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Identification of the dynamics of bottom-up economic strategies in the face of the expansion of the Opole Power Station

Bottom-up social and cultural activities are often perceived as initiatives undertaken outside of formalized institutions, serving to construct a social world and an individual or local identity. It is also agreed that these activities are associated with various political, social, or economic phenomena occurring both on a regional and national scale.¹ It is in reaction to those types of phenomena that activities which can be called bottom-up are undertaken. They take form of various cultural activities, among which bottom-up economic strategies are of key importance. Impulses for those activities are provided by specifically targeted social changes. In Poland, they began after 1989 along with political and economic transformations. The result of these changes was the undertaking of various bottom-up adaptive activities, which became the subject of anthropological research and its results have already been published.²

¹ For more on the bottom-up cultural processes taking place in the microscale: *Oddolne tworzenie kultury. Perspektywa antropologiczna*, Piotr Cichocki, Karolina J. Dudek, Tomasz Rakowski et al. (eds.), Warszawa 2015.

² Among many publications on similar topics, the pioneering studies of Michał Buchowski and Tomasz Rakowski deserve special attention: M. Buchowski,

Along with the progressive course of changes and the influence of broader processes of a globalizing nature, there were changes in economic activity, in which the share of persons who most often started one-man or family businesses was visible. Similar phenomena were occurring in the Dobrzeń Wielki commune, which at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s experienced problems connected with the closing of workplaces and growing unemployment.³ Small trading and service companies, especially those established after 1989, were developing slowly and only some of them managed to remain on the market or expand their operations. The situation changed when construction of a power plant commenced in the commune, and the plant soon became a source of rapid modernization processes. Thanks to them the commune was systematically losing its previous agricultural character, becoming an area dominated by industry and trade and service economy.⁴ The emergence of the power station caused a number of changes in the environmental landscape and initiated a process of establishing new forms of entrepreneurship, from companies strictly connected with the power station to various businesses meeting the needs of new residents of the commune, who came from different parts of the country to work in the power plant. Over time, the network of connections with the power station at its center began to be visible. From its assets, as a result of privatization

Klasa i kultura w okresie transformacji: Antropologiczne studium przypadku społeczności lokalnej w Wielkopolsce, Poznań 1995; T. Rakowski, *Łowcy, zbieracze, praktycy niemocy. Etnografia człowieka zdegradowanego*, Gdańsk 2009. Newer publications: M. Buchowski, *Czyścić. Antropologia neoliberalnego postsocjalizmu*, Poznań 2018; W. Kuligowski, A. Stanisław, *Ruchome modernizacje. Między Autostradą Wolności a „starą dwójką”*, Warszawa 2017.

³ R. Kałuża, *Rola elektrowni „Opole” na rynku pracy*, [in:] *Między przeszłością a przyszłością. Elektrownia „Opole” jako czynnik zmiany społecznej*, Wiesław Lesiuk, Robert Rauziński, Teresa Słodra-Gwizdź (eds.), Opole 2000, p. 59.

⁴ Already in 2000, several large businesses were operating in the commune, which was recorded in sociological research: W. Lesiuk, *Przeszłość i współczesność okolic Dobrzeń Wielkiego w badaniach Państwowego Instytutu Naukowego – Instytutu Śląskiego w Opolu*, [in:] *Między przeszłością a przyszłością. Elektrownia „Opole” jako czynnik zmiany społecznej*, Wiesław Lesiuk, Robert Rauziński, Teresa Słodra-Gwizdź (eds.), Opole 2000, p. 8.

processes, so-called daughter companies were separated and eventually became independent. At the same time, larger industrial plants were set up to use the by-products generated as a result of the coal combustion process and other plants not related to the operation of the power plant. These companies are the main source of employment for the residents of the commune and the surrounding area. The potential associated with the operation of a large number of business entities became one of the foundations for the development of small entrepreneurship. The number of small retail and service companies is much higher in the commune than in the neighboring communes and it determines its economic potential. This network has been forming for many years, and in many cases the entrepreneurs saw a chance for its further development in the expansion of the power station, planned for the years 2014–2019.

