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## **MIGRANTS FROM CITIES AS CULTURAL INNOVATORS IN THE RURAL COMMUNITIES OF THE ŚWIĘTOKRZYSKIE PROVINCE**

### **Abstract**

The rapid cultural transformation of the countryside in Poland weakened the previous rural culture, but the inhabitants of peasant origin have preserved to some extent the core values constituting the former cultural identity. New ideas and behaviours become innovations when they are in line with the core values of the given culture. The influx of urban to rural migrants can carry innovation, but only under certain conditions, and its extent is usually limited.

### **Key words**

cultural innovation, cultural identity, rural culture, urban to rural migrants, agro tourism

### **Introduction**

Transformations or changes have long been one of the main themes in rural studies [1]. They are often interpreted in terms of the disappearing of rurality or (constitutive for it) the category of peasants, or – finally – folk culture [2] [3] [4] [5]. On the other hand, rurality and peasantry continue to be the object of interest for successive generations of researchers and have not disappeared from the social imaginary of the Poles for two reasons. The first reason concerns the nature of change that transforms modern globalized culture. This culture *thrives on 'difference'* [6] and peasants became figures of cultural difference, while the adjective *peasant* moves from the sphere of ideology and culture to the sphere of consumption [8]. Peasant origin becomes another trademark that drives the sale of organic food, tourist and property services, but it is accompanied by death and/or musealisation of the existing forms of folk culture, such as the peasant movement in literature. The *ethic of cultural difference* [8] is also expressed in the search for *self-identification and cultural identity by reference to the 'other' culture* [8]. On the other hand, anthropologists researching rural culture in Poland [9] [10] [11] indicate that it transforms with various social and cultural speeds [12]. Particular groups of villagers in different regions are more or less susceptible to change. First and foremost, what changes quickly is a sort of cultural sheath [13], such as casual consumer choices, fashionable whims and market offerings. On the other hand, the *core values* [14] change very slowly. They are the basis of cultural identities [12] [15] and are reflected in habituses [16], and these can survive the transformations of social reality. Although practices are prone to structural change, the ways of conceptualisation are rooted in known and available meanings [16]. This vitality of long-lasting cognitive structures [15] among the various groups of the descendants of peasants determines the continuation of folk culture, despite the changes in living conditions in the countryside.

### **Innovation within cultural identity**

How should one understand cultural innovation in this context? Many definitions of cultural innovation treat it as a synonym of change in culture. For example, *the processes by which a novel cultural trait emerges and spreads within a society* [17]. There is a body of literature, especially written from the evolutionary point of view [18] [19] [20], describing the mechanisms and rules of cultural transmission, namely – *who copies what from whom, and how* [17]. However, the mere popularity of the term 'innovation' proves that it signifies something else, not only modes of cultural transmission. The convenient departure to the more precise description of the cultural innovation seems to be from the theory of cultural identities.

Stuart Hall distinguished two understandings of cultural identities. *The first position defines 'cultural identity' in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial and artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common* [21]. According to the second understanding cultural identities are (...) *the unstable points of identification (...) which*

are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence, but a positioning [21], so they incorporate not only what a category of people has in common, but also differences within it. In both perspectives, cultural identities can be recognised mostly *in retrospect* [21] and in reference to *the "other"* [21]. However, the recent works of the Polish anthropologists [12] [15] seem to merge these two approaches, simultaneously making the concept of cultural identities less past-oriented. As argued by Anna Engelking, "*The answer to the question 'who are we as a community?' always crystallizes around the specific question 'what is most important to us?'"* [15]. Hence, the cultural identity embodies the core ideas and values of the social category [12], shared throughout the long periods of time, usually generations, but allowing for some intra-group differences in the less important issues. The analysis of the literature of the contemporary Polish rural culture suggest that it is still the *active culture* [22] and that it is capable of absorbing and integrating foreign elements, as far as they conform to the stable cultural identity. Although it is increasingly encountered and penetrated in rural communities by the mass culture and other cultural forms, some of which are brought by new non-agricultural categories of rural residents, including different groups of urban to rural migrants, its enclaves and elements persist, also due to innovations.

Therefore, as "change" is the result of differences in the lasting identity [1], an "innovation" is a change that improves the functioning of the system, or allows it to adapt to new conditions. It cannot lead to its *death*, and in the case of culture, to its transformation into another culture. It cannot, therefore, violate the core values expressed in the cultural identity, but should lead to their more thorough fulfilment, or at least to their survival in unfavourable circumstances.

