

*Tomasz Marcysiak**

ORCID: 0000-0003-0733-1956

From Tradition to Innovation: Rurality in the Discourse of the 19th Polish Sociological Congress

The 19th Polish Sociological Congress of the Polish Sociological Association took place in Białystok from 16 to 19 September 2025. The event focused on contemporary crises and social transformations. The programme included more than one hundred thematic groups, many of which directly or indirectly addressed the countryside and rural areas. Although there was no section explicitly dedicated to agriculture, the theme of rurality permeated numerous presentations centred on economic, social, and cultural transformations. An analysis of the papers presented allows us to conclude that contemporary sociological discourse no longer conceptualises the rural in terms of “tradition” or “peripherality,” but rather as a *laboratory of social change*.

Of particular note was the thematic group entitled “*Ruralities in Transition: Environment, Places, People*,” organised by Katarzyna Zajda, Sylwia Urbańska, Ilona Matysiak, and Wojciech Goszczyński. This group aimed to integrate diverse academic and research environments engaged in studies on broadly understood rurality. The organisers and participants sought to address new local and trans-local phenomena and processes. It was assumed that contemporary social challenges – such as climate change, demographic shifts, cultural trans-

* WSB Merito University Bydgoszcz

formations, economic processes, and gender relations – leave a profound imprint on the trajectories of rural transformation. Consequently, an important research challenge lies in examining how rural communities adapt to, transform within, or seek to protect themselves from these dynamics.

The first speaker, Wojciech Knieć, presented a paper titled “*Farming 5.0: Towards Agriculture without Farmers?*” He observed that the contemporary agricultural sector demonstrates a remarkably rapid adoption of intelligent technologies, largely due to their tangible advantages over analogue systems. These advantages include, above all, the ability to process significantly larger data sets and transmit them instantaneously between agricultural devices and machinery. This has a direct and substantial impact on optimising production costs and reducing environmental expenses. In this context, Knieć discussed the concept of the *paradox of sustainable intensification* in agricultural production. Precision farming refers to a form of agriculture in which digital technologies are extensively used to monitor and optimise production processes. Smart farming encompasses all the features of precision agriculture while extending them through the Internet of Things (IoT), the introduction of robotics and drones, as well as artificial intelligence. According to Knieć, this should be understood not only as augmenting human capabilities with machines’ analytical power but also as enabling machines to interact with people through Artificial Super Intelligence (ASI). It is conceivable that “invisible agriculture” may soon dominate the countryside – large, autonomous farms detached from the authority and needs of local communities. What may arrive even sooner, Knieć argues, is the erosion of the farmer’s work ethos as production becomes decoupled from nature, along with a weakening of the emotional relationship to land and animals. Another challenge will be the externalisation of knowledge and power within the agricultural economy – the rule of algorithms. Techno-Luddite critiques are also emerging: contemporary technological solutions, it is argued, threaten humanity, destroy local communities, and create risks associated with the uncontrolled influence of machines on food production. In certain domains, technological progress, some contend, should be deliberately slowed. The author also called for Polish and European rural sociologists to pay much closer attention to the impact of Economy 5.0 on the development of agriculture.

The second paper, by Ruta Śpiewak and Elwira Wilczyńska, was titled “*Polish Women Farmers – Between Conservatism and an Unarticulated Emancipa-*

tion.” The authors argue that Polish agriculture remains male-dominated and continues to be strongly shaped by traditional patriarchal cultural structures. The transformations observed – such as the rising share of women farm owners – have not been accompanied by corresponding shifts in deeply rooted beliefs about gender roles. The presentation outlined the structural and cultural barriers to women’s empowerment in Polish agriculture and identified the main systemic challenges faced by women farmers. These were discerned through a two-stage study: at the meso level, in-depth interviews with female experts connected to the agricultural sector, and at the micro level, in-depth interviews with women farmers from selected voivodeships.

The methodological framework rested on Feminist Agrifood Systems Theory (FAST), which integrates several theoretical strands and encompasses diverse spheres of women farmers’ activity, including agricultural identities, structural and cultural barriers, and women’s innovativeness in sustainable agriculture. The changes observed in recent years have been emancipatory in character and highly dynamic; however, prevailing cultural conditions mean that traditional constraints continue to hinder women in Poland. In most Polish family farms, a traditional division of labour still prevails, making it difficult for women to engage fully in professional work. As a result, they find it harder to pursue farming as an occupation and – once they do – harder to become active in farmers’ organisations.