The new investment thus raised expectations connected with the economic development of the commune and of the businesses operating within it. However, reality proved to be different, as the expansion of the power plant turned out to have no decisive influence on the functioning of the local economy. The connection of the major industrial investment with the local community proved only indirect, and local business operators were forced to seek common areas of investment which would allow them to use the expansion to their own advantage. Many local entrepreneurs managed in the new situation and recognized that potential financial gains from the expansion of the power plant could be obtained primarily from two aspects of economic activity. This concerns especially rental of apartments and accommodation for other companies which, depending on the time consumption of the works outsourced to them, book accommodation for their employees. They often stay for several weeks, months, or even longer, which guarantees a stable, predictable income. Occasionally those companies do not pay attention to the high standard of services offered, although senior staff expects a higher quality of accommodation and, for example, access to high-speed Internet. The rental price is a matter of direct negotiations, and the potential profits are high. Connected with this is the

phenomenon of accommodation providers accusing one another of concealing the actual number of people using their services and thus not revealing their actual income. In terms of accommodation rental, the inhabitants of the commune adopted very different strategies. A small number of places with hotel standards have been created or refurbished. However, the use of the existing housing infrastructure prevails. Only small repairs and modifications are carried out on a regular basis, while the rooms are furnished at the lowest possible cost. There are owners of grocery stores or bars whose businesses experienced a serious decline due to the expansion of supermarkets. Looking for profits, they convert their premises into accommodation services. The residents realize that the demand for places to rent is temporary, it will expire as the development progresses and will eventually end after the new blocks are put into use. For this reason, excessive investing in creating new objects, refurbishing and modernization of apartments are neither profitable nor necessary, since each offer is met with great interest of companies that prefer to pay larger sums than to struggle with costly transport of employees to power plants from distant places. On the other hand, owners of local businesses interested in renting apartments and hotel rooms for their guests and contractors noticed that the housing market in the commune but also in Opole "had shrunk significantly" while the prices had gone up. Thus, the costs of their businesses increased. Renovations of rooms intended for employees and the construction of hotels entails an increased demand for construction works. Therefore, companies dealing in construction materials, interior furnishing, window carpentry, electrical installation, TV services, roller blinds, windows, electric gates, etc., record much more orders.

Observing the strategies adopted within the development of the accommodation base, a clear division is noticeable into two segments of activity, one being temporary, and the other one based on a long-term, thought-out business plan. An example of this can be the operation of two hotels, each of which has adopted a different model of operation and development. The owner of the hotel "Pod Kominem," located in close proximity to the power station, uses the

economic situation of the moment and spends a significant part of income from the room rental on modernizing and raising the standards of provided services. (Currently, these services are targeted mainly at people working at the construction site of the new blocks and are characterized by a low standard of dormitory-type rooms.) As a result, this is supposed to allow to improve the quality of services to such an extent so that once the development of the power station is completed, the target customers of the hotel would include management staff, guests or various types of experts working for the power station. The situation is different in a hotel located in Dobrzeń Mały. It was built from scratch just before the expansion began, and its owner decided to use subsidies from the EU. In this case, taking advantage of the current economic situation consists in obtaining funds which will allow to pay off the loans and continue the operation of the hotel after the expansion. It should be emphasized that the quality of the services offered is already high, and the owner is planning on expanding it by a recreational section. Here the target group are supposed to be tourists, especially members of families who had emigrated to Germany and who are now eager to visit their homeland. Another important part of the activity is the organization of various kinds of special events.

Trade is considered as yet another aspect of profitable activity. Increased revenues were expected especially in the food industry. It was hoped that the workers employed at the development will shop in the businesses operating within the commune. It did happen, but trade was almost monopolized by chain stores and markets such as Dino, Biedronka, or Tesco, and so small, family-owned stores were only slightly affected by the economic upturn. However, exceptions from this rule can be found which point to the ability to adapt to changing conditions. For instance, the owner of a butcher shop in the town of Borki states that she sells much more to individual clients, and she also takes delivery orders from some companies. Among her customers there are also foreigners hired at the expansion of the power station. From her perspective, what is important is the quality of offered goods, because regional and natural products,

especially those that do not contain preservatives, are very popular among clients. The owner of one of the family-owned grocery stores adopted a different solution in the face of increased competition; she changed her line of work and started selling shoes, which turned out to be an extremely successful undertaking. It should be added that the store also sells online, which shows innovation and coping skills in the face of changing business environment.

