
THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

A R T I C L E S A N D E S S A Y S

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SOCIAL SOLIDARITY DURING THE PANDEMIC

THE “VISIBLE HAND” AND NETWORKED SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

*You end up in forced quarantine, or you're scared of stepping out of your home, but you need to do some shopping or have something important you need to sort out, or to chat over on Skype, you need help for your child because the schools are shut, or you have to take your dog for a walk—or look after somebody's dog for a while. Or perhaps you just need to chat with another person. Don't wait for a police officer, just post here, and together we'll work out the details of how to help and who will do it. REMEMBER, WE WRITE ABOUT UNPAID HELP HERE [...] The purpose of this group is simple: to find and offer help.*¹

The above is quoted from the description of a group named *Widzialna Ręka* (literally Visible Hand), set up on Facebook on 11 March 2020. This initiative started off a wave of grassroots activity among the male and female residents of Poland (including foreigners), as well as among Polish citizens living abroad. The phenomenon also led to the posing of two questions, both important from the point of view of the social sciences and observation of social reality:

What forms are social movements adopting today, especially in response to the epidemic crisis?

Are we observing a practice of grassroots solidarity reaching beyond the charity model of support?

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¹ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/widzialnareka> [accessed: 17.06.2020].

This paper was written during the first phase of the COVID-19 epidemic in Poland, when diverse forms of social organisation constituting a response to it inclined me to make an attempt to describe them in sociological terms. The rendering impossible of almost any interaction whatsoever in the real world steered my attention towards the virtual social networks being born. One of the indirect consequences of lockdown was a reaction among those affected by the restrictions, whereby the needs of local community members were identified and responded to. In this respect, the Visible Hand initiative was by far the most salient. Using the method of netnographic observation, I gathered materials from this Facebook group, as well as its regional and thematic subgroups. The purpose of this paper has been to explore Visible Hand as a form of social mobilisation. During the process of analysis I applied the concept of online social movements of Manuel Castells (2015). This concept enables an in-depth and analytical understanding of the motives behind the establishing of the group and its subgroups, and the organisational rules of their activities, while also allowing for the role of solidarity in the process of social mobilisation to be defined. Moreover, analysis of the networking of Visible Hand seems important due to the scale of the help provided through it, frequently embracing activities crucial for realising the public interest in a democratic state. In addition the success of spontaneous mobilisation via social media illustrates the effectiveness of grassroots solidarity in the today's reality, where such initiatives are concerned.

METHOD

The conditions of forced social isolation highlighted the significance of information technology, and in particular the social media, for social communication and the space for building and maintaining social networks. It would be impossible to investigate the societal world without an in-depth analysis of virtual social space. My desire to identify the genesis and structure behind the functioning of the Visible Hand initiative inclined me to adopt the method of ethnographic observation, which in regard to a group functioning within an internet-based social medium is known as netnography, or virtual ethnography (Caliandro 2014: 739; 2018: 554; Jemielniak 2013: 105), or the ethnography of social media (Postill, Pink 2012: 125–127). A supplementary stage to this study is desk research, its goal being to place the said initiative within its broader context. This context comprises a comparison of available data regarding—firstly—the significance of solidarity in past crisis situations in Poland,

and—secondly—social initiatives similar in terms of situational context (the need for self-organisation in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic) but different geographically and in terms of culture.

The first stage of the research, lasting from March to June 2020, involved the gathering of material from the main Visible Hand group on Facebook, and from all of its thematic and regional subgroups (functioning and existing on the date of 17 June 2020, $N = 150$). The analysis embraced group descriptions or posts expressing their goals and the rules behind them, technical information on the number of group members, and the degree of group openness (whether hidden or visible in terms of being searchable among internet users with a Facebook account, and private or public in terms of people being able to join). The final choice of groups that served as examples was dictated by an attempt to grasp the popularity of the initiative on the one hand, and its heterogeneity on the other. As such, I focused on the most numerous groups, followed by a cross-section of thematic groups and one example of a regional group (the Kraków group, one of the those with the most members, and an exceptional case of a group transforming into a foundation). Although I myself am a member of the groups that were analysed, I did not take part in their activities during the research, either in the discussions or the campaigns.

