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Author: Marek S. Szczepański

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Marek S. Szczepański

Localism — An Attempt at a Sociological Interpretation

Localism — precursory remarks

The downfall of real socialism and the decay of the central institutions of the communist state in Poland prompts to deliberation on the future fate of the country and its essential restructuring. In this debate stress is frequently laid on the potential role of the local and regional communities in the development processes. This singling out of the postulated actors of social change is by no means accidental. For more than a dozen years how it was possible clearly to discern worldwide the symptoms of the “renascence of localism and regionalism,” signs of revolutionary alignment of ethnic and religious minorities and also radicalization of separatist movements. Among many social groups and individual persons is observed a positively ostentations return to traditional local and regional values and also historical institutions, customs and habits. In other words, while people are becoming citizens of the world they remain still affiliated to the “personal homeland” and the unique social community, nostalgic place shaping their personality. The home village, township, city or region, existing *hic et nunc*, is nearer to people than the amorphous, abstract, unintelligible and often basically foreign world or continent. Hence it may be said, with a large degree of certainty, transposing the slogan of Ernst F. Schumacher, that small and near — is beautiful, to be treated with pious care.

Any discussion on the role of localism and regionalism in the processes of social restructuring is necessarily of a multifaceted and interdisciplinary nature, involving sociologists, economists, geographers, anthropologists, ethnographers, town planners and even psychologists. Some of them, *implicitly* or *explicitly*, express the belief that upgrading the local and regional communi-

ties to the rank of key leaders of social progress is something both useful and indispensable in a post-communist state.¹ This is associated with decentralization of power and government, and thus with passing over part of the rights of government from the central state institutions to political representations of local and regional communities. For indeed they have the best understanding of the actual needs of these communities and also of the possibilities of meeting these needs.

The emergence of the rudiments of a world system and at the same time the perceivable "restitution" of local patriotic feelings are singular phenomena and processes with which researchers on social development are confronted. And although they are taking place on an entirely different scale, they are inseparable and fully complementary. For in fact there exists a certain continuum of changes and global transformations fragment into local transformations while local changes can integrate into greater and more wide ranging movements.

Local development is by no means an alternatives to the globalising processes but rather their supplement and vice versa. We may recognize here the wisdom of René Dubos well-known imperative "think globally, act locally." He failed to notice, however, that global actions cannot be undertaken in isolation from thinking in local categories.

Localism — the search for a new development paradigm

"The commune — wrote Alexis de Tocqueville — is the only association having such a very natural character that it arises spontaneously everywhere where human beings gather together. Thus this small community emerges among all types of peoples, irrespective of their customs and laws. Man created monarchy and established republics, while the commune would appear to originate straight from God."² This historic dithyramb in praise of local loyalty well illustrates the still truly relevant view of the potential role of local communities, even remote and out of the way, in the development processes.

"Local community" — similarly again as the "world system" — is very difficult to define conclusively or satisfactorily. Already in 1955 George Hillery Jr. made a list of 94 different definitions of this concept. With the passage of time this list has become even more inflated while the concept itself be-

¹ B. Jałowicki, *Rozwój lokalny [Local Development]* (Warszawa 1989).

² A. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York 1945).

comes less and less tangible, so we may acknowledge that Robert Nisbet is right when he proposes that instead of indulging in unprofitable terminological hair splitting we should accept “localness” — *mutatis mutandis* — as a basic, a unit-idea in contemporary social sciences, similarly as we accept such concepts as “sacrum,” “alienation,” “status” or “authority.”³

If we then leave aside such exhausting and sterile disputes as to definition, we may still formulate some few of the constituent characteristics of local communities. First and foremost they are associated with specific **places**. The distinction, commonly in use today in the sociology of the town, between “place” and “space” was put forward by Yi—Fu Tuan, an American geographer of Chinese antecedents.⁴ Space symbolizes an amorphous world, little known, although tempting with its dimensions and the imagined freedom; while place — personifies the ordered microcosm, familiar, rather constraining but for that completely safe.

