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Research article

Farmers on the reasons for their embodied anxieties in post-1991 Slovenia

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Abstract

In the previous three decades, Slovenian agriculture has been exposed to two major changes: the proclamation of a sovereign Slovenian nation-state in 1991 after the disintegration of socialist Yugoslavia and integration into the European Union in 2004. The so-called transition from socialist structures and practices to a full-fledged market economy in agriculture has brought farmers numerous opportunities for development but also experiences of concerns and pressures. What do farmers tell us about the embodied anxieties they experience in connection with these changes? This is the main research question of the ethnographic study (2020–2024) conducted in rural northeastern Slovenia. The article focuses on farmers' reflections on unfair prices in the food chain and their lack of cooperation in the post-1991 agricultural context as a cause of their lived experience of not being well. Drawing on some theorizations regarding the moral economy, the present ethnographic research shows that farmers' narratives are shaped by feelings and thoughts about insecurity and responsibility for their constant concerns and experiences of not being well.

KEYWORDS: farmers' embodied anxieties, agricultural change, moral economy, redemption prices, farmers' cooperation

Introduction

"What do farmers tell us about their embodied anxieties[1] they experience today?" was one of the research questions explored in ethnographic studies as part of the anthropological project Changes in Agriculture Through the Farmers' Eyes and Bodies (2020–2024). The project aims to explain better the impact of the radically changed developments in Slovenian agriculture after 1991 on farmers' health-related suffering than was conveyed by occupational health evidence. However, this article focuses on farmers' ill-being observed through their narratives of their constant worries, sleepless nights, and embodied burdens, which are considered by the farmers themselves to be the main cause of what is called *farming stress* in psychological and medical discourses.

Using the non-medical approach, the authors pay special attention to the farmers' reflections on the causes of their embodied anxieties, referring to their experiences with the radical change from socialist to market-oriented agriculture after the proclamation of Slovenia's sovereignty in 1991. The authors also focus on farmers' experiences with the current burdens, taking into account that the younger generation of farmers did not experience the times of socialism. We argue that farmers in Slovenia over the past three decades have been squeezed between the contrasting values and moral imperatives of the ever-changing agricultural regulations and development requirements, on the one hand, and their moral worlds of farming practices, on the other. Implicitly, this was pointed out by several authors whose post-socialist ethnographies showed that "Western" concepts such as the market, trade, democracy, and the global economy functioned unpredictably in the new context of post-socialism because different cultural and moral valuations were ascribed to them (Buroway & Verdery, 1999; Henig et al., 2017; Fox, 2011; Hann, 2001; Kürti & Skalník, 2009; Naumović, 2013; Pine et al., 2004) and provoked critical reactions among farmers of different social backgrounds (Buyandelgeriyn, 2008; Hann, 2006; Kligman & Verdery, 2011; Mandel & Humphrey, 2002; Svašek, 2008). These ethnographies reflect the sense of insecurity and economic anxiety that radical social change brought to the social groups observed in the former Soviet Union and Southeastern, Eastern, and Central Europe, but they did not explicitly relate the issue to farmers' reflections on their embodied anxieties and wellbeings.[2]

Thus, the article follows some theorizations of the moral economy to provide a framework for interpreting the ways in which the observed moral economies impact farmers'

[1] The authors use the term *embodied anxieties* for stress-related illnesses in medical discourse.

[2] The authors use the term *wellbeings* in line with the researchers Mathews and Izquierdo (2009), who insisted that there is not just one way of understanding or pursuit of wellbeing, but a multiplicity of wellbeings.

wellbeing. Such an approach relates morality to everyday life and economic practices and to farmers' experience of (not) being well without, as Sayer puts it, "reducing it to a matter of individual subjectivity or social convention" (Sayer, 2007, p. 261).

The authors discuss their respective fieldwork observations as part of the ongoing anthropological project to capture farmers' reflections on their experiences of (not) being well in radically different regimes and an ever-changing agricultural context. The research participants (mainly selected farmers) were older and younger farmers,[3] men and women, whom the first author visited between July 2021 and April 2022. The field visits included approximately 40 research participants from 24 family farms; she had previously visited six of these farms in 2009 and three in 2013 and 2015, when she conducted anthropological field research on their understanding of rural aging and sustainable agriculture. A total of 15 family farms were visited anew during 2021 and 2022 when she also talked to local agricultural advisors and health workers about the issue. These farms vary in type and size, so they can be described as large, small, conventional, organic, with or without livestock. The second author visited 39 family farms and two social farms between March 2018 and July 2021, where she spoke with more than 50 research participants. She also conducted interviews with local agricultural advisors, journalists, priests, urban newcomers, and similar people. On about one-third of the farms visited the farm managers were young farmers. Overall, the farms varied in size, predominant farm type, and production methods. In the field, the second author explored the question of why farmers do or do not cooperate with each other. However, as part of the project mentioned above, she evaluated the transcripts from the perspective of farmers' embodied anxieties.

Both authors conducted their participant observation studies in Pomurje, the most intensively farmed region in northeastern Slovenia, where numerous scholars have recently found the most favorable conditions for farming, even for the direction of agricultural sustainability development, but the worst indicators of the well-being for its inhabitants (Lampič et al., 2016; Slabe Erker et al., 2015; Šprah et al., 2014). The first author selected family farms located predominantly in lowlands with so-called favorable conditions for farming, while the second author selected mainly hilly farms with officially recognized constrained factors for agriculture. Although they addressed different research questions, both authors note similarities in farmers' experiences of (not) being well, which differed under pre- and post-1991 agricultural conditions.

[3] Our definition of younger and older farmers refers to experience with socialism. Older farmers have experience of farming under socialism, while younger farmers were mostly socialized into farming after 1991.