It should be pointed out that the study below is explorative, and constitutes but a taste of the initiative's full analysis. In order to obtain a complete description of Visible Hand, the research would need to be conducted in greater depth, in particular with observation of posts within the groups, and group dynamics over a longer space of time, as well as quantitative research (for example the number of posts requesting support compared to the actual support obtained), demographic details of group members, and ultimately a systematic comparison with a larger number of similar initiatives.

NETWORKED SOCIAL MOVEMENT?

The essence of Visible Hand comprises social mobilisation; as such, it would be worth pondering over whether we are talking only about expedient episodes of non-organised collective action, a discussion and contact forum, or perhaps a contemporary social movement? One could posit the hypothesis that, because of the high degree of organisation, temporal continuity, and the fact that it has remained in opposition to prevalent social practices, we class Visible Hand among the social movements.

Following a review of definitions for social movements (Staggeborg 2016: 14–30; Moss, Snow 2016: 547–569; della Porta, Diani 2006; Zald 1996: 1–20; Hannigan 1985: 435–452), I concluded that there is no universal definition, and based on observation of social reality in the era of new information technologies, I decided to go by one of the most popular theories of social movements: Manuel Castells’ concept of networked social movements. Some classify it among the theories of so-called new social movements, since it assumes that today they differ significantly (among other things in their character, structure, and ideology) from the movements of industrial society, and especially from the labour movement (Staggenborg 2016: 24–26).

Castells, emphasising his theoretical inspiration from the works of Alain Touraine and Alberto Melucci, clearly outlines two fundamental defining elements of a social movement: firstly, social movements challenge the prevailing norms and social institutions, and secondly they do so via channels independent of the said institutions (Castells, Kumar 2014: 97). This independence, according to Castells (2015), boils down to those belonging to a movement consciously relying on each other, as opposed to political institutions denied that trust due to a history of disappointment with their activity. Castells also draws attention to the opposition towards other institutions in a sociological sense, and especially in regard to the institution of the free market, the structural problems of which led to the emergence of such movements as Occupy Wallstreet or the Indignados.

When monitoring analyses of movements of “indignation and hope” in the day of the internet (Castells 2015: 189–190; 249–255; Castells, Kumar 2014: 97), there are also more detailed features one could list as characteristic of networked social movements:

- 1) their various forms of networking (“multimodal”)
- 2) simultaneously global and local
- 3) functioning in a specific space, particularly temporal (“timeless time”)
- 4) emerging spontaneously, most often in response to a crisis
- 5) immediately propagating (going “viral”)
- 6) autonomous, and creating the “space of autonomy”
- 7) horizontal in structure, leaderless, providing a sense of community (of “togetherness”)
- 8) highly self-reflexive
- 9) nonviolent
- 10) not possessing a political agenda

11) “rhizomatic”.

The fundamental attribute of the main group and all subgroups investigated is that their members share a conviction that there is a need for spontaneous, widespread, mutual help, irrespective of the government’s measures (or in response to the said measures being insufficient). The need for this help is tied to the diagnosis of one’s own situation and that of others in the social structure, and place in the social distribution of goods—or in other words those aspects which, thanks to the activities initiated in the group, should undergo change. The essence of the activity comprises organisational, financial and psychological assistance for those unable to obtain such help from other sources, precisely because of their social situation and the simultaneous incapacity of institutions. I understand the desire for change through social reorganisation, constituting a questioning of institutional strategies, as a collective challenge to the system or structures of power.

It is worth noting that in the case of Visible Hand, conflict and overcoming norms may involve the providing of gratuitous benefits, for which there is a measurable payment in the capitalist economic system. In addition, the benefits thus provided may resemble or supplement those that make up the social security system in Poland, with the difference that within the bounds of Visible Hand, bureaucratic norms—including complicated procedures for verification and selecting entitlements for the receipt of benefits—are resisted. This is confirmed by group descriptions referring directly to social policy. A group emphatically indicating the problem of the clear inadequacy of governmental solutions for people employed on the basis of civil law contracts, bearing the name “Śmieciówkowe przestoje” (generally meaning junk contracts and standstill), has 1,400 members. The group’s description reflects the motives behind its formation:

