

# THE ECONOMIC CULTURE OF THE POLISH COUNTRYSIDE IN THE PROCESS OF CHANGES – AN OUTLINE OF THE ISSUES

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**Abstract.** *The paper The Economic culture of the Polish countryside in the Process of Changes – an outline of issues sets up a thesis that the transformation process has a multidimensional character and that its final effect is decided by an interaction between the organizational-institutional and mental-cultural level. Drawing attention to the cultural aspect increases the accuracy of the formulated diagnoses, explanations and prognoses. The author's arguments are based on three elements. Firstly, she indicates the theoretical aspects of understanding the economic culture – the ways of defining and operation; secondly, she discusses the essential components of the traditional economic culture of the countryside, indicating the impact that the traditional value system has on contemporary economic attitudes and mentality. Thirdly, she points out how the changes connected with the transformation process exert an influence on modification of the crucial elements of this culture, adapting it to the requirements of contemporary world.*

**Keywords:** *economic culture, Polish countryside, value system.*

## Introduction

The Polish society (similarly to a lot of other Mid- and Eastern-European societies) has found itself within the last two decades in a situation of creating a new political, economic and social order. The changes have led both to disintegration of some structures and creation of others, as well as modification of conduct patterns and adaptation strategies to the new social order. In academic research concerning recognition of the social transformation there appear analyses of institutional, organizational (legal and political) and cultural changes.

Their versatility is connected with the conviction that „the transformation process has a multidimensional character and its final effect is determined by the interaction between the organizational-institutional and mental-cultural level, not the shape of these levels separately. Disregarding any of the dimensions proves weakness of formulated diagnoses, explanations and prognoses”<sup>1</sup> (Sztompka, 1997).

<sup>1</sup> Sztompka, P. (1997). Kulturowe imponderabilia szybkich zmian społecznych – Studia Socjologiczne, nr 4, p. 6.

The aim of the paper is to indicate what role the economic culture of the inhabitants can play in the transformation process of the countryside.

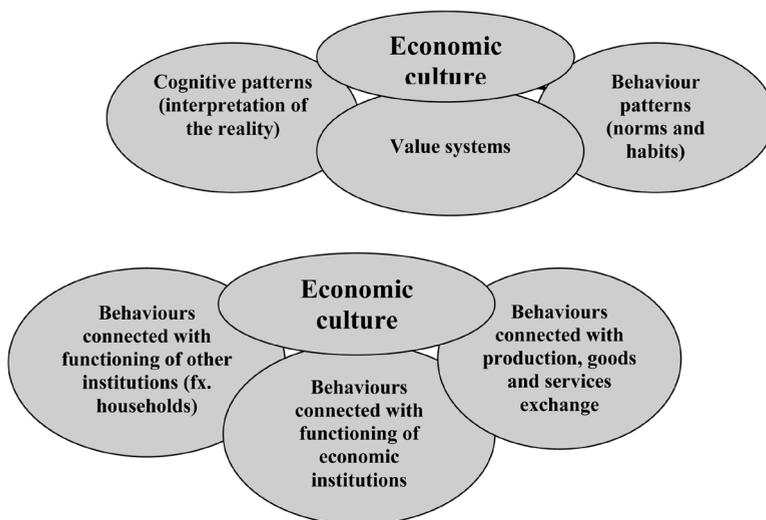
### **Economic culture – theoretical aspects**

Economic culture of a society, being an achievement of a historical development, exerts a significant influence on the environment of economic processes, on people’s behaviour standards and the quality of interpersonal relationships in organizations. It also influences the conditions of spreading social knowledge of economic processes, hence the development of the social capital for economic needs.

The notion of economic culture is not easy to define. One can distinguish between two main ways of understanding

economic culture and applying the notion in research. The first one, defining a culture, creates a catalogue of all values, cognitive and behaviour patterns essential for economic activity. By their means one can evaluate what is considered good or bad, acceptable or not, in a given society. People interpret the reality and take a stance using cognitive patterns. The dimensions of economic culture analysed in this way by researchers is depicted in the following diagram.