The collected semi-structured interviews and field observations of volunteering on some farms were analyzed according to the principles of thematic analysis. In addition to several interrelated themes related to farmers' experience of embodied anxieties such as the repeated extreme climatic events, the intensification of their work, the lack of labor, the dependence on their family members, the disagreements among genders and generations, the arrival of a spouse on the farm, the disintegration of the farming community, the increasing envy in the villages, the dissatisfaction with advisory service, the unfair distribution of subsidies, and other factors, this article focuses on the unfair prices in the food chain and the lack of cooperation among farmers in post-1991 agriculture as a common cause of farmers' experiences of not being well expressed by the majority of research participants.

The article, therefore, starts with a short review of theorization about the moral economy to provide some conceptual emphases for the analysis of farmers' reflections on the main reasons for their distress through their evaluation of the experienced agricultural change and the realities. A longer description of developments in Slovenian agriculture before and after 1991 provides the necessary contextualization to understand how farmers evaluate economic arrangements according to their experienced or imagined wellbeings in both periods. The subsequent focus on the unfair redemption prices in the food chain and farmers' lack of cooperation among themselves in the post-1991 agricultural context are selected not as the only but as the common themes that emerged in the talks with research participants about the cause of farmers' not being well. How farmers' past and present experiences and moral sentiments shape their current hopes and expectations for their wellbeings is discussed in the last section of the article.

Theoretical emphases

When talking about moral economy, one cannot overlook the work of the famous historian Edward Palmer Thompson (1964, 1991) or the political scientist and anthropologist James Campbell Scott (1976), both of whom have dealt extensively with specific economic practices of so-called pre-industrial societies from the perspective of the moral order of the masses. Over the years, however, several scholars (Edelman, 2005; Götz, 2015; Fassin, 2009; Palomera & Vetta, 2016; Siméant, 2015) of various academic backgrounds (history, political science, social anthropology, sociology, etc.) have used, adopted, critiqued, or developed their theorizations of moral economy. It is no exaggeration that moral economy has become an interpretive category with multiple meanings that must be clearly defined when used as a concept (Friberg & Götz, 2015).

This article draws rather on Andrew Sayer's theorization on the moral economy, which relates to the question of people's wellbeing, and also considers some key points developed by Susana Narotzky (2015), who discusses the anxieties of everyday life of farmers and workers in the contexts of what she calls *flexible capitalism* and *times of crisis*.

In his numerous works (Sayer, 2000, 2004, 2007, 2011), Sayer deals extensively with the ethical dimensions of economic life in terms of social relations; however, he equally reflects upon the moral sentiments and decisions of individuals without neglecting the impact of social structure on individuals' wellbeing. Sayer defines moral economy as an analytical and normative approach to the study of economic life, referring mostly to the question of how economic activities affect and depend on people's moral sentiments and norms, while the normative aspect refers to the evaluation of economic arrangements in terms of their effect on people's lives. Sayer argues that all economic institutions have ethical implications and constitutive norms that address the questions of responsibilities, rights, and appropriate behaviors. For him, moral norms are not mere conventions but embodied assumptions about what people's wellbeing(s) consist of. The idea of wellbeing is therefore central to his moral economy approach, defined as states of being in which the treatment of others matters, but also the sense of how we are (Sayer, 2011). Sayer argues that states of being well and the ethical impact of economic institutions and practices on them are evaluated in people's everyday situations.

Since Thompson (1964) and Scott (1976) published their seminal works, a normative orientation has been central to the concept of moral economy. Both authors wrote about the legitimacy of economic institutions, specifically their acceptance and evaluation as (in)just, good, or bad in various social groups by drawing on historical events of radical economic transformations or crises, while Sayer developed a more generalized theoretical approach applicable for different social contexts, not necessarily only for crises. He argues that a normative standpoint in everyday life allows us to evaluate not only economic circumstances and contemporary norms and motives but also the outcomes, the actions, and mechanisms that (re)produce them (Sayer, 2000, 2007, 2011, 2019). Sayer is not interested only in the general critique of economic practices and relations but more in the question of how economic actions, motives, and systems are evaluated in terms of their impact on people's lives. In his works (Sayer 2000, 2007, 2011), he insists that the evaluation of wellbeing(s) and not being well or flourishing and suffering is not merely a subjective judgment but an actual mode of being that humans strive to achieve, discover, and create. Similarly, he understands moral sentiments, such as compassion, pride, shame, envy, and similar, not just as forms of affect but an evaluation of how peo-

ple are treated in relation to what they value, specifically, the things they believe affect their wellbeing(s) (Sayer, 2005). Sayer (2011) further asserts that the quality of social relationships, social structures, norms, moral actions, feelings, etc., matter when people seek their wellbeing(s) and that researchers need to pay close attention to all these aspects of economic life.

We found a related observation in Narotzky's study (2015) about reciprocity, social capital, and the blurring of value realms in flexible capitalism. Investigating endured old (over time) gendered expectations of care and work for the home on family farms in Catalonia, she observed that in the context of what she terms flexible capitalism, farm women took on new roles, responsibilities, and tasks for "the casa," investing their earned money off the farm into the farm. This is understood by farm families as something unquestionable and self-limiting; however, Narotzky showed how the blurring of old and new obligations and expectations creates new anxieties between genders and generations in the family.[4] The author (2020) further states that such new realities and practices can be explained by the concept of moral economy, defined as an attempt to understand the mutual obligations and responsibilities that make differences acceptable and certain forms of socioeconomic differentiation outlast. Similarly, the vast literature on the moral economy (Narotzky, 2015; Palomera & Vetta, 2016; Thompson, 1991) evidences how abstract (expectations) and concrete realities (daily practices) may collide, especially at moments of rupture at the intersection of law, authority, and people. As Narotzky (2015) emphasized, it is precisely these tensions between realities that should be at the heart of the concept of moral economy.