### **Research questions and fieldwork**

Thinking on the role of urban to rural migrants in the cultural innovation process, it is necessary to describe the core values of the Polish rural culture, discuss the attitudes towards these values among the heterogeneous category of urban migrants, and then to examine – on the basis of the fieldwork research – which innovations in rural culture were adapted due to the influence of migrants, what are conditions for appearing and spreading these innovations, and what distinguishes the groups which are the most influential in this process. The focus will be made on the issues connected to family farming, as this seems to represent one of the most important values of the rural culture, and is also one that is particularly challenged by current economic changes.

The research<sup>1</sup> was carried out in the Świętokrzyskie Province (Kielce County), in three villages which will be designated as Podlesie, Ustronie and Moczydło for the purposes of this article. Economic and cultural modernization processes occur relatively slowly in this area [23], so it preserves many archaic elements of the landscape, centuries-old settlement structure and elements of the magical and religious way of thinking [24]. It is thus the area of relatively firmly rooted traditional values and strong social control, as evidenced by low rates of crime, divorce, and extramarital births (data from LDB CSO<sup>2</sup>). The choice of the villages provided insight into the various directions of rural development [25] and the presence of different types of urban to rural migrants. All villages have a tradition of semi-subsistence, non-specialized farming that is typical for central and eastern Poland. Currently, Podlesie – the smallest (about 300 inhabitants) and the most peripherally located – is the closest to the type of agricultural village. Moczydło, the largest of the studied villages, with more than 900 inhabitants, has evolved into a suburban village, and agriculture is in decline there. The village has a relatively young population and is growing rapidly. However, the most new households are constructed by children and grandchildren of the previous residents. Ustronie (less than 600 inhabitants) is close to the category of

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<sup>1</sup> Fieldwork was conducted in August 2013, in August 2014 and in March and April 2016. 44 in-depth interviews (individual and affinity group) with migrants and native inhabitants were conducted. Cultural activists – members of associations, bands, municipal councilors – are strongly represented among the interviewees. The category of people aged 40 and more dominates, but there are also representatives of the younger generation. Participatory observation of cultural events taking place in these locations was also carried out, as well as a review of the websites of the associations operating in the studied villages, their accounts on Facebook and YouTube, as well as articles in the regional press on cultural initiatives that took place in the current decade.

<sup>2</sup> <https://bdl.stat.gov.pl/BDL/start>

multifunctional village. The main source of income is employment outside the village, mainly in Kielce, with which the village has a convenient road connection, but agriculture is commonly practiced by native residents. Urban migration to all the villages is individual – there are no developer housing estates. The migrants are of various family situations, but most are elderly marriages. The biggest number of migrants are in Ustronie – nearly 10 households (including a couple of men – immigrants from the Netherlands). In Podlesie there are only two families, but they are socially active. In Moczydło this category is blurring because there are migrants without family connections with the village, people returning after years of living in the city, and the owners of summer cottages.

### Cultural identity of the Polish village

The analysis of the Polish ethnological and anthropological research on the Polish rural culture [8] [10] [14] [16] leads to the conclusion that its core values can be traced back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century peasants. Through the consecutive periods the rural populations have been undergoing dramatic changes. However, it can be claimed that the foundations of the Polish rural culture – the long-lasting cognitive structures, as cultural identities [15] and habituses [16] – could still be observed at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Due to that fact, the designation ‘Polish rural culture’ could be used to the at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and a hundred years later<sup>3</sup>. It should be emphasized, however, that ‘rural culture’ is primarily a scholarly or intellectual construct, a mean of structuring the fieldwork insights, so it should not be understood essentially, and one could combine it – especially contemporary – with other available cultural values and forms, like mass culture and popular culture.

The core values of the Polish rural culture can be summarized as God, community (centred around the family bonds) and work in agriculture. The peasants’ life was immersed in the Christian sacrum, which defined their place in the world. Identification with Christ, especially suffering and crucifixion, allowed them to humbly accept a difficult peasant’s fate (*dola*) [15]. Passion and faith in justice whose rulings will be finally fulfilled created a peasant’s pattern of being in the world and was a co-component of the peasant ethos [26]. The extended family permeated with the neighbourhood ties, constituting the rural community [12]. The family was the primary, multifunctional and culture-making unit of social life [1] [12].