Another way of understanding economic culture distinguishes between main factors which influence the evolution of cultures, and then standardises them in several dimensions or around a few focal points of the analysis. Each of the points can be further specified in terms of more detailed issues or questions. In this way entrepreneurship, attitudes to money and



*Ill. 1. Economic culture*

Source: own elaboration after: Marody, M. Kochanowicz, (2007). J. Pojęcie “kultury ekonomicznej” w wyjaśnieniu polskich przemian. in: Kulturowe aspekty transformacji ekonomicznej, Warszawa, p. 14–27.

other, may become the central category<sup>2</sup> (Marody, Kochanowicz, 2007).

Applying culture categories to research is not simple, as economic culture entails several intertwining elements creating an empirical entity. Cultural patterns, values, ideas, political and social structures create a context for economic functioning (Berg-er, 1991). It is impossible to explain the specificity of a society's economic culture without reflecting on the economic culture itself.

### **Some aspects of economic culture of the countryside**

The specificity of social and economic system in the countryside has its reflection in the inhabitants' economic life and is an effect of an axiological system, created over the centuries. The structure of the Polish countryside may have always been diversified and may have encompassed several social and professional categories, stemming from financial status and the source of income, but the rural culture and its value system have had an influence on the whole rural community. As a result, the components of the contemporary countryside remain under a significant influence of rural culture<sup>3</sup>.

As it can be seen from the chart above, one of the most significant elements of the rural value system was industriousness. Work is not so much an economic matter

as a cultural value, with the farmer being judged and self-assessed according to the amount of effort put in farming. Not only did work provide satisfaction of needs, but was also a way to the mystic unity with nature. A sense of responsibility was the strongest moral norm. Industriousness was treated as a value in itself and its lack discredited the notion of proper farming. Negligence and shoddiness at work was a highly reprehensible trait, as it betrayed one of the basic social and moral principles of the community<sup>4</sup>.

However, work ethics is not identical with active entrepreneurship; it is rather a stereotypical symbol of tradition. On the contrary, farmers' work ethics is actually almost synonymous with ineffective farming<sup>5</sup>.

Industriousness was directly linked with economizing and thriftiness. „Thriftiness was understood in the traditional countryside as a maximum exploitation of everything a household had at its disposal (land, tools, animals, buildings, people), whereas economizing meant additionally a prospective thriftiness, i.e. gathering and protecting all those goods and items which could come in handy in the household. [...] Understood in this way, thriftiness could be accused of being an adaptation attitude with optimal exploitation of what one owned and little struggle for development and obtaining what one lacked.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Marody, M. Kochanowicz, (2007). J. Pojęcie „kultury ekonomicznej” w wyjaśnianiu polskich przemian. in: Kulturowe aspekty transformacji ekonomicznej, Warszawa, p. 27–28.

<sup>3</sup> Styk, J. (1993). Chłopskie widzenie świata i siebie, Wydawnictwo Duszpasterstwa rolników, Włocławek, p. 17–32.

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<sup>4</sup> Jagiełło-Łysiowa E. (1983), Wzór osobowy chłopca-rolnika. In: Naród, kultura, osobowość, PAN, Warszawa, p. 171.

<sup>5</sup> Fedyszak-Radziejowska B. (1992), Etos pracy rolnika. Modele społeczne a rzeczywistość, PAN IR-WiR, Warszawa, p.22.

<sup>6</sup> Młeczko, F. W. (1976), Oszczędność i rozrzutność w kulturach rolniczych, CZSR, Warszawa, p. 95.

