

LOCAL COMMUNITIES AS MANIFESTATION OF THE CIVIC SOCIETY¹

Adam Sosnowski

Abstract

The author of this publication investigated, to which degree local communities in Poland comply with the criteria of a civic society. He emphasizes, that the renaissance of localism in our country prepared a fertile soil for the emergence of a civic society. Likewise he outlined, that local communities fulfil the characteristics of a civic societies and discussed, to which degree regional communities meet the respective standards

Key words: localism, local communities, regional communities, local systems, civic society

The revival of localism

During the past two decades a growing interest in the issues of localism in Eastern-Middle Europe has become apparent. There are some clue issues which are to be considered within the context of this phenomenon, namely: a. is the renaissance of localism a significant factor of the development of a given society in general and of the local communities in particular

b. or is this “resuscitation” only a passing trend provoked by the crises of overarching political, economic and social structures which have been globally evident for a considerable time?

It may be assumed, that the crisis of major central structures and a trend towards localism as a counterbalancing measure of decentralization of economic and civic life have become integral and equivalent components of contemporary societies. The sudden lurch to globalization, foremost in the field of economy, has met with the resistance of the opponents of such a development in contemporary civilization. The anti-globalists act on the assumption that the world-wide crisis of recent years has clearly demonstrated that any further progress grounded on the apparent validity of so far generally accepted premises is doomed to failure. The main presumptions were

a. the ideology of a centrally controlled state economy;

b. the strategy of extended industrialization and, consequently, urbanization-plans subordinate to the industries exigencies;

c. the agglomeration of gigantic housing –complexes, financed by immense sums of corporate and municipal money, laid out to accommodate tens- or hundreds of thousands of tenants.

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In the countries of Middle-Eastern Europe, including Poland, this standardized model of economic and social (today we would say: civic" development) was common practice up to the late 1980s, early 1990s.

After this general overview, in accordance with Bohdan Jalowiecki I will present the primary causes for a revival of localism²

- A general public renunciation of the generally controlled state economy in favor of the principles of devolution, which means the withdrawal of the jurisdiction to settle local and regional affairs away from a central administration and the reinstalling of local administrative bodies into their legal rights, according to the expectations of the local community.
- The increasing inability to control huge structures and organizations without resorting to the creativity of local population
- Rapid degradation of the natural environment which requires the elaboration of national, cross-border and international programs for a sustainable environment development ,
- The restriction of the impact of exogenous cultural patterns on local populations and their unreflected adoption, which eventually will lead to the disintegration of "little homelands" and the uprooting and cultural alienation of the local population. The upkeep and fostering of endogenous customs and cultural patterns should be furthered instead. ³
- A critical attitude towards the welfare state, and the growing conviction that under given circumstances it is preferable to resort to the communal local tradition;
- The economic, political and social centralization, which leads to a weakening of democracy and tempts a government to enslave their subjects ideologically.

The renaissance of localism therefore results from the decision to opt for a development orientated on the transformation of the local community on the foundation of interpersonal, communal and regional bonds to meet the basic criteria of a civic society. Thus, the alternative option of a society grounded on the enslavement of minds through a totalitarian system as presented by George Orwell in 1984 or Tadeusz Konwicki in " Mala Apokalypsa" is being rejected.

The revival of localism in Poland is an irrefutable evidence. Is the renaissance of localism however the one and only appropriate answer to tackle the problems contemporary civilization has to face? This is the question I attempt to answer in the following.

Local systems

The short period of communist dictatorship excepted, local communities and neighborhoods have from time immemorial constituted the cornerstone of any social structure, in their importance unsurpassed but by the family. Their institutionalized and political expression they found in the municipality. Local communities organized in municipalities to govern and administrate a given territory represent a relatively closed structure- the local system. On a higher, macrostructural level, history is being made- wars are waged, governments, empires and entire political systems rise and fall. Within local systems time passes slower. The processes of change and development on this level happen more subtly. Local societies went down in history only sporadically, when favorable or unfavorable coincidences dragged them in the maelstrom of historical events taking place on a different scale.