Therefore, also in this case more or less accurate strategies based on economically justified decisions count the most. A very important aspect which affects the reduction of costs of running a business is its location on one's own property, which is very common in the case of a commune. Usually, the location is the decisive factor in starting the activity: the closer it is to the main communication routes, the better.

Gas stations are exceptionally satisfied with the expansion of the power station; recognizing that they are dealing with constructors of power units is not a problem, as they for instance require invoices. They record a significant increase in demand, and hence turnover and profits. They needed to adjust quickly to the new situation by changing the assortment of goods offered in their own convenience stores. This concerns seemingly unimportant details, such as introducing large size of coffee packs instead of small, because the new customers expected that. Currently, small local transportation companies which mainly work for the power plant are also using the gas station. The influx of employees developing the power plant resulted in an increased demand for food and catering services, however, from the observations made during the study it appears that the owners of local restaurants or so-called small gastronomy did not significantly increase their revenues. It must be remembered that workers mainly use canteens located at the power plant and prepare meals on their own, which is due to saving money and having access to a kitchen. It can be added that large restaurants did not adjust their offers to the new circumstances, while they could have include cheap meals for employees of companies or the Consortium, which is the main contractor of the extension project. For this reason, the

most frequent customers are still the residents of the commune, whereby, as the owners claim, the custom of family dining in restaurants on weekends or holidays is systematically disappearing. The basic profit in such places is therefore obtained from the organization of weddings and other family and occasional events.

Other beneficiaries of the extension of the power plant include, for example, companies dealing in advertising services, banners, signboards, etc. For them, the power plant has always been a good customer, and the emergence of new enterprises at its expansion is another opportunity to increase profits. Although some companies bring their own promotional materials, still many business owners outsource the production of such materials to local, even very small companies.

Another example is car workshops, although the situation is ambiguous in this case. Increased revenue is particularly noted in those workshops which are located in visible, well-marked places. One of the owners states that there has been an increase in the number of individual clients from various parts of Poland as well as from abroad. He managed to enter into cooperation with many companies working for the power station and he provides car repairs and other services for them. New customers are often forced to use his services due to the long distance from their place of residence or company seat. As one of few respondents, he recognizes their reliability. He explains this is due to the specifics of the operation of the Consortium that implements the expansion of the power plant. They monitor their contractors and if they do not meet certain requirements, their contracts can be terminated. Such subcontractors are not incidental, and the selection made by the Consortium is considered to guarantee that they will also make their payments to the local companies in a fair and timely manner. In a similar way, the District Vehicle Control Station in Czarnowąs significantly increased their profits; it serves a large part of the trucks used at the development of the power plant, and also cars registered with companies cooperating with the plant. It is similar in other but not all car and repair workshops, especially those that are off the beaten track. An example of such dashed hopes

for increased profit could be statements that not many new customers appeared. They come sporadically and expect cheap, quick, and temporary repairs only in the event of an emergency failure. They do thorough repairs and modernizations in their place of residence, especially when driving company cars.

Good business conditions are favorable for local companies dealing in training, consulting, control and supervision of health and safety, projects and construction supervision, which cooperate with subcontractors and contractors for the extension of the power plant. In this case, the economic situation is conducive to an increase in the number of orders and financial inflows. Ever since many more people have been passing through the commune, profits increased in a photo shop whose customers were workers from Poland and abroad who needed photographs required to get necessary documents. The increase in sales also applies to household appliances, and even a clothing store or a garden design company have new customers.

It should be added that also people who do not reside in the commune and only run their businesses there comment positively on the development of the commune, the high standard of living, and the infrastructure. The commune compares favorably with the neighboring communes or even the city of Opole. The wealth of the commune is mainly associated with the power station being located on its premises and considered as a guarantor of financial stability. In this way, the commune becomes an attractive partner for entrepreneurs using a variety of amenities and the orders it places. In other parts of the Opole region such a situation is a rarity, which is not surprising since the Dobrzeń Wielki commune is the richest village commune in the region.