The group was formed in response to the mushrooming financial problems among people on so-called junk contracts. These people are in various situations. Some are in professions for which the “natural” form of employment is contract work, commission work, or B2B, but the problem of standstill also affects those who should be employed on the basis of a job contract—but are not. Some people are represented by trade unions, but most are not. Those employed on job contracts have so-called “standstill pay”, but sadly this is not the case for people on junk contracts.²

By observing Visible Hand, one can notice clearly visible different forms of networking—above all, networks of contacts and actions are

² <https://www.facebook.com/groups/270116167312487/> [accessed: 17.06.2020].

forming in both virtual and real space. Today, the organisational success of social mobilisation, in which technological innovations play an enormous role, depends on these innovations' functions: related to IT, mobilisation, or social media. This undoubtedly allows for social networks with limited organisational structure to draw closer together. Moreover, Visible Hand is not a single organisational entity, but a network of groups operating in various directions, or "streams": in small and large localities, in and outside of Poland, and in diverse areas—including food support, childcare and pet care, and financial, employment and psychological support. Within this initiative we are dealing both with activated social networks already existing before Visible Hand was formed (e.g. certain pre-existing neighbourhood or university communities), and those that formed thanks to its activity (e.g. the Nettle Solidarity Fund). Networks of contacts and activities exist within the group, and are also made with external groups (e.g. with the collective "Food Not Bombs" or "Obiady w Czasach Zarazy" [Dinners During the Plague]), in media space. However, there is no single central group as understood in organisational hierarchy; the networked character largely boils down to the levels of relations, informal structure, and geographic and thematic spread. The dissemination of information, making contacts, and provision of support in the real world does not require any head office; the flows take place directly between group and subgroup members. Because anybody who is willing, has access to the online forum, and knows how to use it can participate, they are open-ended networks. This also allows for group rules to be adjusted as required, for the settings to be reconfigured, and for the creation of subgroups focused on the most pressing topics generating the greatest amount of interest. Castells (2015: 250) argues that networking as a method of a movement's functioning on the one hand makes it resistant to opposing factors, and on the other protects it from internal bureaucratisation and manipulation.

Worth noting in the margins here is that the group is private, meaning that only its members can see who belongs to it and what content it publishes. At the same time, it is a visible group, meaning that all Facebook users can find it in the medium's search engine and apply to join. The original group has a ten-point set of regulations, which constitutes an important condition for functioning within the group. According to these regulations, the group is not a forum for exchanging medical advice or a job fair. They also make expressly clear that posts diverging (according to group administrators) from its declared goal will be deleted, and members posting them will be removed. However, the need for an exchange of

various types of service, and—which is probably more important—for improving the local functioning of Visible Hand, lies at the foundations of the establishing of many groups similar in name and goal.³ Group members are required to be polite, are forbidden from spreading hate and harassing others, cannot discriminate, and should make sure that others feel safe. Their methods of action do not anticipate the use of violence. Users are encouraged to share stories of actions that have taken place, to express gratitude, or to put forward their thoughts. The careful and deliberate creation and modifying of the groups, and the direct expression of values concerning manners of organisation and goals of their activity, harmonise with what Castells (2015: 253–254) defines as a movement’s high level of self-reflexivity:

“They constantly interrogate themselves as movements, and as individuals, about who they are, what they want, what they want to achieve, which kind of democracy and society they wish for, and how to avoid the traps and pitfalls of so many movements that have failed by reproducing in themselves the mechanisms of the system they want to change, particularly in terms of political delegation of autonomy and sovereignty”.

Visible Hand emerged spontaneously in response to a local need for support, and immediately gained enormous popularity. One could easily class it with similar initiatives all around the world (Carlsen et al. 2020: 1–19; Franco et al. 2020: 523–546; Miao et al. 2021: 105–128). It was established as a consequence of people realising the existence of a global problem in managing the pandemic crisis. Networks of contacts stepped beyond country borders, while the very idea of imitating forms of networking in small groups (which can be found in the groups’ rules and descriptions) relates to the English-language term “affinity groups”. Filip Żulewski, the group’s founder, explains in an interview that the group’s name refers to an initiative from back in the days of the Polish People’s Republic—“Invisible hand”—based on anonymous help.⁴ In his opinion, anonymity today would be impossible and unwelcome, since the goal is to further local community. The spontaneity of the group’s founding in response to the crisis situation, coupled with the simultaneous widespread lack of or only weak social support networks,

³ <https://www.facebook.com/notes/widzialna-r%C4%99ka/widzialna-r%C4%99ka-grupy-tematyczne/133063188325841/> [accessed: 17.06.2020].