Women in the Polish agriculture identify as farmers, take pride in their occupation, and view it as a form of economic activity or business. Wives of farmers who are not farm owners and/or do not work in the fields but provide administrative and accounting support for the farm likewise identify with agriculture. Women farmers report few difficulties in accessing the key resources needed to run an agricultural enterprise. Nonetheless, certain barriers persist that stem from traditional understandings of gender roles – for instance, favouring boys as the “natural” successors or denying women competence in operating agricultural machinery. These issues, however, remain largely invisible to the interviewees. Even when barriers to resource access are recognised, respondents do not interpret them in terms of discrimination.

The next presentation, delivered by Marta Gospodarczyk, titled “*Without Water You Can Do Nothing: Coping Strategies of Family Farms in Poland in the Face of Drought*,” addressed the growing problem of droughts in Poland, which are becoming increasingly frequent and prolonged. According to the

author, drought is a multidimensional phenomenon that poses significant definitional challenges. Gospodarczyk's presentation focused on agricultural drought as a contextual factor shaping the labour strategies and coping mechanisms adopted by family farms in Poland. Drawing on the tradition of feminist economic anthropology, the study aimed to situate agricultural labour within a broader socio-cultural framework, offering a *detailed description* of coping strategies and the decision-making processes underlying them, with particular attention to their gendered character.

Family farms were conceptualised as complex analytical units whose members do not necessarily share the same interests and aspirations. The author posited that gender acts as a structuring factor within each family farm's hierarchy, manifested in women's positions within decision-making processes and their influence on strategic choices, as well as in the gendered division of labour. Gospodarczyk argued that the embedding of Polish agriculture in the global market economy creates a situation in which both the experience of drought and the strategies adopted to cope with it align with the logic of capitalist production and the pursuit of income maximisation. However, these economic imperatives coexist with emotions such as anger, disappointment, and sadness, arising from a sense of loss of control over natural forces.

Thus, coping strategies and decision-making processes combine economic rationality (profit maximisation) with emotional responses and an awareness of human limitations vis-à-vis nature. These processes are shaped not only by global market conditions and European and national regulations but also by the specific structure of the local economy. Gender, in turn, influences household members' positions in the negotiations that underpin decision-making and strategy formulation.

The paper presented by Halina Rusek, titled "*Women in Rural Families – Continuity or Transformation of Roles and Life Patterns?*" sought to answer, among other questions, what kinds of relationships currently prevail within families – particularly rural ones – in the first decades of the twenty-first century. The researcher argued that women living in rural areas have not been a frequent subject of empirical study in recent years and that existing research on rural women tends to be narrow, specialised, and event-focused, preventing an adequate representation of the broader socio-cultural context of their lives. As a result, the contemporary image of rural women appears fragmented and full of contrasts.

In this context, Rusek posed a series of questions that merit further empirical investigation: What roles do rural women currently play in marriage and family life, particularly regarding the nature of marital relations – patriarchal or partnership-based? Does the common belief in the persistence of a traditional division of roles find confirmation in the actual lives of rural families? How do rural women describe and evaluate relationships within their own marriages and those of their parents? To what extent can one speak of the continuity of life patterns? Finally, what image of the rural woman emerges in light of ongoing transformations in the roles, structure, and functions of contemporary Polish rural society?

The presentation delivered by Małgorzata Dziekanowska, titled “*Between Tradition and Innovation: Life Strategies of Women in Peripheral Areas amid the Transformation of Rurality*,” addressed the issue of life strategies among women living in peripheral regions in the context of transformations of contemporary rurality and changing socio-cultural conditions. The main objective of the paper was to examine how spatial location, social structure, and access to resources shape women’s opportunities for action and their modes of adaptation to a dynamically changing reality. The theoretical framework of the analysis was based on Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of capital and habitus, which made it possible to capture the relationship between social structure, individual life strategies, and internalised patterns of behaviour. The analysis also took into account the variability of women’s life stages, emphasising the differing pressures, opportunities, and constraints that emerge at various points in the life course.

Particular attention was devoted to the relationship between entrenched norms of traditional rural culture – especially the patriarchal family model – and women’s emerging aspirations for autonomy, self-realisation, and socio-professional engagement.

In the second part of the session, five papers were presented. The first, delivered by Karol Korczyński and titled “*Relational Practices and the Formation of Bonds on the Periphery in the Context of Counterurbanization in Post-Pandemic Poland*,” addressed the phenomenon of counterurbanisation, understood as migration from metropolitan areas to peripheral regions. According to the author, this process in Poland remains relatively limited in scale. However, both its significance and scholarly interest in it among European researchers have increased markedly in recent years, largely due to the spread

of remote work accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the deepening housing crisis in major cities.

In forecasting the durability of counterurban migration and assessing its implications for the development of peripheral areas, it is essential to understand relational practices from a life course perspective – that is, to examine these practices across different levels of social reality and various spheres of everyday life, over time and across space.