However, the most distinctive feature that shaped the rural identity was the high valorisation of hard work, especially on the family farm, even described by the Polish ethnographers [15] [27] as *agro-centrism*. Farming was perceived not only as a profession, but could be described as a lifestyle, the whole of *cultural being in the world*, [as – AW] *it contained undistinguishable spheres of practical action, communication and worldview* [11]. Farm life formed the principal stage for those performances of rurality, which Tim Edensor [28] found crucial for actualization and reproduction of rural habituses. Farming could thus be described as a *total reality* [20] and certainly determined the culture of Polish peasants. As long as it occupied such a position, peasants *were not able to self-destruct* [26] as a cultural category. The imperative of work permeated through the whole life and secured a job for all age groups – including children and the elderly – and did not include free time in the modern sense [15]. Even when worked was suspended for holidays, there were religious duties [29]. The farm work was also one of the primary means of socialisation, which enhanced its importance for the formation of the rural identities, habituses and similar forms of long-lasting cognitive structures. *These shared forms of practical enactions, everyday knowledge and embodied approaches to quotidian problems form mundane choreographies which are forged by doing things rather by thinking about them* [28]. For example, farming required a good knowledge of nature, but this knowledge was determined by the needs and ways of using by particular groups, which leads to connotation with *concrete knowledge*, as described by Claude Levi-Strauss [30]. As Edensor emphasizes, these cognitive structures, choreographies and *everyday knowing* can be crucial in forming the rural community, as they (...) *may be incomprehensible to outsiders who cannot immediately immerse themselves in an unfamiliar field* [28].

Hence, the value of an adult – his/her *honour, reputation and distinction* [16] – in the social system of the archetypical Polish village depended upon the ability to work hard, preferably on the family farm [15]. Earlier ethnographers described rural culture as the *culture of work* [27], as opposed to the culture of the *leisure class* [31], freed from work, at least in a physical sense. Land ownership is of great importance in the rural culture.

<sup>3</sup> Otherwise, we would be forced to write about a series of consecutive cultural phenomena, rather than about one, continuously developing Polish rural culture.

The possessed land constituted the social position of the peasant family and had not only economic, but also social value, as the main condition for the very existence of a group [32]. The cultivated land provided food and formed links with the heritage of ancestors. It was of an inalienable value and an object of longing when one had to leave it. Even today, attachment to it remains the characteristic element of the identity of the eldest generation of the Polish rural population [33].

### **The challenges of the rural culture**

The social and economic conditions framing the development of rural culture in Poland has undergone far-reaching changes, which have accelerated since Poland joined the European Union. The majority of the rural inhabitants have been freed from overwhelming work in agriculture, which leads to the loss of the essence of peasant culture [26]. *In big cities, free time is melting (...) And here – in the countryside – it only appears due to the change in employment patterns* [34]. The last wave of globalization coincided in Poland with the transition to a free market economy, which was a major challenge for rural people, both farmers, working class and intelligentsia [35]. The former were faced with decreasing and volatile prices and global competition. The working class groups with job insecurity, and often with the change from an abstract state employer to an entrepreneur, leading to the emergence of new employment relations. Due to marketing and mediatisation, rural population themselves start to look at the countryside as consumers, with their stereotypes and prejudices [8], and aspire to the urban lifestyle [36]. Rural areas are being restructured, and in some areas become mainly consumption spaces, developing functions related to leisure activities accompanied by the process of commercialization of rural resources [37]. The proportion of people working in agriculture – which is already a significant minority in rural population [38] – are decreasing. The proliferation of institutions, patterns of behaviour, attitudes and elements of material culture associated with the city, above all with the urban middle class (and earlier with the intelligentsia), create an impression that the rural areas undergo some form of urbanization<sup>4</sup>. In such circumstances, rural culture becomes increasingly intertwined with other types of culture, above all in mass culture and consumerism, and one is tempted to argue that it disappeared.

However, recent studies of the Polish rural communities [10] confirm that the individual and collective identity of their members is still based on the division between people in physical and intellectual jobs, or those *who work* and those *who don't have to work*. In addition, just wages are still conceptualised according to the long-lasting patterns. Interestingly, non-farming categories of the rural dwellers perceive the life of farmers through the toiled, never ending work. The identity of farmers is continuously based on the possession of the farm and the inherited ethos of work, despite the commodification of production and the dependence on market mechanisms. They do not want to accept the whimsical market as the measure of value of their work [35]. Valuable work is hard, physical, solidly performed on the land. In this context, it is not surprising that many authors [41] [42] [43] note the persistence of symbolic divisions between old (peasant origin) inhabitants and different types of migrants from cities, which increasingly flow into the villages, especially those located near cities or in attractive landscapes.

