

# MARTOR



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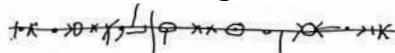
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parts of the world in terms of centers and peripheries (p. 175). Ermann suggests that, due to a so-called “friction” (Tsing 2005) between neoliberal cultural hegemony and the forces that contest it, common brands today have come to represent the West and the global, and the anti-brands the East and the local. The global brands stand for the present, whereas alternative or anti-brands are linked to the pre-capitalist (often socialist) past or an anticipated or desired alternative future (p. 177). In the same vein of renewed stereotyping, juxtaposing the East-European or Balkan “other” with the Western “self”, in the final chapter, Angelidou and Kofti show the occurrence of new self-identifications and processes of “othering” between Greece and Bulgaria, which are linked to transnational movements and new labor relationships (p. 193). What is more, instead of contributing to the elimination of cultural boundaries, new capitalist forms of entrepreneurial activities play a key role in creating new boundaries, stereotypes and antagonisms at the margins of Europe (p. 203).

I would recommend this book to anyone researching within the fields of post-social-

ism, neoliberal restructuring, rural and urban transformations and also to those who have a broader interest in area studies and Eastern Europe. Firstly, the diversity of research contexts offers a broad spectrum of recent research that does justice to the complex and complementary roles that rural and urban localities play in our current global climate. Additionally, the chapters are engaging in their description and analysis of the case studies. Thirdly, while it may not have been originally intended as a key question in some of the chapters, the meaning of “positionality” together with a shaping transformation-versus-reconstruction debate has emerged as a focus that clearly deserves consideration in the wider context of rural and post-socialist research. In an increasingly mobile and globalized world, research of the rural condition is scarce and needed, not only in Eastern Europe, but also in regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia and China, which are still dominated by a large peasantry and whose population comprises half of the world (Hobsbawm 1994, cited in Șerban and Dorondel 2014).

**Mândrie și beton / Pride and concrete,  
Photo Album by Petruț Călinescu and Ioana Hodoiu.  
Bucharest: Igloo Media, 2013.<sup>1</sup>**



**Reviewed by Ger Duijzings**

Amongst the few books that document the often dramatic changes currently taking place in village communities in eastern and south-eastern Europe, this book is unique. The outcome of a collaboration between photographer Petruț Călinescu and anthropologist Ioana Hodoiu, it offers a rare insight into the fast-changing realities of villages in Maramureș, repudiating the common notion of village communities here and elsewhere as rural

backwaters that have missed the train of globalisation. Călinescu and Hodoiu have worked in the area since 2010, documenting village life and following the inhabitants abroad, especially to Paris, where the latter are employed as construction workers and domestic servants. Operating in tandem - Călinescu shooting photographs and Hodoiu doing the research and interviews - they have co-produced a book that offers a dispassionate insight into the destiny of

<sup>1</sup>) A first selection of Petruț Călinescu's images were published in Martor 16/2011.

certain rural communities that have been involved in labour migration to the EU. The book is excellent in that it has eye for visual detail, observing the money-fuelled changes in material culture for example, without casting facile value judgements over what is often in the view of outsiders a betrayal of tradition and travesty of good taste.

The numerous photographs, which form the lion share of the book follow the annual cycle of these rural communities and the villagers' life and work abroad. The reader gets an intriguing insight into the landslide changes caused in these villages by the money earned abroad, but also of the price paid for progress, in terms of social marginality and alienation in cities such as Paris, the extremely frugal and austere living conditions abroad, as well as the social displacements and disruptions occurring back home in the village. The vast houses built there from remittances earned abroad are conspicuous not only by their opulence but also by their emptiness, inhabited almost exclusively by elderly relatives who continue going about their traditional agricultural activities. It is during the summer that these half-abandoned houses and villages come alive, when the labour migrants return to their communities to organise and participate in the lavish weddings.

The most interesting observable features in the images are the changes in material culture, which are well-documented in the book: from timber hand-painted houses with wooden windows to concrete structures, finished with blocks and bricks, tiles and marble, with windows framed in termopane, and iron gates, stainless steel, glass fronts, ornamental lions and columns. Now, a self-respecting local businessman drives a Ferrari instead of the horse-drawn carriages that were the norm a few years ago. Inhabitants bring items from abroad, like brandy bottles in the form of the Eiffel tower, which symbolize their economic success. The changes seem to trigger a certain nostalgia for what has been lost in the process, judging for example by the photo shoots the

inhabitants organise in a nearby village museum, in front of traditional houses, during weddings.