The next presentation, by Krzysztof Gorlach and Anna Jastrzębiec-Witkowska, titled “*Shaping Place through Folk Art: The Case of a Painted Village*,” analysed a rural community in which artistic heritage became a driver of social activity and participation in the development of a distinctive fragment of rural space. The tradition of decorating the walls of both residential and farm buildings emerged in the nineteenth century for practical reasons: at that time, many buildings lacked chimneys, leading to dark stains on their walls. Covering these stains with colourful patterns served to improve their appearance. Later, as such primitive structures disappeared, wall painting continued for purely aesthetic purposes and eventually attracted the attention of external observers. This practice, maintained by a few families and passed down from generation to generation, turned some of its practitioners into informal community leaders, gradually transforming the locality into what became known as the “Painted Village.” Building upon this image, the community was able to generate social capital that, for example, enabled it to introduce electrification ten years earlier than neighbouring villages after the Second World War. The painting of building walls became widely recognised by external actors and entered broader discourses concerning the community’s identity, history, and development paths. Over time, the village evolved into a tourist attraction, hosting agritourism farms, local handicraft workshops, and a cultural centre. The story of the “Painted Village” thus serves as an example of community development based on bottom-up social activism and the creative use of traditional motifs of local folk art.

The following paper, presented by Konrad Burdyka and titled “*Ethos-Based Organizations in the Polish Countryside: Values as a Silenced Foundation of Local Community Resilience*,” focused on rural non-governmental organisations (NGOs) characterised by a strong ethos and identified them as particularly resilient actors within the third sector in the face of externally induced crises. The author’s point of departure was the assumption that values

rooted in the past – understood as a specific way of life reflecting the concept of *ethos* as described by Maria Ossowska – constitute the foundation of the durability and social impact of rural communities.

Burdyka observed that “building resilience” has become a flagship slogan and policy direction for supporting local communities and NGOs in Poland. However, systemic measures (such as government grant programmes) tend to neglect the sphere of values – long recognised in classical theories of resilience as the basis of social capital that enables communities to overcome crises. Public policies focus primarily on quickly implemented interventions, such as equipment purchases or skills development. Yet the most numerous types of rural NGOs often ground their activities in a clearly defined ethos – a generationally transmitted pattern of social behaviour closely linked to a hierarchy of values.

Although these ethos are subject to modernising pressures – and in many organisations no longer serve as a core source of motivation or meaning – there remain opportunities for their preservation and reinforcement to the benefit of society as a whole. Based on field observations of the most active organisations (such as Volunteer Fire Brigades, Rural Women’s Circles, and Local Sports Associations), the author identified several key practices that help maintain this ethos:

- Formalisation of ethos – Drafting documents that define behavioural frameworks and serve as reference points in crisis or conflict situations;
- Socialisation and ritual practices – Engaging in regular collective activities, group rituals, and ceremonies, and commemorating real individuals as carriers of ethos (e.g. founders and community leaders);
- Identity narratives – Cultivating symbols, personal histories, memory rooms, and community chronicles.

According to Burdyka, it remains an open question whether such practices are widespread and replicable. In other words, do ethos continue to be recognised and valued as essential resources for rural NGOs, or are they increasingly giving way to the marketisation of activities and the ambivalence of increasingly diverse and interest-driven membership structures?

The next paper, presented by Jowita Bartczak and titled “*Institutional and Non-Institutional Support for Elderly People in Rural Areas: The Case of the Prostki Municipality*,” outlined the main findings of a research project of the

same title. The primary aim of the study was to identify and analyse the institutional and non-institutional support systems available to elderly people (aged 65 and over) in rural areas. The research was conducted in the rural municipality of Prostki, located in the Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship, during the summer of 2024. As part of the project, in-depth interviews were conducted with two categories of respondents: representatives of local government institutions and organisations, and elderly residents of the municipality (aged 65 and over). The carefully selected sample allowed for a reliable assessment of the challenges faced by older people living in rural areas and helped determine which institutions meet the needs of elderly residents – and to what extent. The study also explored the situation of older rural inhabitants during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the forms of support directed towards them during that difficult period.

Compared to urban areas, rural regions remain particularly underdeveloped in terms of infrastructure designed to meet the needs of older adults. Long distances and the lack of frequent and regular transport connections with larger towns not only restrict access to basic services but also deepen social isolation and increase the risk of social exclusion. The main institutions providing support for the elderly in Prostki include local government offices, the Municipal Social Welfare Centre (GOPS), the Church/Caritas, the Cultural Centre, the public library, local healthcare facilities, the Association of Social Initiatives “Our Prostki,” and local Rural Women’s Circles (Koła Gospodyń Wiejskich). Interviews revealed that, despite the efforts of these institutions, many respondents considered the assistance they provide to be insufficient. Formal support was perceived largely as a supplement to the informal help offered by family members and neighbours, which remains the primary source of care and social support for elderly rural residents.