Most of Narotzky's writings (e.g., 2015, 2020) on the moral economy are related to people's experiences of rupture or a crisis, generally understood as a force (structural process) beyond people's control. However, people in crisis evaluate their situation and try to make life worth living for themselves and for future generations (Narotzky & Besnier, 2014), which resembles Sayers' arguments, prioritizing the moral economy as an approach. Narotzky also shifted the research prism of crisis from the moment of moral alteration to its process, arguing that normative issues arise not from the overthrow of a particular moral order, as Thompson (1964) and Scott (1976) have shown, but primarily from "change within continuity" (Narotzky, 2015, p. 196). While addressing the contradictions and tensions between the processes of capital accumulation and the moral framework of mutual obligation in the context of so-called flexible capitalism and in

[4] Similar observations about changing gender expectations in the context of radical social change are described by Bartulović (2022), who also shows that such a change can contribute to a farm advancement.

times of crisis, she argued that in today's globalized free trade capitalism, some practices of entanglement and moral obligation are being transformed into something similar yet different. In her view, this means that flexible capitalism has blurred in people (workers and farmers) previously well-defined and established value systems and transformed reality (including appropriate moral behavior, obligations, limits in practice, etc.) into an ambivalent reality for them.

In this article, the authors reflect upon the radical changes (pre- and post-1991 agricultural developments in Slovenia) that have significantly shaped farmers' lives and their narratives about their wellbeings. In line with Sayer's moral economy approach, this article addresses the question of how farmers evaluate and narrate their embodied anxieties in the context of radically changed agricultural developments, and, following Narotzky's observations, the article discusses the continuity and change in social structures and farmers' understandings of them. To understand farmers' embodied anxieties, the article focuses on moments of rupture in agriculture as understood by farmers themselves as decisive for their wellbeings through examining their mundane moral reflections and sentiments, what Lambek (2010) refers to as *ordinary ethics* that redefine their expectations, obligations, and responsibilities in their farming and wider social community.

From the working-class enemy to the private entrepreneur

To understand the radical change in Slovenian agricultural development as well as farmers' experience of this change, it is necessary to contextualize this particular event through the short historical overview from "the morale of planned economy" of socialist Yugoslavia to "the morale of market economy" of post-1991 Slovenia.

A peasant-worker before the socialist Yugoslavia

Numerous scholars (Allcock, 2000; Čepič, 1999; Hočevar, 1965; Lazarević, 2015, 2022) refer to the nearly five decades (from 1946 to 1991) of imagining, reshaping, and implementing agricultural reality in Slovenia as part of the socialist or second Yugoslavia[5] as a period of ideological rigidity. However, they agree that in order to understand these specific transformations in time and space, it is necessary to place them in what they call the global context of the modernization process. In their work, they argue that the

[5] In 1929, the triune kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes was renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, also known as the first or old Yugoslavia. The new borders separated Slovenia from the former Austrian and Hungarian territories with which it had long economic relations, but at the same time, the Balkan Peninsula became freely accessible.

process of modernization in the region did not begin with the disintegration of the two great multinational empires, the Austro-Hungarian and the Ottoman, which dominated the region until World War I. Nor do they believe that these empires should be viewed only as obstacles to the modernization process in what would later become socialist Yugoslavia, but rather as "the media through which modernity acquired specific form, pace and direction" (Allcock, 2000, p. 15).

The authors emphasize that from the perspective of historical economics, the entire Balkan region should be viewed through its structural relationship with the then-industrializing economies of Northern and Western Europe in order to assess its multiple marginalities or "backward economies." For example, most of what is now Slovenia and was a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire shared its *backward* position in relation to Western and Northern Europe in 1914 with the empire's smallest industrial output in the continent (Gross, 1975).[6]

In the interwar period, Slovenia was still a predominantly agricultural region, with about 60% of the population living from agriculture and dominated by small peasant farms, almost 60% of which consisted of less than five hectares of land; about 1% of all farms were large farms between 50 and 100 hectares, and only 0.5% had more than 100 hectares (Lazarević, 2017). Persistent indebtedness, the fragmentation of agricultural land, the low productivity and profitability of agricultural labor, and the low education of people engaged in agriculture led to hidden unemployment in the countryside. However, population growth meant that food production had to increase despite the low productivity of agriculture. People who farmed attempted to mitigate rural social tensions through additional off-farm work or by combining multiple other sources of income, practicing an "integrated peasant economy" (Panjek et al., 2017; Sitar, 2021) or the widespread phenomenon of the peasant-worker. All these processes posed a structural problem, despite the creation of the first Yugoslav economic space in the interwar period and the authorities' efforts to promote industrial and agricultural development through the Agrarian Reform (1919) and its follow-up laws (Lazarević, 2017, 2022; Panjek et al., 2017).

Scholars are almost unanimous in stating that under the previous empires and during the period of the first Yugoslavia, agriculture, not industry, was the main site of capital accumulation and the main route through which the region was integrated into national

[6] In 1910, for example, the share of economically active workers in the industrial sector in Slovenia remained low: about 12% (Arnez, 1983; Novak, 1991), although the share of the agricultural population declined significantly from 83% in 1857 to 67% in 1910 (Šifrer 1967, as cited in Fischer, 1996, p. 20).

and global markets (Allcock, 2000). This route, however, radically changed in the second, socialist Yugoslavia.

A peasant-class enemy in socialist Yugoslavia

In socialist Yugoslavia, the vision of agricultural development was in line with the class and political orientation of the authorities. The socialist transformation of the whole society was directly equated with the emerging rapid heavy industrialization. In relation to this priority, rural areas were seen both as a resource to be exploited for industrial development and as the primary site of the *class enemy*. The private farmer was not seen as a true producer but as an owner or "the last bastion of capitalism" (Allcock, 2000, p. 135).