² B.Jalowiecki, *Rozwoj lokalny*, Warszawa 1989

³ Stanislaw Ossowski refers to them as „private homelands”. See S.Ossowski, *Z zagadnień psychologii społecznej*, (in© S.Ossowski, *Works*, t. III, Warsaw 1967, pp 218-219

Exogenous institutions interfered with the daily affairs of local communities rather haphazardly and only then they had a chance to be remembered by history.

How can we define a local society? As already Jerzy Szacki⁴ pointed out, the semantic fields of the English, French and German equivalents of "społeczność lokalna", viz Community, Gemeinschaft and communauté, cover a wider range of significance than does their Polish counterpart. They encompass collectives of all sorts, and apply to territorial as well as to civic communities. This semantic subtleties should be taken into consideration in order to prevent misunderstandings and inaccuracies in the application of these terms.

In this context I would like to refer to George A. Hillary's⁵ comprehensive systematization of the relevant specialized literature. According to his definition of community, each local community is characterized through three universal features: a commonly shared territory, social interaction and reliable permanent bonds between its members.

As to our domestic nomenclature I refer to the definition of *local community* as suggested by Kazimierz Sowa. According to his key assumption a local community is "not a community inhabiting a random territory, but a clearly defined territory with its proper name and distinguishing social traditions. It is a distinctive community clinging to their ancestral settlement area. The local community is and always has been an indispensable component in the organization of social life within any political unit within the borders of the European cultural sphere, and whatever the term social progress may refer to, it cannot comply with the elimination of the important role this sort of collective plays within the framework of social life."⁶

A local system, according to Kazimierz Sowa, is a narrowly defined region inhabited by a self-governed community.⁷ By assuming this definition we have to keep in mind that presently there do not exist many places that meet these criteria. According to Bohdan Jalowiecki⁸ local systems can not be regarded as completely isolated entities, they have to be considered within the framework of their superordinated systems - a local territory, a political system, a continent. Every local system is interconnected with higher-level systems.

To understand the complex nature of local systems it is necessary to differentiate and describe the respective levels of their working. As Bohdan Jalowiecki⁹ points out, we can differentiate five principal levels of performance and interdependence within local systems: they are of political, economical, social, cultural and self-identifying nature.

As to the political level, it can be stated that the ways of exerting power and the communities political organization are determining factors in the functioning of local systems. The exercise of power can be described by the exemplary dichotomy of democracy – autocracy. The political organization of a political system of a state can be characterized by its localization on a scale defined by the antagonistic poles of centralization and decentralization. This leads to a key issue: is there an inherent link between the way to exert power and the political organization of a community?

⁴ J.Szacki, *Historia myśli socjologicznej*, New editio, Warsaw 2002, pp.596-601

⁵ G.A.Hillary, *Definitions of Community: Areas of Agreement*, „Rural Sociology” 1955, t.20

⁶ K.Sowa, *Lokalizm, centralizm, rozwój społeczny*, „Zeszyty Politologiczne” 1988 nr5, p 555

⁷ K.Sowa, *Lokalizm, Wstęp do socjologicznej teorii zrzeszeń*, Warszawa 1988

⁸ B. Jalowicki, op.cit.

⁹ Ibid.

Social philosophers have tackled the above question in different ways and thence have reached different answers. Some scholars claim, that the essential prerequisite for democracy is decentralization, whereas centralization is a manifestation of autocracy and inevitably ends in despotism and totalitarianism .

This is the opinion held among others by George H. Mead, Herbert Spencer and Alexis de Tocqueville.¹⁰ Other scholars however claim, that democratic or autocratic exercise of power may be relatively independent, because these are spheres basically not correlated. This point of view has been present from antiquity up to our days and has been expressed among others by Platon and Aristoteles, by Montesquieu and Vilfred Pareto.¹¹

While the basic principle of democracy consists in the common participation in power through the people's elected representatives, centralization and decentralization concentrate mainly on the territorial organization of a state and the concession of various privileges the political rulers may exert over their subjects. The centralized system concentrate all power in one central authority, which decides on all matters- not only the essential ones- affecting society in its totality or its individual members; thus it deprives its subjects of all initiative and sense of responsibility, simultaneously generating an attitude of entitlement towards aforementioned centralized power. Thus, the central power suppresses all emergence of a civic society. Centralization leads to a general de-politisation of society and a decreased interest and participation in public matters, which is a flat rejection of democracy. This is contrary to the basic principles of the civic society in a twofold way a.) it deprives the citizen of the possibility to decide in personal affairs b. it prevents them to identify with the political sovereignty, which instead is considered an imposed and unwanted power