⁴ <https://oko.press/widzialna-reka-ma-juz-ponad-150-lokalnych-grup/?fbclid=IwAR1h.8gSNU9K67DAdVgaFbr6UZuTdALRE2LXaAG3PGt1T5rfux1URLnSZOY> [accessed: 17.06.2020].

conform with the description of the genesis of the networked movements researched by Castells (2015: 252):

“In all cases they are originated by a call to action from the space of flows that aims to create an instant community of insurgent practice in the space of places. The source of the call is less relevant than the impact of the message on the multiple, unspecified receivers, whose emotions connect with the content and form of the message”.

The initiative’s “virality”, its immediate spreading on an enormous scale, is documented by a website focusing on ethnography connected to social responses to the COVID-19 epidemic. It describes Visible Hand as initially a closed group aiming to organise an exchange of support among a group of friends, which grew to 90,000 members and 150 subgroups of various kinds within the space of one week.⁵ The initiative’s popularity grew very quickly right from the beginning, and it currently numbers 109,577 people.⁶ An interactive map of all groups has even been developed to make it easier to find a local group.⁷

Communities organising themselves in a manner similar to Visible Hand are an example of how external crises accentuate problems existing within societies, and contribute to their structural destabilisation. Rebecca Solnit, a researcher into societal response in crisis situations, writes as follows about the restructuring expected after the COVID-19 pandemic: “The devastating economic effect of the pandemic will make innovation essential, whether it is rethinking higher education or food distribution, or how to fund news media”.⁸ In Castells’ concept (2015: 252) a movement passes from “indignation” to “hope” through deliberation in “the space of autonomy”. In this sense, the practice initiated by Visible Hand is independent of the existing institutional order, yet because of its goals and how it is organised, it also stands in opposition to it. The existence of this autonomy is illustrated by the empirical material:

⁵ https://anthrocovid.com/2020/05/07/the-visible-hand-of-empathy-social-mobilisation-on-facebook-against-the-negative-effects-of-the-lockdown-in-poland/?fbclid=IwAR1XLSDFNZ_IQLhMxUhVXf78mGTy-gTKbUSweMt5wE4J0lprsExjjYhoab0 [accessed: 17.06.2020].

⁶ All numerical data was noted on 17 June 2020.

⁷ <https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?fbclid=IwAR3xNwKWcGr29Wx93gg14zmyucT9LxjyTggCcjZZ-qIRzWw2x0yQsYiEPJU&mid=1cykghFujmMZxsDLTq1hxRW8VRhsU1fbi&ll=52.98854880463348%2C25.731218057812512&z=5> [accessed: 17.06.2020].

⁸ Rebecca Solnit, “*The way we get through this is together*”: the rise of mutual aid under coronavirus (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/14/mutual-aid-coronavirus-pandemic-rebecca>) [accessed: 17.06.2020].

“Visible Hand—international section”⁹ numbers approximately 2,000 people, which goes to prove the popularity of this initiative, reaching beyond Poland’s borders. Formal state law does not constitute a barrier to “grassroots mutual aid”, as testified to by the active functioning of the “Reproduction” subgroup,¹⁰ which has around 1,400 members; its leading slogan is: “Abortion is possible during the coronavirus”. In addition, the telephone number to the organisation “Abortion Without Borders” is given in its background photo. “Giving a hand” can take on various forms, including that proposed in one of the posts:

Many people cannot travel for what they need to do because they have nobody to leave their children with. If you think you might be able to take in kids for a couple of days, email us at ciocia.basia@riseup.net, with “I’ll take them” as the subject. Maybe something that seemed impossible will prove possible thanks to your help.