The following presentation, delivered by Michał Wenzel and titled “*Rural Social Movements in Poland*,” provided a concise analysis of the mobilisation of rural communities in contemporary Poland. The author drew upon his own conceptual framework of rural social movements, arguing that existing research on rural environments in Central and Eastern Europe lacks a clearly defined and consistently applied category of social movements that express the aspirations, interests, and values of populations economically tied to agriculture and culturally connected to the countryside. According to Wenzel, this conceptual ambiguity stems partly from the diversification of the rural

milieu, which has become a field of multiple forms of economic activity and a setting for various social groups. Therefore, it is essential to analytically distinguish between social movements rooted in pre-modern agrarian ideals and modes of action, and the urban-origin populations colonising rural spaces who introduce postmodern forms of mobilisation.

During the Congress, rural issues also appeared in other thematic groups. In one of them, Włodzimierz Durka presented a paper titled *“Risky Neighbourhoods: The Familiar and the Alien in the Social Space of the Village.”* The author discussed, among other topics, new conflicts emerging around space and its use. His presentation highlighted that immigrants in rural areas do not constitute a homogeneous category. In addition to nomads forced to settle in peripheral rural regions, some migrants with high socio-economic status also choose the Polish countryside as their permanent place of residence. As a result, Durka argued, we are witnessing diverse forms of cohabitation between long-term residents and newcomers to Polish villages. These new encounters generate emerging patterns of mutual relations and social interaction.

Another paper, by Sylwia Urbańska, titled *“Places and Solidarity in Conservative Rural Communities of Eastern Poland,”* presented findings from field research conducted between 2018 and 2022 in a rural municipality located on the Mazovia–Podlasie border. Urbańska proposed an innovative analytical approach to understanding how class position and the situatedness of rural women intersect with individual and collective forms of agency, practices of support and/or resistance, access to various types of capital, and gendered expectations. She focused on the role of local (in)formal support networks, as well as familial and community alliances, to reveal the complexity and ambivalence inherent in practices of resistance, solidarity, and survival strategies in de-agrarianising, remote, and conservative rural communities.

The issue of quality of life among rural seniors and the key developmental challenges of the countryside was addressed by Katarzyna Zajda and Agnieszka Michalska-Żyła in their paper *“A Smart Village for Seniors.”* The authors presented the core assumptions of the Smart Villages concept, including its key characteristics and the potential for designing social innovations within this framework to address the problems faced by older residents. The aim of the analysis was to identify the social challenges experienced by rural seniors that inspired local leaders to develop Smart Village initiatives. These concepts were critically discussed in relation to their key components:

the use of local resources, the integration of (communication) technologies, the creation of cooperation networks during the implementation phase, and the types of social innovations envisioned. The authors concluded by highlighting the potential of the Smart Villages concept to mitigate the difficulties faced by elderly residents of rural areas.

The final presentation, by Wojciech Goszczyński and Krzysztof Pietrowicz, titled *“Capitalism from a Bioreactor: New Technologies, Cultured Meat, and Visions of the Future,”* explored the implications of the rapid acceleration of market-driven technological change based on biotechnology and genetic engineering, closely intertwined with the development of artificial intelligence systems and the broader digitalisation of the economy and society. According to the authors, this process is deeply embedded in the current model of capitalism, which relies on technological innovation as its driving force. One of the most striking aspects of this transformation concerns agriculture and food production. In public perception, food production continues to be viewed as an important but relatively traditional economic sector, located in rural areas and closely linked to natural cycles. In reality, however, this sphere has long been subject to revolutionary technological transformations. Beneath the façade of a nostalgic image of “traditional farming” lies a complex system of human and institutional actors, technologies, scientific knowledge, and economic interests. Goszczyński and Pietrowicz argued that technological change is producing profound – though often invisible to consumers – transformations involving new organisms, industrial processes, and the expanding role of laboratory science. Their presentation reconstructed and analysed the corporate visions shaping this emerging branch of food production, examining how these visions represent the social consequences of new technologies and their potential to redefine the future of agriculture and rural life.

The 19th Polish Sociological Congress, held in Białystok from 16 to 19 September 2025, confirmed the growing importance of rural issues within sociological discourse. The wide range of presentations and discussions demonstrated that the study of rurality is becoming increasingly complex, while traditional boundaries between “city” and “village” are steadily blurring. As the papers presented showed, contemporary rural sociology focuses on processes of transformation, adaptation, and resilience in the countryside in the

face of global challenges – technological, climatic, demographic, and cultural. Participants unanimously emphasised that research on rural areas should occupy a more central place in sociological reflection, serving as a crucial point of reference for understanding the broader dynamics of contemporary social change in Poland and across Europe.