Centralization conduces to an atomization of society, where each individual – deprived of any possibility to represent their matters- stands desolately in the face of some central power and its bureaucracy, which eventually leads to the disappearance of the social fabric. Substantial issues and needs of the individual citizen and social groups cannot be considered, because within the centralized system individuals and individual groups appear only as statistical figures. If that is how societies work, decentralization is one of the basic conditions for the implementation of democracy and civic society, as the joint participation of all citizens on all levels of power is indispensable.¹²

Regarding the economic level, we will see that conflicts on the local level are caused, among others, by collective consumption, this is, the amount and quality of goods delivered directly or indirectly by the central power or its commissions. The necessity of a profound and not only superficial agricultural reform is evident and apparent to the majority of the society. Without these reforms there is no chance for an increase of social dynamics and the development of local systems and, in consequence , for the emergence of a civic society. Here an essential correlation between political and economic level is observed.

¹⁰ G. H. Mead, *Umysł, osobowość, społeczeństwo*, Warszawa 1975; H. Spencer, *Zasady socjologii*, t. I-VI, Warszawa 1988/1989; A. de Tocqueville, *O demokracji w Ameryce*, Warszawa 1976.

¹¹ Platon, *Państwo*, Warszawa 1958; Arystoteles, *Dziela wszystkie*, t. I-VII, Warszawa 1990/1994; Ch. L. Montesquieu, *O duchu praw*, Warszawa 1957; V. Pareto, *Uczucia i działania. Fragmenty socjologiczne*, Warszawa 1994.

¹² Por. B. Jałowicki, op.cit.

Under the social viewpoint it should not be neglected that a crucial factor which accounts for the diversity for respective local communities are of ethnic origin. In case there co-exist two or more ethnic groups within the boundaries of one local system, the differentiation gains a new dimension. Like all complex structures a local society represents a system that is particularly susceptible to conflicts, where clashes between global and local interests are common. A global conflict, resulting from the conflict of stratified interests, is of another significance and character in the boundaries of a local community which reflects the peculiarities of the respective region or the prevailing local system. The strong social cohesion, due to numerous and strong family bonds as well as to neighborly and general social connections which determine local systems make it doubtlessly a fertile ground for the functioning of informal associations which are an important factor in the development of a civic society.

The cultural or civilizational sphere presents an ideal field of activity for local systems. It is sheer limitless, encompassing habits and customs, regional folk-art, the source of artistic creation and much more. As it is limitless by definition, it more often than not does not respect the defined borders of the respective local system. Conventions fulfill two important functions, firstly they are a means of control and supervision, which regulates the proper behavior at a given place and time. Secondly, it is of symbolical character and conveys identity, define each member's appropriate place within the given society.¹³ Obvious neglect of behavioral norms are treated as infringement on the symbolical integration of the local community. From the individual point of view a convention compels to "play by the rules" in order to avoid negative sanctions from the part of the local environment. In more detail I am going to discuss this phenomenon in a publication on habits and customs as a significant factor of normative social control.¹⁴ Conventionalization of behaviour is one of the main characteristics of local systems and at the same time a factor of their differentiation; its influence on the shaping of a civic society however is not particularly important.

Finally I will discuss one more significant aspect of localism - it is the symbolically-representative character of the place and the source of self-identification within the local system which- as I have already mentioned at the outset, Stanislaw Ossowski referred to as the "intimate/individual homeland".¹⁵ This mental aspect of dependence is most significant. The place of birth and childhood has a particular influence on the cultural identity of the individual and conveys its lasting shape. The process of identification however, is not restricted to the place of birth and childhood. People change their places of residence several times during one lifetime and do not only move from place to place within their country of origin but as well move abroad. Each time the prerequisite for a successful organization of one's daily life is the exploration, understanding and, at least to some extent, the integration in the local environment and the social systems allocated therein. As an example may be cited the evacuees from East of the Bug river which, after World War II, were resettled in the voievodships of NW, SW and NE Poland. The society of local systems is not anonymous, due to frequently repeated mutual contacts between its individual members. There remains ample space of personal freedom for social contacts, which further the formation of a civic society.