The images also document their lives as labour migrants, which initially (before Romania entered the EU) meant crossing borders illegally, hidden in trucks and under trains, living in abandoned houses or in cheap accommodation, sharing rooms with others while sleeping in bunk beds, or sleeping rough, or building improvised shacks at the peripheries of big Western cities. They show a life of austerity, but also of extreme resilience, where if possible every single penny is saved. In spite of their cross-border 'globalised' mobility, the villagers continue to operate according to 'local' village logic, using their village connections and networks for work and support, forming small teams together to do jobs, and socialising with each other in the spare time they have, and, last but not least, marrying the boys and girls from their region.

The book's strength, that is, its dispassionate observational and 'documentary' character, is perhaps also its main shortcoming. It raises many questions rather than providing the reader with answers to these questions. Amongst the issues that remain obscure is for instance what the effects of these changes are on social relations and economic inequalities within (and between) villages, and how stark differences in wealth and poverty are negotiated in the community? Can one speak here of a 'neo-liberal' context of 'winners' and 'losers' engaged in vicious competition, their comparative success signalled through the size of their house, the materials used, and the cars brought home? Is every villager compelled to take part in this competition in order not to lose face, and how important is it to 'show off' one's accomplishments abroad through the photos one carries and shows at visits home and to friends.

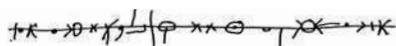
Another question that comes to mind when looking at the images is what has happened to public services in the village, such as the schools, roads, running water,

and sewage systems? As some of the images show, houses do have no running water but only wells, replicating the structural lack of running water and other public services in rural communities in Romania. Last but not least, even if hinting at them, the book does not analyse the emerging social issues, such as repercussions for family and community life and the inter-generational conflicts generated by migration. Parents who made the step to move abroad want to go back, that's why they build these houses, but the children speak of the 'curse' of concrete, determined to lead their own lives abroad without the obligation to invest in a huge home where they do not intend to live.

Finally, one last question that can be

raised is how come certain villages have experienced such an extraordinary development, becoming prosperous at a level unimaginable just a generation ago, while others seem to have missed the boat, ending up as contemporary rural 'ghettos'. The book points at local preconditions, such as previous experiences of labour migration and seasonal work during communism, but that does not cover all possible explanations for this diversity in rural destinies. Yet, by raising these questions, without necessarily answering them, the book makes undoubtedly a very important contribution, and as such it is essential reading for all those interested in the changes affecting rural communities in the region.

## Contributors' Biographies



**Milena Angelova** - Assistant Professor at the Department of History of the South West University, Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria. Milena completed a Ph.D. in History at the South West University Blagoevgrad in 2007. She carried postdoctoral research within Karl Franzens University (Graz), University of Vienna, North Caucasus University (Stavropol), Academy of Sciences of Armenia (Erevan), University "Shota Rustaveli" (Batumi, Georgia). She is currently a participant in the project „Politics of Memory and Memory Cultures of the Russian-Ottoman War 1877/1878: From Divergence to Dialogue” (2012-2016). Her main interests are in the field of modern Bulgarian history, especially the history of “social diseases”, social work and public health, the state policies referring to the rural areas in Bulgaria in the 1930s and 1940s, the politics of memory in communist Bulgaria. She is the author of „The Model Village.” The Modernization Project about the Village in Bulgaria (1937-1944), Blagoevgrad: SWU-University Press, 2008 /”Образцово село”. Модернизационният проект за селото в България (1937-1944)/ and *Unrequited Memory of the Late Socialism. The “Narratives of Popular Memory” movement (1983-1989)*, Sofia: SEMARSh, 2010 /*(Не)сполелената памет на късния социализъм. Движението „Народната памет разказва” (1983 - 1989)*.  
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**Andrew Cartwright** - Research Fellow at the Centre for Policy Studies at the Central European University in Hungary. Andrew completed his Ph.D. in Law at the University of Warwick, U.K. on the Romanian land reforms of the 1990s. He carried out postdoctoral research at Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology Halle and the School of History, the University of Liverpool. His research focuses on post-socialist rural developments, particularly the implications of shrinking and aging populations. He is the Chair of PASOS, the policy associations network, and he is also a member of the organizing committee of LANDNET which seeks to make better connections between land policy and rural development policy in the wider Europe area. He is currently involved in a project researching abandoned land in Serbia. His latest publication was on the failure of land consolidation policy in Central and Eastern Europe in the volume *Negotiating Territoriality: Spatial Dialogues between State and Tradition* (edited by Allan Charles Dawson, Laura Zanotti and Ismael Vaccaro 2014).  
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