### **Urban to rural migrants and their cultural profile**

The positive valorisation of the countryside in modern western culture, especially as *a signifier of national identity* [28], has been extensively examined by rural studies [44] [45]. However, it seems that the positive value of life in rural areas appears in Poland in the scale unparalleled in other countries [46], which is reflected in settlement trends. Since 2000, urban to rural migration has been predominant in Poland. They strengthen the processes of retreat of the agricultural population and, as a rule, the newcomers represent values conflicting with the traditional rural cultural identity, especially in the field of professional activity<sup>5</sup>. Examples of agriculture are rare among urban to rural migrants, and those who move to the countryside to become a

<sup>4</sup> There are plenty of concepts such as 'semi urbanization' [39], 'suburbanization', 'exurbanization' and 'peri-urbanization' [40], describing urban sprawl and the spread of urban patterns in (once) rural areas and communities.

<sup>5</sup> It should be emphasized that this category is extremely diverse, to the extent that they are rarely described in the Polish social sciences as one category, but rather within two more socially and culturally homogeneous types: suburbanites and New Settlers. These two categories are overlapping and do not cover all urban migrants, for example, those who have fled from cities due to the effects of economic transformation – unemployment and rising prices – counting on the reduction of the maintenance costs [11] in the inherited farms.

farmer are the least described group of migrants. In relation to the farmers, the newcomers are thus usually placed as crop buyers. For most (so-called) outsiders, rural life is the acquired concept of life, the consumer space [47].

However, the deterritorialisation of social reality has become more widespread. There is often even the necessity of remote work, so the household, as in agricultural culture, could again be considered a multifunctional centre of family life, if not the universal mediation of life. Some of the new inhabitants are engaged in agrotourism, in which the household becomes the source of income, making them more tolerant to the difficulties of rural life and open to relationships within the local community [41].

### **Migrants' innovations in the rural culture**

The changes in the cultural landscape occur throughout the rural areas regardless of the presence of absence of urban to rural migration. Most innovations diffuse into the countryside through media, school, market, and other institutions of modern society. However, the research conducted in the Świętokrzyskie Province confirms that migrants are often at the avant-garde of changes, and it is possible that their example inspires their neighbours who are deeper rooted in rural culture to learn more quickly. As for the work sphere, which is the main focus of this paper, the newcomers seem to be primarily the forerunners of the new approach to the rural cultural heritage and landscape. Some of them play an active role in the processes of reinterpretation of rurality as the asset on the market of *edutainment* [28], touristic, sports and leisure services. Although few urban migrants are involved in farming, this approach helps to preserve what determined the cultural role of traditional agriculture – the family's work in the inherited ancestral farm, and hence upholds the values of rural cultural identity.

Such attitudes are, however, distributed very unevenly throughout the three villages. In the most backward and otherwise traditionally agricultural Podlesie there are very few commercial activities connected with the newly interpreted agriculture and rural heritage. The two migrant families inhabiting the village were very active in organizing cultural events referring to folklore and cultural heritage of the region, but these activities were non-commercial. Moreover, one of the migrant families were treated with some distrust, due to the lack of permanent job, mental illness, parenting difficulties (children in foster care), New Age style spirituality and different cultural tastes. Although they were trying to conserve and revive the *archetype* of rural life, they were doing it according to a folkloristic and superficial understanding of rural culture, while at the same time violating many of its core values (hard work, care for the family and the farm, Catholic confession). Thus, their activities did not gain recognition in the community, their social status were rather low and after about 10 years of inhabiting the village, they were still labelled as strangers – *the artists*.

In turn, most of the migrants inhabiting Moczydło, the most suburbanized of the villages studied, retain very weak bonds with the native community. They usually commute to the nearby Kielce to work and study, and even retired newcomers have few interactions with the locals. None of them are involved in agriculture and have not contributed to the development of the numerous agrotourism farms located in Moczydło. The material and education status is usually high. Even wealthy native respondent labelled them as *the rich*. Except for having weak religiosity, they do not seem to break from the social norms of the rural community. However, they are isolated from most forms of communal life in the village, and their immediate influence on the native community seems to be weak and rather counter the values of the rural culture. The exception is one family that has its roots in the village.

The only village where the influence of urban migrants on the diffusion of innovations in rural culture seems to be significant is Ustronie. As for the agricultural sphere, their impact can be found primarily in agrotourism, which has evolved in the Polish countryside in response to the crisis of traditional family farming. There are many institutions supporting and promoting agrotourism run by the state, municipalities and non-governmental organizations. The culture of promoting innovation and looking for a local brand in rural traditions, such as by finding and inventing [48] regional and local products, reaches the countryside by different routes. However, out of ten agrotourism farms located in the village, four are run by urban to rural migrants, and one by a couple of Dutch migrants. Interestingly, most of them are oriented toward cultural tourism. Two of the newcomer families breed horses, but agrotourism also inspires a revival of certain elements of folk culture. In some farms, old production techniques are cultivated, especially in the way of food production (dairy, bakery, herbalism) and how private museums (i.e., of weaving) are run.