Groups that directly or indirectly supplement (or one could even say “relieve”) the public authorities in carrying out their responsibilities deserve attention. This applies especially to groups focused on overcoming the labour crisis provoked by the epidemic circumstances, and on social support for people whose living conditions are under threat. The subgroup “Kryzysowy rynek zleceń” [Crisis jobs], with 1,700 users, was formed for the following purpose:

*We want to connect people who, as a result of the coronavirus epidemic, have lost or are highly likely to lose their source of income, and hirers.*¹¹

Castells (2015: 253) would most probably call such initiatives the foundation of “genuine” democracy achieved through the “practising of utopia”. As I have already mentioned, the structure of Visible Hand is, by design, horizontal, while its emergence reflects the process of creating a community described by Castells. However, instead of the word “community”, he uses “togetherness” to define a kind of community foreground, providing a sense of empowerment, conducive to cooperation and solidarity, while at the same time weakening the need for formal leadership (Castells 2015: 2, 190). It is precisely this “coming together” that is supposed to enable the overcoming of fear during a crisis. In the Visible Hand group discussions, a need for non-material psychological aid, based on conversation and a feeling of presence, was quickly identified. Such a form of mutual aid constitutes the foundation of the subgroup

⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/2874461049277846> [accessed: 17.06.2020].

¹⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/2096424953836241/> [accessed: 17.06.2020].

¹¹ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/242750663557555/> [accessed: 17.06.2020].

“Nie jesteś sam” [You are Not Alone], currently numbering 587 users; the description of its activities reads as follows:

*Do you need conversation with somebody showing empathy? Write to the moderator, and in reply we'll contact you to arrange a conversation via Messenger or by telephone.*¹²

The horizontal nature of how a networked movement functions is conducive—as can be seen in the example of Visible Hand—to increased participation and reduced hierarchy, possible thanks to the interactive nature and configurability of communication over a social medium (Castells 2015: 15). The group descriptions and observation of the discussions reveals that this movement is based on the direct participation of people involved along the lines of “you want—you do” (naturally in keeping with general principles and values, but without the acceptance of any specific bodies whatsoever). The movement has adopted the form of a network of “affinity groups”. The group’s founder advocates such organisational structure as follows:

*More and more regional groups are being formed. It's important, because the nationwide Polish group has grown to such proportions that it is becoming hard to moderate, to control, and conversation is suffering as well. In groups of 50 or 60 people, conversation is still constructive—thinking about how to resolve a problem. With 5,000 it sort of still worked, but at 90,000? There are more judgments, accusations, there is a slight loss of empathy. [...] I'm an advocate of constructing so-called "affinity groups", small groups organised around a common purpose, support groups. Many regional teams or collectives have already formed that are going a great job. I'm constantly in favour of there being more—whether as part of Visible Hand or not, that doesn't matter.*¹³

Probably the biggest analytical challenge is the goal to find answers to the question as to whether Visible Hand can be acknowledged as a social movement if, in unambiguously public space, it neither fulfils Castells’ condition of occupying symbolic places in urban space nor expresses itself through street protests. The space of autonomy mentioned above, described as a hybrid of cyberspace and urban space, is supposed to constitute a “third kind” of space. The initiative we are describing here would seem to function in just such a dimension, elusive in the classic dichotomy of public and private. The group is a forum, an agora, yet remains entirely independent of the state and of institutions. Its virtual

¹² <https://www.facebook.com/groups/144513560199129/> [accessed: 17.06.2020].

¹³ <https://oko.press/widzialna-reka-ma-juz-ponad-150-lokalnych-grup/> [accessed: 17.06.2020].