The local community shows characteristically a limited number of actors whose interrelations are of face to face kind. These not numerous actors of the local stage are linked by a certain community of aims and means resulting from the common circumstances of everyday life. The long duration enjoyed by such communities leads to a situation where to them may be ascribed a symbolic universality, as it was expressed some years ago by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann. What we have here is a collection of values and norms very largely resisting historical transformations and regulating everyday behavior, establishing its rhythms and cycles. And finally, local communities exhibit a specific autarky so that virtually the whole life of their members may be lived out within its bounds. “The mark of a community — wrote Robert M. MacIver and Charles H. Page — is that one’s life may be lived wholly within it.”⁵

In the processes of local development, sometimes called endogenous since accented here is the role of intrasystem factors, the chief motive force comes from smaller sized communities. This type of development makes use of their internal potential, unperceived over many years by the institutions organizing and promoting social, economic, political and cultural changes in our country. It is commonly accepted that the indispensable condition for this kind of development is **participation** of individuals and communities. This conception, however, is not definitive and occurs in at least a triple context. Firstly, it is sometimes taken to be identical with the process of **mobilization**. The term “mobilization” has a broad range since it may comprehend both the process of social mobilization and political mobili-

³ R. A. Nisbet, *The Sociological Tradition* (London 1967).

⁴ Yi—Fu Tuan, *Space and Place, the Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis 1977).

⁵ R. M. Mac Iver, Ch. H. Page, *Society: An Introductory Analysis* (New York 1961).

zation and political mobilization. The former involves the preparation and readiness of a population or certain of its fractions to envisage changes in the established social or economic order and replacing it with another, perhaps better or more effective. Then again political mobilization is most frequently associated with the existence and activities of groups of people, governments, ruling elites, parliaments, pressure groups, party elites, parties endeavoring to win social support for formulated programmes, doctrines, ideologies. Then again, participation is sometimes identified with decentralization of authority and government. This involves the ceding of powers and competence previously vested in central institutions and organizations in favor of institutions and organizations at a lower level, i.e. the local level. In the third instance, finally, participation is perceived as a process of stimulating to social activity people previously marginalised, deprived of access to power.

Local development must be accompanied by a full awareness and knowledge of the local ecosystems and the consequences of disturbing the equilibrium existing in them. In other words, development, *hic et nunc*, cannot take place at the cost of future generations and the natural environment. Hence development must necessarily be "ecodevelopment," where the natural environment is treated as a specific cultural value co-constituting the social identity. In effect we must seek a social development that is precisely coordinated with environmental conditions, does not lead to degradation of nature while utilizing as fully as possible its resources. Man, being an organic part of nature must sagaciously direct the transformations being brought about in it.

The process of local development defined in this way should satisfy a certain, especially significant, categorical requirement. For its principal objective and sense is the protection of the cultural identity of the community in question, while this cultural identity should be conceived as a relatively permanent identification of a certain group of people and of individual members of this group with a determined set of attitudes, ideas, convictions, with specific customs and habits, with the given axiological and normative system. This identification should strengthen the unity of the group and its awareness of its individuality. Hence this identity may be summed up in this way: **"We are as we are, we are different from others, and this difference should be a cause for pride and not for shame."**

Local patriotism is then an intellectual and organizational reaction to the processes of concentration, centralization and standardization taking place in industrial and postindustrial societies. It is also a challenge to the development visionaries making a fetish of economic growth, i.e. continual increase in production, treated as the paramount measure and indicator of social progress. Is this way it supplements the globalisation processes and constantly moderates theme, at the same time being subject to the effects of feedback.

Conclusions

In literature of science fiction type giving descriptions of a global civilization and its future evolution may be found gloomily pessimistic and even catastrophic predictions. Ever more frequently the hypothesis is put forward of an apocalyptic *finis mundi* or at least the twilight of our world. Simultaneously in belles lettres literature dealing with the provincialism of the "private homeland," quite often we read pastoral and idealized descriptions, and similarly in scientific-academic essays. Their authors propose the shifting of the development nuclei from the large social systems to the local and microscale system. This is by no means intended as diminishing the initiatory role of the social macrosystem; but rather as raising the status of the complementary systems incorporated in the local communities. For many of us they represent the fundamental reality.