¹³ B.Jalowiecki, op.cit.

¹⁴ A.Sosnowski, *Różnorodność...* op.cit

¹⁵ S.Ossowski, op.cit.

Striving for a Civic Society within the framework of local systems

As to the modification of social and civil interaction within our country a key issue lies in the development of bonds that cross over close family ties by establishing/founding associations of various kind and by the implementation of a local self-government in order to establish a civic society. This is the construction of a school of co-governance and democracy. Locality, and, in its wake the development of a civic society, is not only an alternate concept to the governing of a society imposed “from above”, but as well a necessity in the spirit of our times. Without a re-awakening and rebuilding of a positive attitude towards the phenomenon of localism the development of social bonds which are the foundation of any civic society are doomed to failure from the outset. Taking into consideration the amazing reverse towards a post-communist consciousness (read: mentality) that recently could be observed in certain parts of our population this is no easy task, which, moreover, is being hampered by the behavior of the representatives of the ruling parties, who deprave the public through their arrogance, corruption and opportunism in their actions. As the saying goes: A fish rots from the head down.

Local self-administration and the challenge to manage their own affairs through changes from the bottom up as supported by committed local citizens does not always meet with the acceptance of the local community's majority. This is a major hurdle on the way to a civic society.

Reduce the interference from the government to a minimum- this is the fundamental request of any local population that relies on the principles of democracy, decentralization and self-government. These are the pillars on which to build a civic society. The model of social self-organization on a local level has not only benefits but also its disadvantages. Just to mention a few: excessive particularism, which may be observed in the way personal interests of representatives of the local government are favoured; the emergence and development of relations of dependence furthering corruption and damaging the interests of the local community. Another negative aspect is the excessive control of the individual citizen by organs of the local government, which dispose of much more efficient means of control than does any state apparatus. Notwithstanding all these deficiencies the system of self-government – as well as democracy itself- constitute the best of all inadequate social organization systems which mankind has come up with till now; although subjected to criticism throughout history from antiquity till now- from the Sophists, Democritus, through the constructive criticism of Athenian democracy as expressed by Plato and Aristoteles, up to Winston Churchill's famous quote “ Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others.”

Summarizing - and in conformity with the conclusions of such renowned authors like Bohdan Jałowiecki, Kazimierz Sowa, Piotr Dudkiewicz, Grzegorz Gorzelak, Jerzy Bartkowski, Andrzej Kowalczyk and Paweł Świanewicz¹⁶ – localism can be defined as a worldview distinguished by the special appreciation of a particular place on earth, referred to as the “individual” or “small homeland” (in German simply: “Heimat”)- where for the individual lies the origin of the world.

Localism means

- a. the principle of the definition of the own self within the broader context of a particular territorial populace.
- b. The principle of socialization of the young generation through the admission into various local associations of educational, cultural and athletic character and the joining in their activities.
- c. The deliberate rejection of certain aspects of contemporary mass culture like the compulsion to buy and homogenous mass-culture mash.

- d. The craving to keep up and further cultural diversity in order to attain personal satisfaction and the development of varied counter culture movements;
- e. A life comparatively close to nature and in harmony with its rules, as opposed to languishing in the obscurity of an artificial environment of concrete buildings unfit for human beings.
- f. The (joint) responsibility for one's own fate and fortune and the affairs of one's family and the local community.

Considering the above it can be concluded that a complete decentralization and, in its wake, an active democratization cannot be achieved as long as the majority of the local population is not sincerely convinced of the necessity to manage their own local affairs by self- government and act accordingly. This is one of the basic conditions which must be fulfilled before a civic society can be implemented.

¹⁶ B. Jałowiecki, op.cit; K. Sowa, Lokalizm ... op. cit.; P. Dutkiewicz, G. Gorzelak, *Problemy rozwoju lokalnego*, Warszawa 1988; J. Bartkowski, A. Kowalczyk, P. Świaniewicz, *Strategie władz lokalnych*, Warszawa 1990.

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Address

dr hab. Adam Sosnowski
Wyższa szkoła informatyki i ekonomii TWP w Olsztynie
10-283 Olsztyn
Ul. Jagiellonska 59
E-mail: adam.sosnowski@wsiie.olsztyn.pl