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BOOK REVIEW: “KAPITAŁ OBYWATELSKI SPOŁECZNOŚCI LOKALNYCH” [CIVIL CAPITAL OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES], EDITED BY CEZARY TRUTKOWSKI, PUBLISHED BY SCHOLAR, WARSZAWA 2024 <https://doi.org/10.2478/ppsr-2024-0020>

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A more detailed examination of the current state of Polish local self-government, which has been developing systematically for over three decades, leads to the conclusion that the development model initially adopted at the outset of the system transformation and subsequently cultivated in local Poland is gradually becoming exhausted. Although modernisation and development supported by infrastructure investments (Bitner, Sierak 2022) was a beneficial direction at the beginning of our self-government path, it is now evident that it is no longer aligned with the rapidly changing needs of local communities. The resulting gap is challenging to address with established methods of action. The changes are evident and uncontested. New roads, sewerage, and other infrastructural investments, along with increased funding for education (Trutkowski 2015), sports, and all other spheres of life, have transformed the face of our municipalities, elevated their competitiveness, and demonstrably improved the quality of life of the inhabitants. Nevertheless, in this race for development, which is largely driven by officials' competition for external funds for new investments (Swianiewicz, Łukomska 2020), the local community, which is made up of ordinary people, is overlooked. Its potential is often reduced to the potential of the local government unit as a legal entity (Gendźwiłł, Wiszejko-Wierzbicka 2022), and these are two different realities (even if they were one even in legal terms).

This is proven by survey research carried out by the Jerzy Regulski Foundation in Support of Local Democracy, the results of which are presented in the reviewed book, *Civil Capital of Local Communities* (*Kapitał obywatelski społeczności lokalnych*). The findings indicate that there is no correlation between residents' engagement in the public sphere and their perceptions of the quality of life in local communities (p. 494). Despite the cultivation of the idea and legal principle of “sustainable development”, the facts indicate that, for some time now, we have been dealing with progressive *unsustainable development* in local governments, resulting in an increasingly pronounced gap between the building of infrastructural development potential in territorial self-governments and the building of the potential of local communities (Lewenstein 2010).

After three decades of grassroots work and experience, we now know how to multiply the development potential of our municipalities, districts, and voivodships – for example, by effectively raising funds for various investments. But do we also know how to build the civic capital of the local community in order to measurably increase its potential, understood as the subjectivity of the inhabitants and their formal and informal organisations?

Notable contributions to this field are provided by the authors of the monograph *Civic Capital in Local Communities*, edited by Cezary Trutkowski. In the reviewed volume, the texts were published by Anna Dąbrowska, Adam Gendźwiłł, Joanna Konieczna-Sałamatin, Mikołaj Lewicki, Sławomir Mandes, Kacper Pobłocki, Cezary Trutkowski, and Dariusz Wojakowski. The volume was published by Scholar Publishing House in 2024 on the initiative of the Jerzy Reguński Foundation in Support of Local Democracy. The work is of exceptional and extensive scope, comprising over 500 pages. It is a collaborative endeavour involving researchers from a range of scientific disciplines, who have assessed the functioning of Polish local self-government in the context of social processes that shape it. They have also identified a set of factors that may determine the future development of local communities.

The entire body of considerations contained in the volume is divided into three distinct parts, the first of which comprises a comprehensive review of theoretical concepts (with a particularly detailed examination of domestic and foreign literature) related to the processes of shaping social development potentials at the local level. In this part, the authors concentrate on four problem areas: (1) the formation of social ties and the nature of the ties that determine local social life (a concept that is broader than that of social capital as discussed in the literature); (2) social mobilisation and processes of community integration and division; (3) interest groups, their formation, reproduction, and the social effects of their activities; and (4) local leadership (understood not only concerning politics) and forms of control over local resources. The second part brings the readers closer to the results of the Foundation's extensive qualitative empirical research carried out in two regions of Poland (Pomorskie and Podkarpackie voivodeships), as well as in the form of a survey conducted on a sample of 4,000 people. The third part of the book represents a successful attempt to operationalise and summarise the collective efforts undertaken in this work. By integrating theory with empirics, it constructs a useful perspective for future reformers of the local government system in Poland. The effective combination of contemporary empirical research with a comprehensive, interdisciplinary theoretical analysis, coupled with an expert diagnosis of the state of Polish self-governance, has resulted in a new approach to research on the civic potential of local communities by the team of authors. This approach simultaneously highlights potential avenues for further research on local democracy in Poland.

The central concept integrating the authors of the individual chapters is *community capacity building*. Although difficult to translate faithfully into Polish, it is intuitively understood as empowerment, building specific capacities and potentials of local societies/communities. According to this concept, people, and therefore local communities (including human capital – the specific skills, knowledge, or experiences of selected individuals, as well as group interaction and ways of using social networks) on the one hand, and the governance mechanisms of these communities on the other hand, should be strengthened. It is therefore essential that these processes are closely synchronised, as the implementation of individual actions in isolation from each other will not achieve the desired results and

will lead to the aforementioned “*unsustainable development*” becoming more pronounced (p. 10).