context also results in a need for the temporal reconceptualisation of a movement's activities (Spier 2017: 83–105)—its “suspension” in the virtual world is in keeping with the Castellsian “timeless time”. In my appraisal, the fact that it does not operate through the occupying of urban buildings or street protests does not make it impossible to recognise Visible Hand as a social movement. As is indicated by researchers into civil society in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, Elżbieta Korolczuk and Kerstin Jacobsson (2020: 125–142), restricting the notion of civil activism to street protests and social movements with an organised structure, capable of lobbying among entities creating public policies and achieving publicity in the media, is not only inadequate but also undesirable. After all, narrowing down the understanding of civil agency in such a manner is both occido- and metropolitan-centric, since it excludes forms of deliberate resistance and engagement of no less importance in the post-Soviet context, which due to a lack of trust in public institutions and overt political activity maintain the appearances of inorganisation and apoliticality (Korolczuk, Jacobsson 2020: 129). This would seem to be confirmed by one of the principles of Visible Hand: the requirement to avoid political topics, religion and worldview as potentially triggering quarrels. The authors cited here use the notion of “uneventful protests”, characteristic features of which are the small scale of their activities, absence of publicity, self-organisation, and their focus on the mundane problems of everyday life (Korolczuk, Jacobsson 2020: 130). The unobvious rationality of such an action strategy and its effectiveness in the long-term shaping of social attitudes is present, among other things, in the fact that as it constitutes a negation of the free-market and state-centric order, expressed frankly it would easily be dismissed as “wrong”, and the movement's members as “orientalised” (Korolczuk, Jacobsson 2020: 131).

The conclusions drawn by the researchers into post-Soviet activism go hand-in-hand with Castells' assertion regarding the “occupying” of minds and not streets (cf. Ślosarski 2014: 197). This is also tied to a fact discerned by Castells (2015: 255) that networked social movements rarely possess a political agenda, resulting from the fact that “togetherness” is based on acting together here and now, and not on long-term goals. This constitutes both a strength, a broadly-appealing argument, and a weakness of the movement, entailing problems with assessing the realisation of undefined goals. Instead, networked movements focus on achievable goals that are meant to reinforce the movement as a whole:

“In a dire economic and social situation, there is an urgent need for a change of course, and this can only be achieved by channeling the energy liberated by the movement into some achievable, short-term goals that, in return, would empower the movement. The problem, though, is that ‘the movement’ is not a single entity, but multiple streams that converge into a diverse challenge to the existing order. Furthermore, a very strong sentiment in the movement is that any pragmatic approach to achieving demands would be required to go through the mediation of the political system, and this would contradict the generalized distrust of the representativeness of political institutions as they presently exist in America” (Castells 2015: 190).

The “rhizomatic” character of a networked movement means that it exists in the internet the entire time, while in the real world it comes and goes in diverse forms, in institutions, in urban space; it descends into the underground and resurfaces (Castells, Kumar 2014: 97). Such a portrayal is close to what is probably the most inclusive definition of a social movement, by Anthony Oberschall (1973), who acknowledges hundreds of groups and organisations, frequently dispersed and only existing for a short while, not maintaining direct contacts with one another and devoid of an organisational structure or common leadership, sporadically taking part in various kinds of collective action, as social movements (cf. della Porta, Diani 2006). Even if it turns out that Visible Hand ends its activity as soon as the epidemic is declared over, and no classic components of a social movement emerge, those sporadic collective activities could be taken as qualifying it as a social movement. Confirmation of the appearance of certain “rhizomes”, or offshoots, of Visible Hand in various forms could, for example, be the Kraków regional group going by the name “Twoja widzialna Ręka” (Your Visible Hand); as many as 14,991 people are in the group. It is rather telling that this has transformed into a formal entity, as a foundation. And the group description explains the reasons for its institutionalisation:

[...] Visible Hands have shown that our help is very necessary and bounteous, while the positive effects of the Visible Hands’ activities reach far beyond Kraków. A person in need has frequently become a person giving help. We have dedicated our time and money to bringing support to those who need it today. In coordinating the activities and initiating aid campaigns, we have noticed that the Group’s formula on Facebook requires support. Sadly, there are cases of our trust being taken advantage of for people’s own, dishonest aims. [...] The Foundation has legal personality, and has a court-approved statute, while its activity is subject to social control and the control of the appropriate institutions. [...] The ‘Your Visible Hand Foundation’ is the people,

and the people are all of us. We know that Visible Hands want to bring help, and are capable of doing so. Visible Hands on board!

The proposal to classify Visible Hand as a social movement is undoubtedly controversial, but I believe it constitutes a valuable exercise of the sociological imagination within the framework of the theory of social movements in contemporary societies. The deliberations here constitute an invitation to join the discussion, and to undertake further research regarding Visible Hands and other grassroots initiatives of this type.

