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Rural Crumbs of the Pandemic: Communities and Their Institutions Introduction to the Thematic Issue

Let me start with a few remarks about time: as I write these words (mid-November 2020), the second wave of the COVID-19 epidemic is advancing; what the status will be in the first weeks of 2021 when this issue reaches readers, I cannot foresee. However, it is certain that our readers will already have a different experience and views related to the epidemic and its social effects than the team studying the course and consequences of its first, springtime wave, and recounting them on the eve of the second, autumn/winter one.

The idea to observe the effects of the pandemic was born as soon as COVID-19 appeared in Poland and gave rise to varied spontaneous responses. An informal, ad hoc team was formed in the second half of March 2020. It was gathered together based on acquaintance, comprising people who already knew one another and had worked together before. They also liked one another, which is extremely important for the functioning of such unformalised, impromptu structures without financial backing, working together out of pure curiosity. Later on, I think there also appeared a sense of obligation towards the others as well as respect for the effort already put into the project.¹

From the very beginning, we treated the COVID-19 pandemic as a natural social experiment in which the whole of society was involved. We had had such a local case in Poland before: the 1997 flood in Wrocław. The observations recorded at the time

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¹ The core of the team comprised staff members from the Institute of Rural and Agricultural Development of the Polish Academy of Sciences (IRWiR PAN): Sylwia Michalska, PhD, Dominika Zwęglińska-Gałecka, MSc, Sławomir Kalinowski, PhD hab., Arkadiusz Ptak, PhD hab., and Konrad Burdyka, PhD. A little later, the team was joined by Prof. Jacek Kurczewski, PhD hab., from the University of Warsaw, Paweł Kubicki, PhD hab., from the Warsaw School of Economics (SGH), and Łukasz Posłuszny, PhD, from the University of Wrocław. The self-appointed team leader was the writer of these words.

revealed the distinctive rules by which a community functions in the face of danger as well as the mechanisms of change in its social order (Sitek 1997; Wrzesiński 1997). In the current situation, i.e. a lack of funding for ad hoc studies on the one hand and restrictions brought on by the lockdown on the other, the choice of method was a key issue. We decided on different types of observation, including participatory. Although every study these days is based on some form of “homespun triangulation of methods”, the important if not fundamental element is the material gathered through observation. This has not always been our own original observation. We managed to raise interest in our project among many people we had previously worked with in the field, who agreed to keep systematic diaries for two or even four months for our benefit. I would like to extend my sincere thanks to each and every one of our anonymous collaborators. All the information contained in the diaries turned out to be very useful. I would also like to thank the members of the team for “handling” the observers and for the frequent contacts with them throughout the observation.

The working title of our project was *Rural Crumbs of an Epidemic*. It encompassed two theses. First of all, it was obvious to us that the social reception and consequences of the pandemic would be different in the countryside than in conurbations. We assumed that this different reception would be influenced by the spatial organisation of rural areas, where people live in small clusters and in single-family houses (which additionally have yards and gardens). The occupational structure in the countryside is also different, especially the proportion of farmers in this structure. In rural Poland, farming is mainly practised in small, family teams, largely outdoors and in the place of residence. This makes it fundamentally different from the work conditions in industry or services (e.g. commerce).

We realised that we would be unable to study and describe the problem in full, hence the “crumbs” in the title. A little later, there came the reflection that we were not studying the pandemic/disease, since we were not epidemiologists, biologists or physicians; we were studying the social effects of the pandemic, doing so indirectly, by observing people’s responses to actions, whether suitable or not, aimed at counteracting it. Above all, we analysed the social effects of anti-pandemic measures undertaken at various levels of social organisation by different entities.

The present thematic issue comprises studies by the members of the above-mentioned team, which was joined by some historians and archivists from the State Archives and the Archive of the Polish Academy of Sciences who were also interested in the subject matter. In this make-up (see below), they presented their analyses during the online seminar/conference *Rural Crumbs of the Pandemic: Communities and Their Institutions* held on 5 November 2020. The present issue

contains the presentations from that scientific meeting.² Studies by historians and archivists open and close the issue, which brings the realisation that pandemics have happened before in history, and that the current one, COVID-19, will have its place in the archives one day. I hope that this thematic issue of *Więś i Rolnictwo* will also find its way there, to be treated as a source for future analyses.

The issue opens with a historical text; Hanna Krajewska's paper *Pandemie w historii świata* [Pandemics in World History] not only describes quite regular outbreaks of diseases like the plague, cholera, typhoid, smallpox, syphilis, leprosy and the Spanish flu, but also draws attention to their social consequences, including how they affected people's mentality and culture, as these have been widely recounted in literature and depicted in paintings and sculptures. This historical analysis opens up prospects for future research, since the consequences of the present pandemic have barely begun to emerge. A historical approach is also represented by Magdalena Masłowska's *Ostatnia epidemia cholery azjatyckiej w Warszawie w XIX w. – zapobieganie, leczenie i przebieg w świetle źródeł z lat 1892–1894* [The Last Asiatic Cholera Epidemic in Warsaw in the 19th Century: Prevention, Treatment and Course in the Light of Sources from the Years 1892–1894]. It also includes an analysis of gossip and conspiracy theories, which, as it turns out, accompany every epidemic and, as the literature shows, are often the object of scientific investigation.