The post-war authorities sought to completely eliminate the exploitative nature of private property in the countryside, rather than private property in general, and to curtail the development of capitalism, first through the 1946 agrarian reform (Čepič, 1996). The first measures related to the dispossession (without compensation) of private land that exceeded the maximum limit of 45 hectares, while other measures concerned the distribution of this land to those who would be able to cultivate it on their own (Čepič, 2005).

However, these measures did not contribute to the elimination of social classes in the countryside, and forced collectivization (the general agricultural cooperatives) also failed since peasants were generally unwilling to voluntarily join such cooperatives (Čepič, 1999). Therefore, the state again radically intervened in property structures (Čepič, 1999, 2002; Novak, 1996). The second agrarian reform in 1953 introduced a cap on private ownership of cultivable land of 10 hectares, with which the authorities attempted to introduce the social type of ownership (self-management) to improve collective management of land (Turk et al., 2007). Peasants were no longer understood as enemies of the working class but still as *foreign bodies* in a socialist system. In mutual cooperation with the peasants, a new cooperative system was introduced:[7] the cooperatives offered them mechanization, reproduction materials, professional management, loans, and similar, while the peasants provided labor and labor resources on their own land in the form of a secured quantity of products, which they had to sell to a cooperative according to their mutual contract. Through the cooperatives, the authorities directed most investments in agriculture.

[7] This time, this system was defined as a type of socialist organization—the so-called Agricultural Working Cooperatives.

Throughout the period of socialization of agriculture in Slovenia (1945–1991), more than 80% of total agricultural production was subject to official price control, and only 15–20% of agricultural prices were determined on the market (Turk et al., 2007). The introduction of some free-market elements and workers' self-management in the 1950s did not change the price policy. The latter continued to serve primarily to finance industrialization and relative prices that were very unfavorable for agriculture. Prices for major agricultural products, raw materials, capital goods, and communal services were kept low through administratively set maximum and fixed prices, while prices for most industrial end products were not subject to control. One of the consequences was that agricultural production lagged behind general economic growth, and the demand exceeded the supply of agricultural products. Social price controls in the form of guaranteed prices and minimum prices (support prices) were introduced for the main agricultural products, as well as producer guide prices from 1978 onward, to eliminate market disturbances (Lončarević, 1987).

Until 1991, the peasant-industrial worker was a feature of Slovenian industrialization, not of the actual modernization of agriculture itself. Those who were employed in non-agricultural enterprises continued to live in the countryside and were only engaged in agriculture in the afternoons and evenings (Čepič, 2002).

A farmer-entrepreneur in post-1991 Slovenia

After Slovenia's independence from socialist Yugoslavia in 1991, Slovenian farmers found themselves in a sovereign nation-state for the first time in history. This was an opportunity to define the political mechanisms for the development of the agricultural system according to the possibilities and needs of Slovenian farmers, economic constraints, and natural conditions (Krajnc, 1999; Turk et al., 2007).

Nevertheless, the first years of the 1990s were marked by the lifting of external trade restrictions, which led to a significant drop in the prices of agricultural products. Farmers were disappointed, and then the government introduced a policy of high price support along the lines of the European Union (EU) and terminated the external trade agreements with other countries. The latter two measures clashed with each other and were conditioned by competition in the global agricultural market. In addition, in mid-1993, the Slovenian government adopted the strategy of Slovenian agricultural development until 2004, when it was expected to become a member state of the EU. This strategy established the policy of price support and multifunctional agricultural development

based on the so-called Austro-Swiss model, which still did not represent a drastic change in the Slovenian agricultural system (Erjavec & Kožar, 2021; Krajnc, 1999).

Major changes started in the late 1990s, when Slovenia gradually aligned its agricultural policy with the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which is a budget-intensive public policy determined by a system of comprehensive legislation and branched protectionist measures with a specific decision-making mode in the EU institutions. Although the form and mechanisms of agricultural policy have changed fundamentally, the reform has not altered the basic strategic goals of Slovenia's agricultural policy: the emphasis remains on food security and multifunctional agriculture (Erjavec & Kožar, 2021; Kerbler, 2006).

Over the years, Slovenia has managed to adapt its agricultural policies to CAP, but researchers (Erjavec & Kožar, 2021; Turk et al., 2007) observed that insufficient public funds were invested in sustainable and socially relevant rural solutions, resulting in the circumstance that mainly the few large farmers benefited while the problems and concerns of the majority of farmers and their families were persistently ignored. Some researchers (e.g., Erjavec & Kožar, 2021) believe that the reasons for this phenomenon should not be attributed only to poor networking and support along the entire food chain but also to the circumstance that farmers still wait and expect the state to act properly and find solutions to their problems.

The radically transformed agricultural context in the last three decades also entails other unfavorable trends: on average, about 1,000 farms have stopped farming per year since 1991, and the most rapid decline of medium-size farms ("too small to be economically efficient, but too large to be profitable" (Bojnec & Latruffe, 2013, p. 216)) has been observed 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 four times as high as the total crude rate of all occupational groups in 2016 (Roy & Knežević Hočevar, 2019). It seems that farmers-entrepreneurs struggle to fulfill 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.

"What affects my condition the most? That nothing is fixed."

Farmers believe that constant worry, anxiety, and pressure can affect their health; however, they may respond differently. "It depends on each individual," explained Marija (68), a retired pig farmer: "Some worry for nothing, while others accept or resign themselves to their lives and do not want to burden anyone. When you worry, you constantly burden yourself and make yourself sick."

The reasons for the constant worries and tensions that affect farmers' bodies and minds, and that they cannot get rid of easily because, in their words, "they are constantly after you," are many and highly interrelated: from increasingly unpredictable nature (weather), the limited available land, long-term loans, animal or plant diseases, followed by the fear of being punished for doing something improperly, and similar, to their poor health.