Chart 1. The axiological system of the traditional Polish countryside

VALUES	DESCRIPTION
<b>INDUSTRIOUSNESS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• work duty as a moral norm</li> <li>• sacred nature of work</li> <li>• conscientiousness at work more important than qualifications</li> <li>• work ethics – appreciation of the working process itself (working all day, from dawn to dusk), not its final effect (which depends on “the grace of God”)</li> </ul>
<b>LAND</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• economic-protective function</li> <li>• social-prestigious function (determines social position in the local community)</li> </ul>
<b>ECONOMIZING AND THRIFTINESS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• maximum exploitation of everything that a household has at its disposal (land, tools, animals, buildings, people),</li> <li>• thriftiness meant gathering and protecting all those goods and items which can come in handy in the household.</li> </ul>
<b>SELF-SUFFICIENCY</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• satisfying the family’s needs by one’s own amount of effort (self-supply)</li> </ul>
<b>INDEPENDENCE</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• individualistic attitudes</li> <li>• mistrust towards the outside world</li> </ul>

Source: own elaboration

In the peasant value system the land and the household used to be superior values, as their loss meant a collapse of the entire family. Any other values were treasured only as long as they involved the household’s support, expanding and strengthening. „Farmland is treated as workspace, but it is simultaneously the family seat. Consequently, farmland not only provides a source of income, but also a certain lifestyle to be carried on by the generations to come”<sup>7</sup>.

In traditional forms of farming the economic way of thinking clearly reflected the peasant value system. One could repeat after M. Weber<sup>8</sup> (Weber 1978) that the peasant culture is characterized by a certain type of rationality which has its con-

sequences when the aggressive capitalistic culture collides with the peasant traditionalism. According to Weber, capitalism is based on formal rationality, consisting in an extreme economization of social activities whose base is a cost and profit calculation. This calculation, however, is not part of the peasant way of thinking. The peasant culture is characterized as based on *actual rationality*, subordinate to other acknowledged criteria stemming from values which cannot be quantitatively expressed by means of money. In this respect culture can play a significant role in preserving and adapting the peasant farming to the changing world.

The crucial principle of farming is therefore not profit maximization, but minimalization of risks and providing self-sufficiency. „The peasant way of farming” has become one of the ways to define this category on account of the economic sys-

<sup>7</sup> Grabski W. (1936), System socjologii wsi, Roczniki Socjologii Wsi, t I, p. 98.

<sup>8</sup> Weber M. (1978), Economy and Society, Berkeley: University of California Press.

tem specificity. It is nevertheless within its domain that one seeks answers to the question what factors can have an effect on the contemporary moral attitudes and economic functioning of the countryside, in spite of the change within social and economic context and abandoning traditional rural relationships.

### **Formation of a “new” economic culture in the Polish countryside – where are we heading to?**

Economic culture of the Polish countryside (and of the whole Polish society) has been significantly influenced by new values and presented with different behaviour patterns for nearly the last two decades.

One can set up a hypothesis that its shape is and will be essentially affected in the long term by two phenomena:

1. political transformation aimed at the transition from a socialist to market economy
2. entering the EU economic and social structures

The transformation after 1989, was focused on a complete institutional change of the new system and transformation of all social, political and economic structures following the example of stable democratic societies based on market economy. The changing process turned out to be extremely problematic for the countryside, as it meant a significant decrease of income, high unemployment rate, both official and hidden, and a progressing impoverishment of rural families. It also meant a necessity of changing the attitudes and mentality in view of a new social-economic system (which was and still is a significant challenge because of the established tradi-

tional value system). The transformation process in this field was dynamized when preaccession processes were introduced. At that point the EU operating principles (procedures, norms etc.) were transplanted on the Polish ground. It meant an explicit subordination of the Polish side to the EU standards and regulations, as long as the enterprises wanted to become beneficiaries of preaccession programmes. “Culture clashes” occurred several times. The rural inhabitants were not fully aware of the fact that the Polish participation in the European Union had its organizational and legal consequences, also in the area of farming<sup>9</sup>. They were overwhelmed with the bureaucracy level, the number of requirements that they had never encountered before, and the formal issues, such as filling in applications and writing reports etc. they had seen for the first time in their lives. The problem turned out to be a real barrier in an effective application procedure. It contributed to a realization that the accession of our country to the EU and stabilization of the market system imposes a necessity to change the way of farming. Consequently, it made people rethink previous attitudes to different institutions, behaviours connected with production, interchange of goods and services, and patterns to follow in business