Due to the direct participation in the development, and earlier the construction of the power plant and the role it plays in the local community, the Kociok Company deserves special attention. Its owner developed his own business while the power station was still under construction. He was prompted by personal observations from the construction site, where he worked for a short time. In his opinion, the lack of work organization was very noticeable. This

observation and his experiences from his stay in Germany, where he encountered entirely different patterns, encouraged him to establish his own business, which soon received its first orders from the power station in the final stages of its construction. Having obtained information about the expansion, the company started preparations for participation in tenders announced by the consortium managing the investment. Those consisted in purchasing new equipment or increasing employment so as to be able to compete on the market. The company's asset is its location in the commune, in close proximity to the construction site, which significantly diminishes labor costs and thus allows to offer cheaper services. As a result, the company won a number of tenders related to, for example, earthworks and is treated by the Consortium as a company whose services can be used in emergency cases, at the so-called intervention works. It can be added that the owner, anticipating the complicated process of receipt of orders and the necessity of issuing payment certificates, ensured the creation of financial reserves which allow for smooth operation. The owner's reflections on the attitudes of the residents of the commune, who barely take advantage of the fact that the power plant is located in their neighborhood, are also interesting. They do not attempt to reap any profits from it, even ignoring the employment opportunities offered by the companies engaged in the process of the plant's development. They consider the offered salaries too low, and the job too hard, counting on lucrative position in Germany. Therefore, the company often hires specialists from outside the commune.⁵

⁵ This issue is also often raised by owners of other companies, noticing the lack of workforce, like the manager of a company that sells and installs windows: "To be honest, there's a problem with professionals, we're actually waiting for them to arrive. Because in this region there are major problems with finding people for work. I know it can be a matter of money and so on, but even when it comes to young people for jobs that do not require any bigger knowledge or skill, there's still a problem with finding workers. That they bring people from abroad, mostly from Ukraine, that's better for us that we have more hands for work" (business owner from the village of Brzezine, currently a part of Opole).

The Kociok company is an example of a dynamically developing enterprise, skillfully using the opportunity to earn income from the works performed at the extension of the power plant. Among other things, it is owing to those works that the company is steadily growing, although in the opinion of its owner, the orders for the extension are only about 30% of its processing capacity. It follows that currently the major part of economic activity is carried out not only at the plant's development and in the commune, but above all in the supra-local market. It is thus a very good example of how a bottom-up economic initiative transforms, owing to the cooperation with the plant, into an independent enterprise, for which the local market becomes too small and does not ensure the use of the company's potential. This also concerns a few other large companies, for which the commune ceases to be an economic partner. Their owners, hiring between several and several dozen workers, hold it against the commune that while they contribute large sums into the local budget from the taxes they pay, they are still not treated seriously and they are exposed to numerous restrictions. Moreover, they are accused of excessive exploitation and destruction of roads, production of noise and smoke pollution, and the degradation of the commune's environment. Some business owners state that there had even been suggestions they should limit their operations and point to the fact that the commune authorities should be favorable to residents, who appreciate the peaceful, rural way of living or treat the commune as a bedroom community. Therefore, in this group of business owners the opinions that preferably the entire commune should be joined to the city of Opole are much more common, as the Commune Office is no longer an attractive contractor for them.

On the other hand, those who run small businesses are said to be given preferential treatment, as the commune creates perfect conditions for them. Let the statement of a person who compares their experience with the officials in Opole and in Dobrzeń Wielki serve as an example. Not only did they not receive any help from the officials, but they were informed about various problems connected with establishing a business in the industry that they proposed:

“Why do you want to run something like that? Do you know how harmful it is for the city? Do you know these services can be a disturbance? Do you know you’ll need consents from the neighbors? Do you know you’ll need permits from the environmental protection section?” (a city official in Opole)

In the same situation, the officials from the Dobrzeń Wielki commune acted quite differently:

“I came to the commune office and I said I was going to look for a piece of land and (...) open such and such line of business. Would you like me to get the mayor? Please, do come in. I went in and I tell him what this is about. Madam, we will do everything to make this easier for you. I will appoint a person who will guide you through this. We are very happy that such a business will run in the area, because we do not have one yet. We will help you a lot. He went with me to the construction department, he appointed a person to help me, and that person really did guide me by the hand through everything. After three months, I have everything. Construction permit included. Do you see the difference? Because I do (...) you have an issue, you go to the right window in the office, you tell them what your problem is, please sit down, I will help you, this is what I’m here for. They have the time, they have the will” (female resident of Czarnowąsy).