As editor of the volume and President of the Board of the Foundation in Support of Local Democracy, Cezary Trutkowski observes that “more than thirty years of local authority functioning, under limited resources, have led to relatively simple management choices” (p.10). However, these priorities weren’t “shaped in a vacuum” (p.11). The time has come to break from this established pattern – described by Mikołaj Lewicki as “the model of hot water in the tap” (p.290) – and for local politicians to make choices suited to today’s realities rather than replicating outdated models.

These observations correspond with the results of a survey conducted by the Foundation “on the public perception of the priorities of local authorities, according to which 64% of residents are of the opinion that it is infrastructural investments that are important for the municipality, (...) while only 39% of residents attribute such importance to the integration and activation of residents” (p. 369). This is why Trutkowski calls for an end to both the managerial and romantic understanding of territorial self-government. For, although self-government is supposed to be competitive, it is not a business (nor is it a “local development agency”, p. 240), and despite its high-flown ideas about the local community’s self-management of its affairs – it is not a romantic realisation of the utopian idea of a *face-to-face* community either.

However, the governance model is not the sole problematic aspect. The very concept of *the local community* generates a multitude of doubts. In the third chapter of the monograph (pp. 125 ff.), Sławomir Mandes presents an intriguing analysis of the concept of social bonds and the definition of community. This analysis is crucial for understanding community capacity building, which is the subject of the reviewed book. Furthermore, it is unlikely that every local community will be able to transform existing civic engagement into the kind of local action that will ensure the achievement of collective goals. This will depend on a number of factors, including how and whether it effectively articulates collective interests. These themes, embedded in the strand of research on interest groups and civic dialogue, are explored in depth in the book by Mikołaj Lewicki in chapter four. As the author rightly asserts, the logic of group action can facilitate or impede decisions about the common good (p. 156). Harmful tendencies such as the “NIMBY syndrome” (*not in my backyard*) imply actions aimed primarily at protecting the state of possession, which remains, as it were, a pure form of legitimised particularism (pp. 179–181). While this sometimes generates the potential to mobilise and produce multidimensional connections, or at least activate them, it does not contribute to strengthening community capacity – quite the opposite. Importantly, “interest groups are not an outgrowth on the healthy organism of local government civil society, but are part of its structure” (p. 195) and therefore the patterns and dynamics of their functioning in local contexts translate directly into the models of local development governance adopted. Another crucial element of this complex puzzle is the role of local leadership, which Adam Gendźwiłł examines in depth in chapter six. The author draws attention to the process of “transition from the model of local government as a tool for the production and delivery of basic public services to the model of local government as a development policy actor” (p. 227), in connection with which the role of leadership significantly increases. It is becoming “a resource that mobilises other resources” (p. 242), rather than simply “a means of exer-

cising power” (p. 227), and as such plays a considerable role in each of the models of local development governance.

The question thus arises as to how the potential of a local community can be harnessed in order to effect sustainable development. In essence, the community’s distinctive character must be restored. This may appear to be a relatively straightforward proposition, but in practice, a number of obstacles emerge. How, then, can these obstacles be avoided, or, if they cannot be avoided, how can they be dealt with as effectively as possible? The answer to this question is not simple and, as a result, the attempt made by the authors of *Civic Capital in Local Communities* to address this issue is particularly important.

In concluding this short review, I feel unsatisfied. First of all, it is impossible for me to convey in a few pages the essence of the argumentation contained in this monograph, because its essence spills over dozens of pages. It is impossible to reasonably summarise such a vast and important work, such a multifaceted, interdisciplinary narrative, and the enormity of the authors’ insightful reflections, supported by a wealth of empirical evidence. Although the whole is a coherent proposal – which is determined both by the arrangement of the content of the individual chapters and the layout of the book as a whole – this holistic study cannot, unfortunately, be “summarised” or “abstracted”. It needs to be read in its entirety (and probably more than once). *Civic Capital in Local Communities* is, in fact, a study to which, after a single reading, one will return many times, on different occasions. It will be appreciated not only by researchers and theorists, as the authors’ conclusions are also useful for practitioners, local activists, and decision-makers at various levels of governance.

It is also noteworthy that the book was produced as part of the project *Model solutions to strengthen citizen participation in decision-making on local issues*, which was funded by Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway from the EEA Funds under the Active Citizens – Regional Fund Program. Consequently, it has been made freely accessible to the public. This makes it available for consultation by any individual, without restriction. It is particularly recommended for those who are concerned about the future of Polish self-government.

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