In general, migrants have not inherited their holdings, but in the design of their homes and gardens they refer to the material heritage of folk culture more than their native neighbours, especially those who deal with agrotourism. Their relocation to the countryside was often preceded by visiting agrotourism farms, and since they usually belong to the middle class – the main target group of tourist services – they better understand the tastes of holidaymakers than native farmers. Moreover, most of the migrants in Ustronie keep some form of neighbourhood relations with the native inhabitants, and a group of them share the zeal for protecting the artistic heritage of the Polish countryside. As one participant said, *“I was really interested in such grass-root level work, for example, if this Danusia [a native neighbour cooperating in agro tourism – AW], a simple woman, will make wooden stairs to the house, instead of concrete, because I'll explain it to her why it is better to make the wooden ones, and she will do it. For me this is a dimension of my work, somehow preserving this cultural heritage, even at these stairs. Well, or other things. That she would have sold this cow long time ago, but she has it, but she knows that thanks to this cow she can still work in education and somehow make money. She did not demolish the bread oven in her house, because I say – Danusia, you will be selling tickets to this stove and you will get money for it.”*

Hence, the migrants are natural intermediaries in communicating these tastes to local owners of agrotourism farms. Migrants contribute their social capital to this activity in the form of contacts with urban circles of New Age and folk culture lovers, as well as skills and a willingness to organize co-operation between farms, leading to revival in the field of events [49]. They co-organize a festival during in which tourists can wander between agrotourism farms presenting their attractions and specialties. Especially noteworthy is the earliest migrant couple, which has organized an informal network of cooperation including direct neighbours that provide agricultural products and organize bread baking shows. On several other agrotourism farms, the couple carries out activities complementary to art workshops such as herbal workshops and hippotherapy. It makes Ustronie an educational complex with a variety of offers, especially for children and youth. They have also managed to mobilize the village community to install on nearby water sources a ceramic casing, which became another attraction of the village and the main destination for the afternoon strolls. It can be the example of the transformation of local knowledge, in which the change of one activity at the same time implies the change of the entire knowledge structure of the world, *illuminated by the social reflector of attention* [11]. Cultivated land becomes a space of artistic expression and a setting for tourist attractions.

### **Summary and conclusions**

To conclude, the influx of urban to rural migrants seems to be less a source than the *catalyst* of innovation in the rural culture. Based on the research conducted, there are several conditions that must be fulfilled before the newcomers can play such a role. First, the village must be a place of life for the migrants in a social sense, which also includes relationships that go beyond the household at the neighbourhood level through interactions, mutual help or cooperation. Interactions at the community level, through participation in village gatherings, or at least interest in the issues raised there, are also important. Rural culture is primarily communal, and introducing some innovation requires the recognition of the minimum rules of this community. In turn, introducing innovation depends upon the willingness of the migrants themselves, given modern technology, the state, and market opportunities to live alienated from local ties. Migrant households cannot, therefore, be extraterritorial enclaves to which they come by car to hide behind a high fence and an aggressive dog running alongside, which is a typical practice in the suburbs of big cities [41], but also in the most suburban part of Moczydło. There must also be a convergence of values between migrants and the residents in the sphere of life in which innovation occurs. Innovators must enjoy authority in this area of life among residents. Innovation itself must be coherent with the core values of both groups and confirmed through a credible presence in the migrants' way of life. Thus, migrants can serve as the innovation catalyst primarily in more peripheral villages where isolation from the neighbours is more difficult, and in places where families valuing the rural culture (sometimes imagined) and the values it represents are settling in.

The rapid cultural transformation of the countryside in Poland weakened the previous rural culture, but the inhabitants of the peasant origin preserve to some extent the core values constituting the former cultural identity. It is possible due to the lasting influence of the core values of the peasant culture, which form the habituses and cultural identities of the modern rural dwellers, thus influencing their ways of interpreting the occurring structural changes. New ideas and behaviours become innovations, when they are in line with the core values of the given culture. The influx of urban to rural migrants can carry innovation, even in the sphere

of agricultural activities. However, migrants remain a distinct category of inhabitants, and therefore their influence on the local population is limited (and vice versa).

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