

Part III: Civic Activism as a Response to the Crisis

Editorial Introduction

The Cases of Germany and the United Kingdom

In the following studies, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the resilience of communities and the formation of civic activism in Germany and the United Kingdom is analyzed and discussed. In the German study, the expected impact on existing volunteer organizations is explored. In the UK study, by analyzing quantitative data pertaining to (about the determinants of) different categories of mutual aid groups (MAGs) interpretations are made concerning resilience, agility, and civic activist potentialities.

The orientations and methodologies of the two studies are quite different. Yet, comparing them may lead to some interesting conclusions and clues for further research into the topics of “civil society,” “civic activism,” and “democratic relationships.”

In the German case, by applying a framework to analyze community resilience the author is able to explore possible positive and negative impacts of measures of physical distancing on the continuity and stability of various types of existing volunteer organizations. The imposed contact restrictions appear to have variable—not conclusive—effects depending on the nature of the volunteer work. Considering the substance of the volunteer work (sports, arts, culture, welfare, etc.) the analyses primarily appear to be conducted from the sociocultural and welfare dimension. In the discussion of the findings, the uncovered resilience of the volunteer organizations is interpreted in terms of such key democratic concepts as “civil society” and “civic activism.” As Susann Worschech writes: “Consequently, a resilient civil society may also contribute to democracy’s resilience by forcing politics to become more inclusive and participative.” Observations of increased political participation, related to better cycling facilities in Berlin, are assumed to have been enhanced by the improvement of the digitalization of communicative spaces, enforced by the lockdown measures. These interpretations do shift the orientations of the study outcomes regarding resilience from the sociocultural dimension toward the sociopolitical dimension. This shift is quite interesting. It assumes that the interrelationships and dynamics between these two societal dimensions are constitutive of developments in both. This means that sociocultural resilience is sustaining for democratic inclusiveness, and vice versa. In the author’s interpretations of the findings, the social quality conditional factors are



introduced as constitutive factors for an “inclusive and participative democracy.” Both assumptions regarding these intersections are highly interesting for the comprehension of processes that constitute the foundations of societal resilience, as well as for the participative nature of democratic relationships.

In the UK study, the formation of different kinds of MAGs is compared by analyzing the determinants of the creation of community resilience resulting from the COVID pandemic. The design of this large quantitative study is most interesting. The resilience of the MAG communities is analyzed according to features of their core business and their emergence: participation in local government initiatives on “climate emergency action” and “fair trade in crisis”; the presence of a local ornithology organization; the presence of green business; and the presence of radical environmental activist groups. The classification into specific groups also here is connected with the five social quality conditional factors. The best predictor of community resilience turns out to be the presence of “radical environmental activist groups.” The evidence of the study also indicates that the interference of the state may be counterproductive to the emergence of community resilience. The author states that “there are aspects of local state action that are resistant to such nimble responsiveness, possibly because of risk aversion and the structures within which public systems operate.”

Deploying the social quality procedural framework, here some interesting comparisons with the German study may be made. The predictive value of the presence of “radical environmental activist groups” strongly suggests that processes in the intersections of the “socioenvironmental” and “sociopolitical” dimensions are constituent of strong communities. Speaking in terms of the German article, the political agency of these communities is relatively strong, and therefore its significance for “participative democratic processes” is remarkable. The UK study also suggests that the interference of the (local) government is not a predictor and may be even an inhibitor of community resilience. As was the case in the German study, the social quality approach with its five conditional factors also was introduced in the analysis. Although here it was also not clearly and logically discussed in the conclusion section.

From the perspective of these two studies on community resilience and civic activism, it is interesting to consider the Chinese study, in which “community participation,” in the realm of the sociocultural and welfare dimension, was discussed as a crucial component of the compliance with government measures. In these studies, community participation, in the intersecting dynamics of the four dimensions, is also interpreted as a political phenomenon, enhancing inclusive democratic processes. As was concluded in the Chinese study, it is a great challenge to pick up this important thread in the future and initiate comparative studies aiming at the exposure and comprehension of the intriguing interrelationships between the four dimensions and the social quality analytical framework. Follow-up studies, more explicitly deploying the procedural framework of the four societal dimensions, as well as the social quality approach, would signify interesting contributions to the comprehension of the resilience of societies against crisis, as well as the comprehension of processes sustaining “inclusive democracies.”