Farmers are indeed not a uniform occupational group of people who respond in similar ways to the circumstances that affect their lives. However, our research participants invariably wove a wide variety of reasons for their ongoing concerns into the narrative about unpredictable redemption prices. They are constantly uncertain whether they will end a fiscal year in profit, in deficit, or break even. It is precisely this kind of unpredictability that they experience as unjust conditions in the current food chain and the main reason for their poor wellbeings. Mihael (42), a pig farmer, is a highly illustrative example:

> How can you sleep well when no one asks you [a farmer] about the price? When you sell your pigs to the slaughterhouse, someone else sets the price for you, and when you buy pigs, someone else sets the price again. ... Everybody wants to earn their money. You cannot change that because the traders and buyers, for example, the butchers, are free to set their prices. ... 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!

Older farmers, in particular, used the narrative of the unjust redemption price to reflect on agriculture under socialism and to compare agricultural conditions in Slovenia before and after 1991. Irrespective of their expressed criticism of the socialist regime, which significantly devalued farmers, the majority agreed that life was easier then because production and sales were assured in the country. Whatever a farmer produced, he could sell it without problems through the system of cooperatives before they were "politically corrupted." Ema (64), a cattle farmer, remembers a cooperative at that time as an institution that "worked for a farmer."

> The cooperative bought everything from a farmer. Well, it is also true that it [the cooperative] took its own share for itself. But it was easy to sell everything from cabbage, cucumbers, and milk to bulls. Redemption was guaranteed, but it is also true that, at that time, all farms were small.

Older farmers often mentioned that being industrious and hardworking was enough to live a life on the land under socialism and that farmers were not under constant pressure and stress like the present-day farmer who needed to know how to produce and sell. They emphasized, for example, that in those days, a farmer was allowed to be present in the slaughterhouse when his cattle were weighed and slaughtered, and this presence and the transparent protocol allowed him to trust the calculation he received about the proportions of meat and fat. Today, a farmer is not allowed to personally observe his cattle in the slaughterhouse. They only receive the calculation and must take it as a given; however, their trust is lost.[8] Some also referred to the better valuation of their products or cattle, which they consider more valuable compared to today:

> If we sold a calf or a cow, we could buy a lot of material to build a new house. Today, you can get 800 to 1,000 euros for a cow. What can you buy with this money if you want to invest it in the farm or house? Nothing. Compared to today's expenses, this price is nothing. The same is true for milk. From the money we received in socialism for the milk sold, we could buy something, while now, we have many more cows, but financially it is worse (Ana, 62).

A few farmers even regret the absence of certain government interventions practiced before 1991, which they understand as a "soft way" to ensure the normal functioning of agriculture at that time. If you were a farmer and could not sell your produce for any reason, the state responded with buybacks, which some older farmers see as a caring act by the state to protect the countryside. The former Yugoslav market also provided a safe place for their crops. As one of them, Egon (67), explained.

> The directors of the cooperatives were politically connected in several republics and knew how to sell everything, whether canned, fresh meat, or live cattle, bad, good, as well as top products, if not in Slovenia, then in other republics.

The majority of older farmers believe that these state interventions benefited farmers, whereas today, everything is regulated within certain frameworks and schemes, and cooperatives serve commerce rather than farmers. Jože (73), an organic farmer, misses the

[8] Frelih Larsen (2009) expanded on farmers' moral arguments and sentiments towards the state (e.g., suspicion and resentment) when the ban on on-farm slaughter of cattle was enforced in the context of the transposition of EU biosecurity in Slovenia in the early 2000s.

former reliable relations with a cooperative or banks when, for example, you could buy a tractor on the basis of mutual trust or when you got a loan on the basis of trust.

> Because of mutual trust, you simply told them [the bankers] that you could not pay this month but would do so next month. Can you imagine giving such a statement to an Austrian banker today? That you will not pay this month, but next month? The same is true for our bankers. Nobody tolerates such a delay in payment.

Not all of the older farmers interviewed saw some benefits in the pre-1991 period. Especially those who experienced the dispossession speak of that time as "devilish communism," "brutal Tito-Yugoslavia," or "damned socialism." Franc (78) said with tears in his eyes that his father, whom he always remembered as an enthusiastic and happy soul, became introverted and bitter when seven hectares of best fields were taken away from him in the 1950s because of the introduced 10-hectare maximum. He emphasized only the disadvantages of that time and spoke mainly about those farmers who resisted cooperation with the imposed cooperatives. Similarly, Pišta (77) denied that the socialist cooperatives benefited the farmers. On the contrary, in his opinion, too many employees in the cooperatives lived "on the backs of the farmers." He believes these employees did not produce anything but only bought everything from the farmers and resupplied the farmers' products while they lived off the profit margins. "The more profit margins were delivered to the cooperative employees, the less was left for the farmer," Pišta summarized.

However, those older research participants who criticized the pre-1991 context shared with other younger and older farmers their frustration with the unfair redemption prices of the food chain under post-1991 conditions. Farmers experience, as they put it, a "price drought" or "price crash" daily and believe that both retailers and processors "strip the farmer down to his underpants." "How can you sleep peacefully and not worry when a consumer blames us farmers for higher food prices?" said Geza (39), a livestock farmer, disappointed when commenting on an article published in *Kmečki glas* (*Voice of the Farmers*, 2021) about the division of the proceeds of a slaughtered bull between a farmer, a butcher, 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 your labor 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.