A good example of discrepancy between large and small business operators was the assessment of the construction of the planned bypass around five communal towns located by the main road No. 454 and how it will affect the economic activity carried out in these towns. In this case, fears were voiced by owners of small businesses located primarily in the immediate vicinity of the road. They were convinced that the decrease in road traffic would cause a substantial decrease in the number of customers, a reduction of income from sales or services, and it could be a potential threat to their operations.

“Once they build a bypass, Dobrzeń Wielki will be a regular, poorly developed village, off the beaten track, the development of the power station will only bring losses or nothing will change. We have fewer and fewer customers, our store is the last one in the village” (male resident of Dobrzeń Wielki).

Large business owners assess the construction of the bypass differently, especially those for whose operations the ease and speed of transport and communication are very important. In this case, the bypass promotes mobility and reduces costs, and so from their perspective it is an awaited and desired investment.

When it comes to issues connected with communication and transport, the residents of the commune notice something seemingly obvious, namely the possibility of using the Oder. It is a natural waterway running through the territory of the Dobrzeń Wielki commune, and it remains unappreciated. The residents do not understand why the coal is delivered to the plant via railway, and all other deliveries via road transport. The decision makers are being accused of not taking actions to restore water transport and modernize the port which operated here in the past. Some residents remember the times when barges transported coal from the Upper Silesia, and on their way back up the river they carried river mud, which was used to fill the corridors in the mines. A recent renovation of the locks and sluice located near the village of Chróścice is considered a harbinger of changes in this matter, as a few residents of the commune found employment at the site.

The extension of the power plant thus influenced the development of entrepreneurship in the Dobrzeń Wielki commune. A large industrial investment became a reason for and an opportunity to restructure the existing economic potential, which is particularly illustrated by the dynamics of the emergence or transformation of the already existing economic entities. Their number is estimated at almost one thousand, with a vast majority of private companies, of which most are small, often one-person economic entities. The statement that such bottom-up economic practices undertaken by the local community are only to a small extent directly related to the operation or development of the power plant is not justified. Moreover, the creation and development of an accommodation base for construction workers, employees of the Consortium and the Opole Power Station, and the increased demand for services and commerce are only seemingly the only visible consequences.

The flow of capital is much more complicated and cannot be captured without a deeper analysis of the employment structure, and the network of social and economic connections.

While considering the mutual relations between the local community in Dobrzeń Wielki and the Opole Power Station, its long-term operation in the commune seems to be of much greater importance than its expansion, influencing the local environment for the past few years. It is primarily the construction and operation of the power plant, and not its extension, which has left its mark on the history of the commune and its present day. The sudden increase in the number of residents and thus the increase in demand for services and trade released the potential and creativity of local, grass-roots economic activities. The cultural environment in which the described processes take place is not without significance in this respect. For this environment, identity and adherence to certain values such as attachment to the inhabited space, community, or work ethos, are very significant. Therefore, the effective implementation of economic strategies is influenced by the “entrepreneurial habitus” associated in this case with the incumbent population of Silesian origin or the German minority community. Such an observation undoubtedly requires in-depth comparative studies.⁶ Meanwhile it should be concluded that this group brought into the commune certain models which were not commonly known in the Polish cultural landscape after 1989. This concerns particularly the models of functioning of economic initiatives, thoughtful and economically justified undertakings supported by courage in decision making, resourcefulness and conviction about their effectiveness. The residents acquired those skills while working in Germany and other highly developed countries of Western Europe, where they came into contact with a different system of work organization, and the relation between its quality and remuneration. Equipped with this knowledge, they

⁶ Similar issues were noticed during the studies on the impact of the A2 motorway on local cultural landscapes: W. Kuligowski, A. Stanisławski, *Ruchome modernizacje. Między Autostradą Wolności a „starą dwójką”*, Warszawa 2017, p. 316.