VISIBLE SOLIDARITY

The notion of solidarity reoccurs both in Manuel Castells' concept and within the initiative described in this paper. An analytical grasp of it is not easy; in particular it is difficult to state what it signifies, and why it is appearing precisely now and in such a form. If we treat Visible Hand as a social movement, then we should consider the action strategy it has adopted. This largely boils down to what the movement does to motivate its members to get involved, and here one can discern a combination of ideological incentives and those based on solidarity. The ideological incentives are seen in how it appeals to a set of values universally recognised in the Polish cultural circle, as indicated for example in the genesis of the group's name, which refers to the post-Polish People's Republic collective identity. It is also possible that the popularity of Visible Hand is linked to organisational culture; such a model of action was quickly acknowledged as effective in many social milieu, because it is based on well-known practices and relations, and it remains at least consistent with those we learn about at school in regard to Polish tradition. The Visible Hand groups assume that its members already have certain resources upon joining the movement. These resources influence the strategies taken by the movement. The term "mutual aid" as referred to by Visible Hand¹⁴ (and by people chanting at numerous contemporary protests) harks back to Kropotkin's (1902) concept. As Rebecca Solnit indicates, the idea—for years known only in anarchistic and academic

¹⁴ Cf. *Jak tworzyć grupy/sieć pomocy wzajemnej*, opracowanie: Widzialna Ręka / Visible Hand and <http://spina.noblogs.org> [<https://www.facebook.com/notes/widzialna-r%C4%99ka/jak-tworzy%C4%87-grupysie%C4%87-pomocy-wzajemnej/116615193303974/>] [accessed: 17.06.2020].

circles—has gained enormous popularity in recent years, and especially in response to the epidemic.¹⁵

Piotr Sztompka's definition of solidarity (1997: 8), which refers to "concern for the interests of others and a readiness to take steps for their benefit, even when that is in conflict with one's own interests", corresponds to the mutual aid visible today. In the structure of Visible Hand, and in the rules of its activity, such taking of steps is closer to cooperation than a selfless act of help. As such it would seem to step beyond the charitable model of support for those in need. It has to be stressed that all groups are dominated by problems in the economic aspect of the current crisis: losing one's job, having no money, or being unable to afford childcare or psychotherapy, for which there has suddenly proved to be an urgent need. The importance of solidarity as a political value, involving the "flattening of inequality", is emphasised by Agnieszka Nogal (2013: 99), presenting an element of such an understanding in the word's etymology (Roman law), in the visions of state and politics of Plato and Aristotle, in the slogans of the French and Russian revolutions, in the assumptions behind the concept of welfare states, and in contemporary portrayals—sociological (e.g. Robert Putnam) and philosophical (e.g. Alasdair MacIntyre). Solnit, already cited here, also draws attention to the relations of solidarity and the values underpinning the activity of social movements, which could be guided by a slogan coined by Eduardo Galeano, "Solidarity, not charity". It is meant to highlight the significance of non-hierarchical relations and empowering actions in the sense that activity is grounded on respect and an attitude of reciprocity. Based on research into societal responses to catastrophes, the author posits a few conclusions which could also apply to Visible Hand. Above all, it is based on solidarity in collective action, constituting affirmation of sharing a difficult fate, while also demonstrating via mutual aid the strength and capacity to take care of oneself.

Grasping the axiological dimension of the notion of solidarity, as evident in the activity of the Visible Hand initiative, is undoubtedly essential for a reliable description of this phenomenon. Neither, too, can one ignore another aspect consistent with broader deliberations regarding the idea of solidarity, namely the specific social bond. It is hard to characterise explicitly, above all because this bond can take on various forms. On the one hand, we may speak of a cementing of the political community, which

¹⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/14/mutual-aid-coronavirus-pandemic-rebecca-solnit> [accessed: 17.06.2020].