The analysis of the social consequences of the current pandemic in rural communities opens with Sławomir Kalinowski's text *Od paniki do negacji: zmiana postaw wobec COVID-19* [From Panic to Negation: Changing Attitudes Towards COVID-19]. The author offers the hypothesis that adjustment to the virus, which he calls a "new normality", leads to a decreasing interest in the pandemic and a noticeable intensification of narratives negating its existence. This is indicated by the diminished interest in research on the effects of the pandemic conducted using the CAWI method. This text, which shows how the passage of time affects the perception of the pandemic, is complemented by Dominika Zwęglińska-Gałęcka's analysis of the impact of space in her paper *Koronakryzys. Lokalne zróżnicowanie globalnej pandemii* [Corona Crisis: Local Diversification of a Global Pandemic]. She underlines local factors determining different attitudes, depending on whether the illness (its consequences) has appeared in a given community or the epidemic is something only known from the media. Her studies of the local authorities of *gmina*/commune units in three *powiaty*/counties show, among other things, that agricultural communities have had far fewer infections, and their perception of the effectiveness of government aid and the expected economic consequences has

² It is still available online here: <http://witrynawiejska.org.pl/component/k2/item/53828-okruchy-zarazy-wiejskie-spoleczności-i-ich-instytucje-transmisja-interdyscyplinarnego-symposium-naukowego>

been different. This supports one of the initial hypotheses on how farming/farmers influence the pandemic's local effects: agricultural communities display greater resilience to the COVID crisis. How local communities respond to the corona crisis depends on many factors, including local authorities' crisis management skills. This is the subject of Maria Halamska, Jacek Kurczewski and Arkadiusz Ptak's chapter entitled *Władza lokalna w stanie niezwykłym* [Local Authorities in a State of Unusualness]. The text, which was based on participatory observation, among other elements, shows how local actors belonging to different structures of power (local self-government versus national government, commune–county–province authorities) get organised, integrate and cooperate during the epidemic, while also indicating emerging obstacles. The case study of Orlin commune enabled the authors to present the broad background of the “state of unusualness” that was not an official state of emergency, the legal and extra-legal means of handling it, and its impact on how the state functioned. The next three papers discuss the functioning of important institutions in rural/local communities: schools, parishes and the Roman Catholic Church, and the neighbourly community. In the chapter *Szkoła wiejska w czasie pandemii* [Rural Schools During the Pandemic], Sylwia Michalska not only describes the difficulties – for teachers as well as parents – caused by the sudden change in the mode of learning, but also points to a possible change of the school's place in rural communities as a result of the shift to “home-based” teaching, i.e. a situation in which parents become the partners of teachers not only in the process of upbringing but also education. On the one hand, this strips the teacher's profession of its secrets, while enabling teachers to enter their students' family lives, even if only via electronic media, on the other. In his text *Amoralny familizm? O samopomocy rodzinno-sąsiedzkiej w społeczności wiejskiej czasu pandemii* [Amoral Familism? On Family/Neighbourly Self-Help in Rural Communities During the Pandemic], Konrad Burdyka seeks an answer to the question of the title. It is a search for indicators confirming the existence of a strong bond that would work in the reality of the corona crisis. The author does not give an unequivocal answer, because in the period he analysed (April–June), this community only knew about the epidemic from the media. The impact on the institutions of the Roman Catholic Church and individual parishes was much stronger. In the text *Zacieśnianie czy rozrywanie immanentnej ramy? Polski katolicyzm wobec epidemii koronawirusa* [Tightening or Breaking of the Immanent Frame? Polish Catholicism in the Face of the Coronavirus Epidemic] outlining the directions of change, such as the erosion of community rituals, an institutional saturation, the broken continuity of religious socialisation and decreasing trust in Catholicism, Wojciech Sadłoń comes to the conclusion that the epidemic has imposed a peculiar form on Polish Catholicism, one that has limited the scope

of interaction and collective practices as well as consolidating a process observed over the past two decades at least, namely the weakening of collective religious practices and ties to the parish. Meanwhile, the perception of the countryside as a safer place to live than the city has been frequent among both urban and rural residents. Łukasz Pokorny, Paweł Kubicki, Marta Olcoń-Kubicka and Joanna Felczak reconstruct it in their text entitled *Społeczny obraz życia codziennego na wsi w pamiętnikach z czasów koronawirusa* [Social Image of Daily Life in Rural Areas in Diaries from the Time of the Coronavirus]. It is probably the first text about the pandemic that is based on the diaries entitled *Daily Life in the Time of the Coronavirus* from a competition held between May and July 2020. The authors outline the key themes that dominated the diarists' accounts: 1) portraying the countryside as a refuge and an oasis of safety; 2) emerging fears, tensions and prejudice against visitors; 3) the redefinition of relations in rural communities, and 4) changes in rural areas' daily functioning and the challenges connected with pursuing basic life activities. The final text, *Archiwa Państwowe w obliczu pandemii wywołanej koronawirusem SARS-CoV-2: Archiwum Pandemii* [The State Archives in the Face of the Pandemic Caused by the SARS-CoV-2 Coronavirus: Archive of the Pandemic] by Beata Żelazek, describes the State Archives' projects planned for the time of the pandemic; the formation of the Social Archive of the Pandemic is one of them. This is an idea well worth publicising, and I hope our collection of sources and our modest studies will find a place there.

The analyses presented in this issue are based on observations of the pandemic's first wave. It followed a characteristic, optimistic course: everyone – terrified to a lesser or greater extent – was waiting for it to end. But social consequences revealed themselves even then, and they deepened during the second wave. That first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic offered a unique field of observation, because the observers, as yet unused to the pandemic, captured all new social behaviours before these lost their novelty as the pandemic continued. I think this is an added value of the studies.

Translated by Joanna Dutkiewicz

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