Agricultural advisors also agree that farmers today suffer primarily from uncertain sales rather than production. Despite the considerable advantages brought by the radically changed agricultural conditions after 1991, when the country joined the European Union's CAP, which enabled Slovenian farmers to develop their competitive, market-oriented farms, the advisors cannot deny that the former cooperative system did not work. They all pointed to what used to be the local largest cooperative system, which linked farmers, the processing industry, and commerce. This system included several stores in Slovenia and some in Yugoslavia. In fact, it was a company that regularly redeemed, processed, and sold farmers' products, and the circle was closed within the state borders. One even insists that the abolition of this system immediately after Slovenia joined the EU was a big mistake, responsible for two social deaths. The first death is said to be related to the abolition of the comprehensive cooperative system and the pursuit of a new value-of-scale economy, which he believes has led to a preferential new structure of farms in the country: large farms and agricultural enterprises competitive at the European level at the expense of a death of small self-sufficient farms. He also believes that the closure or sale of domestic stores to foreigners (e.g., Hofer, Lidl, Spar, etc.) worsened farmers' social and economic situation after 1991:

> The foreigners are not interested in Slovenian food production. Their goal is for Slovenian consumers to buy their food. That is why we received EU subsidies to produce less food. But now our farmers want even more subsidies because daily expenses are higher, and prices are lower. Therefore, our farmer is in deficit.

The second social death of the farm advisor refers to the much higher quality standards for food production in Slovenia compared to other EU countries, which allegedly additionally degrade Slovenian farmers:

> Now, our farmers sell the best quality bulls in Austria because the price for this quality is too high for our [foreign] stores and [domestic] processing industry, while we import much inferior meat from the other EU countries. I believe that this is the main reason that destroys the wellbeing of our farmers.

Although the majority of older farmers emphasized that life on the farm before 1991 was easier, slower, less intensive, more predictable, and without financial risks and uncertainty as they experience today, all of them agree that the system of agriculture as introduced after Slovenia's accession CAP enabled them to advance their farms in a way that

was not possible under socialism. However, farmers demand a better social position, economic justice, and a sense that their work is paid honestly and not subsidized, which they believe only fuels envy and jealousy in the countryside. Finally, farmers believe that to improve their wellbeing, decision-makers should introduce "buy at a good price," as the older generation of farmers experienced under socialism between farmers, food processors, and traders.

"Dishonesty has always been the cause of the collapse of every cooperative. And it always will be."

Since unfair redemption prices are one of the main burdens for farmers, a reasonable solution would be to develop and strengthen local agricultural cooperatives. This could give farmers greater negotiating power to obtain higher and more stable redemption prices. Although livestock and grain farmers sell their products to local companies and cooperatives from other parts of the country, "each cooperative attracts a small portion of farmers to its side, creating division [among farmers]," according to one of the older research participants. The situation is even worse for fruit growers, as the local specialized horticultural cooperative failed more than a decade ago. Most apple growers, especially the older ones who were the main players in the aforementioned cooperative, report many problems with the sale, for which they are solely responsible. The sale is a great burden for them since they have to do it during the harvest season. In light of all this, farmers recognize the need for greater collaboration within each agricultural segment and the agricultural sector in general. Although collaboration could reduce farmers' financial dependence on traders and uncertainty, they associate it with their poor wellbeings due to bad experiences, envy, and different interests among farmers, and their withdrawal from responsibility for the solid start and fair functioning of the potential cooperative or other type of large-scale collaboration.

The post-1991 period saw the collapse of the large state cooperative system of socialist Yugoslavia, which, according to the local journalist, planted the first seeds of distrust in the cooperation between farmers. There are many unofficial stories about the reasons for the failure of the previously established state cooperative system in the newly independent state of Slovenia. What they all have in common is that the interests of local key players were behind this collapse. Later, many smaller, sector-specific cooperatives and enterprises were established, with a few industries continuing to exist. One of these is the local dairy, which ran into debt about 10 years ago. This negatively affected the finances of some dairy farmers, who experienced another collapse of a common agricul-

tural structure. The dairy survived, but the cooperatives lost their equity due to the forced compensation. The injustice and mistrust experienced have an impact on the current non-cooperative culture among farmers, as crop farmer David (38) explained:

> Farmers recapitalized the dairy by withdrawing a percentage of their milk each month. This was a clever thing to do because it made them [through shared ownership] [co-]owners of the company. But they did not know that some people had stolen the money. … And now convince the person who has already been robbed of a thousand [euros], two, five, ten, some, the biggest [farmers], of 30 [thousand], to reinvest some of her wealth somewhere. Someone said to me: You know, I have 30,000 [euros], but I do not have it; it's like when you buy a car, and you crash it, and you do not have it anymore, but [you] I stayed alive. They [those who ruined the cooperative] treated them [the farmers] like this.

Apple growers had extremely bad experiences with joint sales after 1991. Peter (62) explained that they "lost some money on each story, and that means a lot of money in the end." In the late 1990s, growers on their own created the specialized fruit cooperative Gorički sad. After ten years, the cooperative collapsed: the management accused the growers of cheating on sales, and the growers accused the management of not paying for the entire crop delivered and for chamber dues, which, along with interest, ultimately had to be borne by the growers. After this experience, growers were cheated by distributors who rented the cooperative's cold storage. This led not only to poor relations between farmers and between generations within the family but also to the collapse of some farms. Oliver (61) described the whole situation and acknowledged that such bad experiences have a very negative impact on farmers' non-cooperation, financial situation, and daily life.

> Negative stories have a great effect. This is sad. The failed traders owe us about 50,000 euros because they did not pay out the fruit. There were [the cooperatives] Panonka [under socialism], and then Gorički sad, they are all gone. Then the [cold storage] tenants came, and we sold them [the harvest]. Fifty thousand euros is a lot for such a small farm. Of these traders, one had Austrian citizenship; then there was a Croatian and a Dutchman. They had gone bankrupt, and then the banks got everything, but we got nothing. With the one from Austria, we were in the cold storage at about 3 p.m. We talked about the sale and how much. I came the next morning—the warehouse was empty. They took everything overnight and paid nothing. We [family members] argue a lot about it. Young people notice [bad intentions] much faster. I am naive.