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<sup>9</sup> The conclusions connected with the issue in question are drawn on the author’s own research which was carried out in 2005 and 2006 in the countryside in order to learn about the inhabitants’ opinion on the integration effects. The research was concentrated on a few problem groups concerning, among other things, determining inhabitants’ attitudes to the integration, evaluating economic mobility and making use of the Union’s opportunities for development, also fears and threats connected with the integration. The research was carried out with the focus technique among several social categories – farmers, entrepreneurs, youths and inhabitants of the post state-owned farms areas.

activities. It concerned both a necessity to take risks in business activities, increasing the operational skills on free market and undertaking entrepreneurial actions.

The inhabitants of the countryside, municipal authorities, entrepreneurs and – least but not last – the farmers, began reluctantly to adapt themselves to the system, struggling consistently to implement new rules in business and social activities. The effects of the preaccession training became visible in the moment of integration, as, according to the authors of the report *The Polish countryside after the EU accession*<sup>10</sup>, the year 2004 was decisive for the development of agriculture and countryside in Poland. It was the first year since 1996, that brought improvement in the agriculture's profitability. It was thanks to better price relations for farmers and launching the direct subsidies, which 85% of farmers using 95% of their arable land benefited (it was a record in the EU).

The first data on the situation in the countryside after the EU accession indicated that the Polish agriculture benefited most from the accession out of all the member countries. The income of the Polish farmers was increasing fastest in comparison to the rest nine new member countries. It was connected with a fast increase in export of raw materials and processed food products on the EU markets (but not only) and an improvement in profitability and competitiveness of the Polish agricultural production (profitability in the Polish agriculture increased by 8.2%)<sup>11</sup>.

Another extremely beneficial change in the countryside is an increased educational aspiration of the new generation who plan to stay in countryside, but don't want to become farmers (the tendency observed from the late 90.). One can also observe a development of human and social capital, giving hope for a long-awaited social and economic advance of the Polish countryside. Admittedly, the favourable tendencies observed by the researchers do not translate yet into such an increase of economic and social activity that could ensure an unambiguous change in the employment structure, decrease in unemployment or a decided limitation of the areas of rural poverty, but stable economic development creates a perspective of such development of the countryside, that its inhabitants can stand a chance of actual change in the quality and level of life<sup>12</sup>. It is undoubtedly a qualitative change of the situation in the Polish countryside. In the author's conviction we are facing here some important aspects of the transformation, namely a process leading from adaptation to the new conditions to actual changes in the way of thinking about the approach to farming. According to L. E. Harrison and S. P. Huntington<sup>13</sup>, whose convictions are founded on analyses carried out in a number of countries, the social environment, the institutional activities and the country's policy can trigger off some cultural changes. Following this line of thought one can convincingly assert that introduction of the market economy, and es-

<sup>10</sup> Polska wieś po wejściu do Unii Europejskiej (2004), Fundacja na rzecz Rozwoju Polskiego Rolnictwa, Warszawa.

<sup>11</sup> This data is obtained from The Agency for Restructuring and Modernisation of Agriculture.

<sup>12</sup> Polska wieś po wejściu do Unii Europejskiej, op. cit., s. 83–90.

<sup>13</sup> Harrison L. E., Huntington S. P. (2000), *Culture Matters. How Values Shape Human Progress*, New York, Basic Books.

pecially the European integrity, are important determinants of changes in the countryside, as they affect positively those cultural values which are considered crucial for proper functioning in the market economy.

The effects are visible in the development of rural entrepreneurship. When speaking about the development of entrepreneurship in the countryside, one must pay attention to the fact that on the Polish ground the idea of rural activation and the diversification of business activities proved effective. It is due to the conviction that the future of the countryside may not only be connected with agriculture, but also with other branches of economy. The idea of multifunctionality<sup>14</sup>, realized by a considerable number of inhabitants, helps to organize income outside the agricultural branch, which leads to the deagrarianization of the countryside and its civilisational advance.