instead of a revolutionary charge is granting society stability, reducing the differences within it (Nogal 2013: 101). We should ask with whom we feel the bond? With whom is our solidarity? The answer to this question may, particularly in conditions of crisis, mean having to make a choice. Jerzy Bartkowski (2014: 20) asserts that “in such situations values reveal themselves definitively as decision criteria in conditions of having to make a choice”. Another consequence of such more or less conscious outlining of the scope of solidarity is a marking out of the boundaries of the community: “By reversing the reasoning, you could also view solidarity as a living and real border of the group. It is what indicates whether specific social aggregates constitute groups in the sociological sense” (Bartkowski 2014: 21). When analysing the findings of research into the significance of solidarity during the crisis of 2008, the above author draws attention to trends characteristic of the countries of Eastern Europe. Compared to the countries of “old Europe”, he asserts, among other things, a higher level of egocentrism and atomisation, and less solidarity—both internal (within a neighbourhood, region or nation) and external (in relation to other EU countries and the world). He even speaks of there being less developed care for the sick and unemployed in times of crisis (Bartkowski 2014: 22). But in that case, why such a difference in societal reactions to the financial crisis and the epidemic crisis? One could put forward the hypothesis that there was a change in “non-motivational” factors, such as subjective appraisal of the effectiveness and legitimacy of support, and the moral assessment of those receiving it (Lepianka 2012: 182). Perhaps there was a change in how the threat was assessed in the public mind. Piotr Sztompka (1997: 9–10) identifies the perception of dangers and uncertainty as individual as a cause of the weakening of the moral bond, while he sees threats perceived as collective, such as natural disasters, and therefore ones that can only be tackled through collective action, as a factor reinforcing the bond. Visible Hand may constitute confirmation of the thesis that the social bond has been strengthened and solidarity has increased in response to the epidemic crisis.

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Abstract

The author poses the following questions: (1) What forms are social movements adopting today, particularly in response to the epidemic crisis? (2) Are we observing the practice of grassroots solidarity reaching beyond the charitable model of support? She seeks answers taking the Facebook group Visible Hand [Widzialna Ręka] as an example; it was established shortly after lockdown had been announced in the first quarter of 2020, as a form of social organisation aiming to provide mutual aid during the difficult time of the pandemic. She asserts that communities organising themselves in a manner similar to Visible Hand are an example of how external crises highlight problems existing within societies and contribute to their destabilisation. While deliberating over whether the initiative in question is one of ad-hoc episodes of non-organised collective activity, a discussion-and-contact forum, or perhaps a contemporary social movement, she reaches for Manuel Castells' concept of networked social movements—and asserts that Visible Hand may be acknowledged as a social movement. In closing her paper, she considers the connections between moral bond and solidarity.

key words: Facebook, mutual aid, networked social movement, solidarity

SOLIDARNOŚĆ SPOŁECZNA W CZASIE PANDEMII „WIDZIALNA RĘKA” A USIECIOWIONE RUCHY SPOŁECZNE

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Abstrakt

Autorka stawia następujące pytania: (1) Jakie formy przybierają ruchy społeczne współcześnie, zwłaszcza w odpowiedzi na kryzys epidemiczny? (2) Czy obserwujemy praktykę oddolnej solidarności wychodzącą poza charytatywny model wsparcia? Poszukuje odpowiedzi na przykładzie działalności grupy Facebookowej Widzialna Ręka, która powstała wkrótce po ogłoszeniu lockdownu w pierwszym kwartale 2020 roku jako forma organizacji społecznej mającej na celu pomoc wzajemną w trudnym czasie pandemii, Twierdzi, że społeczności organizujące się w sposób zbliżony do Widzialnej Ręki są przykładem tego, jak kryzysy zewnętrzne uwypuklają problemy istniejące wewnątrz społeczeństw i przyczyniają się do zachwiania ich struktur. Zastanawiając się, czy obserwowana inicjatywa to doraźne

epizody niezorganizowanego działania zbiorowego, forum dyskusyjno-kontaktowe, a może współczesny ruch społeczny, sięga do koncepcji usieciowionych ruchów społecznych Manuela Castellsa. Twierdzi, że Widzialną Rękę można uznać za ruch społeczny. Na koniec rozważa powiązania między więzią moralną a solidarnością.

słowa kluczowe: Facebook, pomoc wzajemna, usieciowiony ruch społeczny, solidarność