Disappointment with collaboration and the associated financial losses over the past 10 years have had several effects. Farmers have switched to working and selling their crops themselves. This situation is more problematic for older than for younger farmers. Young farmers have grown up listening to their parents' stories about poor cooperation and have begun to work under market conditions. Jan (21), a young fruit farmer, said that there is no competition among farmers because everyone works for themselves. This was also confirmed by Peter (62), an older apple grower, who admitted that they are constantly under pressure and stress because of this.

> The problem is, when we talk about sales, this is the end of collaboration. Now, each of us has built our own sales channels and is afraid of losing them. This is not easy. The conditions are extremely difficult, really, especially because of Poland [and the import of cheaper apples].

Bad experiences make farmers believe that it would be very difficult for them to work together again because the trust between them has been lost, as Sara (45), the fruit farmer, said. Regardless of production orientation, research participants emphasized that broader collaboration among farmers was unlikely due to envy, jealousy, and selfishness. Statements like the following two were very common in the field when discussing opportunities for collaboration between farmers. Štefan (74), an older fruit farmer, said that envy is abundant in the countryside because everyone thinks like this: "She/he has more than I do; she/he has three cars, I only have two, and three tractors…" Tim (34), a young dairy farmer, explained that cooperation is impossible: "We would kill each other. No, everyone would take sides."

Despite this attitude, the majority of farmers felt that collaboration is possible, but conditionally, "if everything goes well," and if the right person makes things happen, as fruit farmer Tone (51) said. Erik (27), a young farmer, explained: "Maybe the right person would have to be found who dares to do it and be honest. And we would probably follow such a person." Milan (40) from a crop and livestock farm shared this opinion, saying: "Farmers would not organize on their own. … They do not have enough knowledge and time." He believed that agricultural cooperation should be addressed and improved through the advisory system. The state and the National Farmers' Union were mentioned as other proactive actors, although research participants believed that they all only support large-scale producers and have no interest in improving their wellbeings.

When discussing the conditions of sale and the possibilities of cooperation between farmers, Peter (62), the apple farmer, expressed feelings of hopelessness and apathy be-

cause "small farmers cannot influence market conditions at all." Although farmers assume that they cannot set their own prices, they believe that selling at home is the best pricing strategy. Backyard stores are trending, and some of the farmers recognize the opportunity for collaboration in expanding supply. "I do not want competition. … I have a colleague in mind that I want to collaborate with. He is very interested in cannabis," explained Erik (27), a young farmer who was in the process of building a store in his backyard. This is not the only form of collaboration between farmers. They help each other to cover crop losses in case of accidents and at work peaks. There is solidarity between two to four farmers who help each other, but farmers can mainly rely on themselves and their families. Mark (34) from the mixed farm said: "We only work together on corn silage; from then on, it's a fuck. Then it's every man for himself."

The absence of local cooperatives illustrates the farmers' concern for selling and obtaining good redemption prices, as they take care of it themselves. The past functioning and present absence of cooperatives puts farmers in a difficult financial, distributional, social, and labor situation. Farmers blame others for the absence and failure of local cooperatives, mostly the unsupportive national government and dishonest administrators. As heard locally, farmers also share the blame because they lacked loyalty and adherence to sales rules in the large cooperative system of the past. Research participants did not point this out but only repeatedly emphasized that there was envy and lack of trust among them due to bad past experiences. Various unfair practices contribute, at least in part, to the concerns and pressures of farmers who, as a result, refuse to cooperate and rather consider whether it is still worth farming.

Year by year, there are fewer and fewer farms. The existing farms are drifting further and further apart in their way of thinking and producing and are left to fend for themselves. However, in times of work overload and natural disasters, farmers cooperate and furthermore put pressure on decision-makers from time to time. Nonetheless, the results show that it would be extremely difficult to get a larger number of farmers to work together in a systematic, long-term, and financial way, such as cooperatives or producer organizations. Finally, the "do-it-yourself" principle has gained importance, which inevitably leads to an increasing exhaustion of farmers' minds and bodies.

Debate and conclusion

The analysis of ethnographic material on farmers' reflections on the causes of their experienced distress in Slovenian agriculture after 1991 shows that farmers believe that the real cause for their embodied anxieties lies outside their bodies. Farmers are constantly

concerned about unpredictable and, in their words, unfair redemption prices, emphasizing that their economic position in the food chain is not just and that they are not paid enough for their hard work, especially compared to other actors. Farmers evaluate economic arrangements according to their experienced wellbeings and the way they are treated by others (Sayer, 2000, 2011) and make judgments about the moral impact of economic institutions, actions, and motives of others and even their own on their personal wellbeings, the wellbeings of their farm, their family, and their community. The study shows that farmers experience the current economic arrangements and their economic position in them as clearly unjust, which they also relate to their lived experience of constant anxiety and feelings of being constantly under pressure. A critique of a particular feature of an economy reveals people's perceptions of bad and good economic life (Sayer, 2000, 2011), which implies a desire and need for a change and raises questions about how alternative forms of economic arrangements should be realized and whether they are feasible. When farmers reflected on the unfair prices in the food chain as the main cause of their sleepless nights and constant worries, they turned to the past and selectively chose certain economic arrangements to show what a good life is. Moreover, their assessments of redemption prices as something that preoccupies them day and night show that their position in the agrifood chain needs to be changed. It seems that the question of how to achieve this change on their own has often remained unanswered, as farmers face mutual distrust and envy, lack of cooperation due to bad experiences, and further exhaustion of their minds and bodies.