could easily meet the requirements of the political change in Poland. An important role in this case was also played by the fact that they had capital accumulated abroad, which in large part could be invested in their own business activities in their place of residence. Even if their enterprises failed, they had the possibility of returning to their previous way of living, that is, to go abroad for work. Moreover, coming back to their country they brought experiences and standards of living observed abroad, which contributed to modernizing and developing their own surroundings and environment. Similar models and high western European standards were applied into the models of governance and management of the community, which was thus becoming modernized at a rapid pace. However, that would not have been possible, had it not been for the very good financial condition of the commune, which was largely owing to the power plant being located in the commune. Consistent economic policy of the communal authorities, skillful spending of financial resources, and prospective action plans were conducive to the placement of new companies in the commune, and thus the creation of new workplaces and many bottom-up initiatives. All these phenomena formed an inextricable network of economic connections and solidified the capital flow between large industry, the financial resources of the commune, and small business operators. The economic successes of the commune associated with it translated directly into high quality of everyday life of the residents and they attracted a growing number of new residents interested not only in living in a commune which was clean and friendly in terms of social benefits, but also in locating their own businesses in it.

The economic relations between the local entrepreneurship and the operation and expansion of the Opole Power Station, which largely decided on the existence of the community, determined the specifics of socio-economic connections and the grass-roots economic activities undertaken within those relations. Those specifics also influenced the development plans designed in accordance with long-term strategies by the commune's authorities. It should be added that the possibility of such long-term planning was possible

owing to predictable and stable financial inflows, among which the revenues from taxes paid by the power plant and large enterprises located nearby were of key importance.

Such a stable network of connections between various types of institutions in the commune was interrupted when, at the supra-local level, sudden and unforeseen decisions were made to annex a large part of the commune to the city of Opole. The decision of the mayor of Opole, motivated by the necessity to acquire new investment areas, was accepted by the government and its consequence was the loss of five villages (*sołectwa*) by the Dobrzeń Wielki commune. Their area constitutes ca. 30% of the commune's total area and it is inhabited by a comparable percentage of the population. The power station and numerous industrial plants which used to determine the commune's economic potential, were now on the territory of the city. From the point of view of local economy, the event is unprecedented, as it disrupts or even destroys the socio-economic order of the commune developed over many years. There was also a threat of the emergence of phenomena which might affect the lives of the residents of the commune in a multilevel and sudden way. This indeed happened, the budget deficit of the diminished commune meant that without external one-time subsidies in 2017 and 2018, the municipality would face bankruptcy. According to the predictions of local authorities, without radical financial cuts and limiting or abandoning planned investments, the existence of the commune as an independent local government unit is in doubt. Layoffs of employees in the Commune Culture Center and the Commune Office started already in 2017, teachers were deprived of relatively high motivational bonuses, the support subsidies for care and educational centers and scholarships for pupils were significantly reduced or canceled, the number of sports instructors was reduced, and the plan was abandoned to subsidize the replacement of obsolete furnaces with modern heating systems. What is more, the commune was deprived of attractive investment areas. Area development plans were also no longer valid.

Decisions taken at high levels of authority and imposed without any public consultation, therefore forced and unexpected, led to a

dramatic situation. As a result, the richest rural commune in the Opole region has been degraded to a commune of a peripheral character, facing problems that it has not experienced for many years. The consequence of this state of affairs is the need to develop new strategies aimed at the survival of the commune in new conditions. If for various reasons the new strategies prove impossible to implement, the commune is threatened with bankruptcy. The decision made at the beginning of 2016 about the partition of the commune and the annexation of its significant area to the city of Opole was very negatively interpreted by the majority of residents and treated as an unjustified interference with their lives and achievements as a local community. The result of this were long protests in defense of the unity of the commune and its residents, the social space which should remain intact as one of core values. For this reason, there was a struggle to stop the process of the partition of the commune even at the expense of giving up the huge financial inflows coming from the Opole Power Station. So far, the actions of local and regional leaders have not been considered significant, the policy of the central authorities turned out to be more important.

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