However, the multifunctional rural development can only proceed when some essential conditions are fulfilled, i.e. if an influx of organizational concepts and solutions, supported by local entrepreneurship and social activity of the inhabitants is of a permanent, not incidental character.

The prospects of rural entrepreneurship's development will firstly depend on the general condition of the Polish economy, and secondly, on the countryside inhabitants themselves and their deliberate actions taken in this area. The main concern is that the changes in economic culture can be of a more profound character, if

there occurs a considerable development of some factors. The factors encompass a potential considerable development of the social capital of the countryside, an increase in public trust in Poland and the improvement of self-organization and the competence within the area of market gambling and marketing. In this respect, the question of encouraging co-operative attitudes is crucial, so that the position of business actors, especially of the farms economically incapable of competing on the market, can grow. It is possible when co-operative attitudes are encouraged and producer groups are formed. In the countryside the development of multisubjectivity within business activities is currently not quite dynamic, whereas forming producer and marketing groups and co-operative movements is actually considered extremely important because of the low production level of the Polish farms and their shortage of capital. It is considered that increasing economic effectiveness is possible owing to collective forms of farming. The fact has been verified by many EU countries where producer groups play an important role in the creation of food market and representing the agricultural producers' interests.

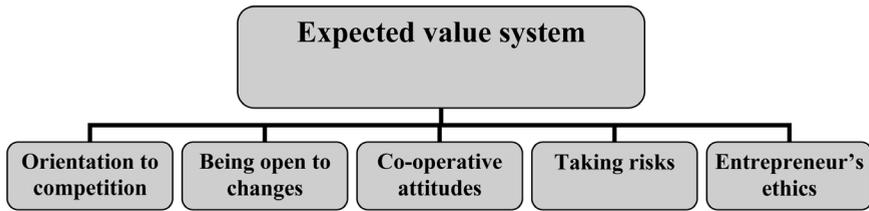
From this point of view it is possible to create a new economic culture based on internalised values which support adaptation to market gambling. According to researchers, culture can become the asset and the driving force of the positive socio-economic changes only if a determined, not incidental combination of economic culture's features becomes widespread<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Kamiński, W. (2002), Warianty wielofunkcyjnego rozwoju wsi – uwarunkowania przestrzenne, in: *Wielofunkcyjny rozwój wsi w aspekcie przewyższania przeludnienia agrarnego*, Zeszyty Naukowe Akademii Rolniczej im. H. Kołłątaja w Krakowie nr 295.

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<sup>15</sup> Harrison L. E., Huntington S. P. (2000), *Culture Matters*, op.cit., p. 434.



### *Ill. 2. Value system of the „New economic culture”*

Source: author's elaboration

The value system presented below is considered an important element of the prodevelopmental cultures.

Nevertheless, changes in economic culture will not proceed in the expected pace and scope, unless favourable environmental conditions are stimulated, which are first and foremost:

- consistent following the public patterns of the common social order by institutions, which ensures a basis for creating positive entrepreneurial patterns;
- creating transparent codification systems to eliminate the phenomena which disorganize the established legal order. The systems' purpose is to initialize and develop the entrepreneurship of all business enterprises participating in market gambling, and to strengthen positive patterns;
- efficient development of the norms of social co-existence;
- supporting education on all levels and in all possible aspects (courses, coaching).

Only positive mutual influence between a favourable social environment and pro-market and pro-social attitudes among the inhabitants of the countryside can create „new economic culture”, where there is an acceptance of elements such as:

- farming and running business activity in accordance with the EU agricultural policy;
- entrepreneurial attitudes;
- willingness to co-operate between different business enterprises and institutions.

### **Conclusions**

The above theses were aimed at indicating the barriers, also the development opportunities of those elements of social and economic life which will encourage modernisation processes in the countryside. A multifunctional development of the countryside, the entrepreneurial activities of its inhabitants and co-operative attitudes are a basic chance to find own position in the economic system. Formation of the economic culture of the inhabitants, adequate to the requirements of contemporary world, is part of the process.

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