Older research participants often referred to the guaranteed redemption of their production in times of socialism. However, their talks about simpler and more secure agriculture under socialism do not suggest that the socialist economic system was fairer. Some farmers still believe that it was (also) corrupt and abusive towards them, while they all agree that the agricultural reality of acceding to the CAP allowed them to advance their farms in a way that was not possible under socialism. Rather than idealizing the past, farmers' narratives show what the good life is and what meanings they ascribe to such a life now. Farmers emphasize that the entire sales process was simpler and more transparent under socialism than it is today and that then there was less financial uncertainty and better prospects for the future, although they all lived on substantially smaller and poorly developed farms than today. It is not an exaggeration that all these past experiences form a horizon of expectations that shape farmers' current aspirations and hopes for the future (Narotzky & Besnier, 2014) related to their wellbeings.

In addition, moral sentiments are also an important source of information about current and past events and people's behavior in relation to their wellbeings (Sayer, 2011). When farmers talked about inadequate material provision and unequal distribution of resources and power in the agrifood chain, they expressed a sense of justice, respect, and dignity, implying that farmers long to be respectful and trustworthy actors in the food chain. Farmers invoked past experiences and associated moral sentiments not only to demonstrate what a good life is for them but also to demonstrate that they want to live a "life worth living" (Narotzky & Besnier, 2014, p. S5).

Conveyed comparisons of the conditions of sale and the formation of redemption prices before and after 1991 by the research participants confirm the radical change in agricultural conditions in the previous three decades. Older farmers often referred to guaranteed and administratively fixed prices under socialism and low and unstable redemption prices more recently. They are more likely to admit that they are affected by today's economic uncertainty than the younger generation of farmers, who, at first appearance, are better equipped to cope with the conditions of a market economy. However, younger farmers also expressed concern about the current precarious economic situation.

Uncertainty can affect not only people's ideas of what is good but also the imagination, feasibility, and implementation of alternative economic practices (Narotzky & Besnier, 2014; Sayer, 2011). This was evident in farmers' narratives about their culture of collaboration. Farmers face not only economic uncertainty but also relational uncertainty, not knowing how other farmers or management morally behave in the collective arrangements. Farmers relied on people they believed would not take advantage of their vulnerability, which was at least partly due to daily economic uncertainty on the farm and bad experiences with cooperatives in the past. The farmers themselves, their family members, and some friends became a unit mobilized to carry out future projects, while large-scale farmers' collaboration was not recognized as an alternative for them.

In the post-1991 period, due to the (intentional) collapse of socialist economic structures, agricultural organizations were rebuilt while claims, responsibilities, and appropriate behavior were redefined. This is not a surprise when seeing all economies as moral economies because they all have rules about what is considered fair and who should do, get, or control what (Sayer, 2018). With the collapse of socialist cooperatives, farmers were addressed to have a (greater) opportunity to find the best buyer for their products, and the responsibility for selling their harvests clearly shifted from the state to them. In addition to selling the produce to agricultural enterprises and cooperatives, farmers attempted to sell their harvests and products in their own stores – the only economic envi-

ronment in which they could set the price for their crops. The fact that farmers did not set the price under socialism, and generally still do not, reveals the maintenance of power relations in agriculture under new conditions where people were just given new responsibilities while certain practices of entanglements and moral obligations were maintained (Narotzky, 2015). This kind of change within continuity requires an evaluation not only of what people have and what is important for their wellbeings but also of what they can be or do. According to the research participants, there was not much they could do themselves to change their economic position in the food chain, and they shifted the responsibility for this change to the state or even a "superhero."

Some farmers thought of local businesses, and apple growers had even formed a cooperative; otherwise, farmers collectively or on their own initiative did not do much to improve their wellbeings within the farming community. Farmers experience the redemption prices as unfair but would not work together to get better prices unless forced to do so by the government or by the proper, honest, and courageous person taking matters into their own hands. These results suggest that, despite numerous bad experiences with cooperatives and joint sales, farmers expect someone else to take care of them, which could be attributed to their feeling of social powerlessness, confrontation with circumstances beyond their control, or even disappointment with the current state, which is not that much "existent" as in socialism times. However, despite observed negative moral sentiments (envy, jealousy, and resentment) in farming communities, farmers believe they should soon reconsider their duties and rights (Sayer, 2011) and invest their efforts into common goals to reduce the economic pressures that are damaging their minds and bodies. Finally, their narratives, at least implicitly, convey their expectations to take action to keep agriculture and their wellbeings livable.

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Povzetek

V zadnjih treh desetletjih je bilo kmetijstvo v Sloveniji izpostavljeno dvema velikima spremembama: razglasitvi suverene nacionalne države leta 1991 po razpadu socialistične Jugoslavije in vključitvi v Evropsko unijo leta 2004. Tako imenovani prehod iz socialističnih struktur in praks v tržno gospodarstvo je kmetom prinesel številne priložnosti za razvoj njihovih kmetij, a tudi izkušnje skrbi in pritiskov. Kaj nam kmetje povedo o utelešenih skrbeh, ki jih doživljajo v povezavi s temi spremembami? To je glavno raziskovalno vprašanje etnografske študije (2020-2024), ki se izvaja na podeželju severovzhodne Slovenije. Članek se osredotoča na razmišljanja kmetov o nepoštenih cenah v prehranski verigi in pomanjkanju sodelovanja v kontekstu kmetovanja po letu 1991 kot vzroku za njihovo živeto izkušnjo slabega počutja. S pomočjo nekaterih teoretizacij o moralni ekonomiji pričujoča etnografska raziskava pokaže, da te pripovedi kmetov oblikujejo njihovi občutki in razmišljanja o negotovosti in odgovornosti za njihove stalne skrbi in doživljanje slabega počutja.

Ključne besede: utelešene skrbi kmetov, spremembe v kmetijstvu, moralna ekonomija, odkupne cene, sodelovanje med kmeti

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