

TRANSNATIONAL MIGRATION AND POST-SOCIALIST PROLETARIANISATION IN A RURAL ROMANIAN PROVINCE

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Abstract:

The aim of the article is to explain the amplitude of transnational migration and of the strong social competition of one of Romania's most isolated regions, the Oaş Country. Analysing historically the organisation of labour within the region's communities, the article reveals that a traditional organisation of work found the structural conditions to reproduce during socialist times, as a result of an incomplete proletarianisation process. A particular subsistence system, defined by collective organisation of work and by geographical mobility, explains both the success in transnational migration after 1990 and the intensifying of the social competition within the region's communities. The article also makes clear that transnational migration represents the path for a complete proletarianisation of these groups.

Keywords: post-socialism; social competition; labour organisation; migration; proletarianisation; Oaş Country

Background

During the socialist years tens of millions of peasants from the CEE countries were driven towards joining the ranks of the proletariat. While this social phenomenon was indeed fast and sizeable, it was not as comprehensive as the communist bureaucracy envisaged. Due mainly to economic constraints, many peasants were held on their places, and were even forbidden to move to towns and cities, being still dislocated for employment, either as temporary workers or as commuters. Neither city-

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dwellers, nor full-time peasants, these rural “peasant-workers”, who worked for smaller salaries in mines, workshops or forestry and also toiled the land, formed, together with their families, a group of people that were never fully proletarianised. They may be considered as the true “industrial reserve army” of the real existing socialism, a “flexible group” that could have been employed or disemployed, in accordance with developmental needs, cycles of production, marginal labours and so on.

Particularly fit for this category were, in Romania, the inhabitants of the mountain regions, especially from the places where socialist collectivisation of the land was never enforced, the more infra-structurally isolated areas, but also populations inhabiting less urbanised regions. Due to incomplete proletarianisation, less social intervention and lack of important capital investments, the populations from the aforementioned areas continued to reproduce local social relations and lifestyles that were still linked to archaic patterns.

I am interested in this paper to cover a different but consequential undertaking, which deals with the incentives for completing the proletarianisation process, as a consequence of social changes brought by the new position of Romania in the capitalist world system after the fall of the socialist regime.

Transnationalism, local development and social competition

The subject of this paper is related to the transnational migration of a rural population from Northwestern Romania, known under the name Oaş Country, to Western Europe.

I am particularly interested not in migration per se, but in the outcomes of this migration, and in the explanations that were given to it.

This migration started very early after 1990 and was one of the more intense from Romania; its main destination was France, and it passed through very different forms and stages: irregular, asylum seeking migration, for work circular migration, temporary and long-time migration.

The phenomenon was scrutinised by a number of researchers, especially due to its striking outcomes in terms of local development of the sending villages. More precisely: while a vast literature on migration describes how remittances are used for improving life standards in the sending localities, by investing in long-time goods like houses and

productive tools, as well as the emergence of a competition among migrants to make visible migration success through these goods, what happened in Oaş Country is somehow of a spectacular scale.

Namely, not only that very large houses were built everywhere, but individuals regularly demolish parts of their house in order to rebuild it to respond to a newer building of a neighbour or a relative, or to keep up with a more recent fashion in terms of design, ornaments, types of building materials, and so on. This fact has transformed the region in a very lucrative area, a vast building site, but most important, in a field of a fierce social competition which involves entire communities. A sense of excess is visible everywhere and a proper term for comparison would be the post-socialist villas of the suburban nouveau riches of most of CEE's larger cities.

To all these should be added that Oaş Country is, geographically, one of the most isolated region from Romania, a mountain area that was not collectivised during socialism, a place where close-knit communities are bound together by strong social norms, some of them still archaic. I could observe and analyse these norms in my field research that I did in 2013 and 2015 in some of region's villages, especially in the village of Certeze¹.

Shortly put, about these norms: kinship relations are still very strong, marriage is highly endogamous, marriage alliances are strongly guided by status positions; people wear sort of highly elaborated traditional clothes in ritual contexts, and various items of prestige, which have only local value, are praised.

As I mentioned, different researchers tried to give account of the scale of the social competition within the area, and of the particular development produced by it. They tried to explain it through two main dynamics, more often interlinked: the specificity of Oşeni's transnational

¹ The methodology involved in the research combined first-hand qualitative data, collected through field observation and 40 semistructured interviews, with secondary data from public archives and published researches.

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migration², or the supposed cultural autarchy, which would have preserved and transformed some archaic competitive practices up to the present³.

If both perspectives (transnationalism and cultural autarchy) are valid in certain regards, and may explain some of the developmental features of the Oaş Country, they both suffer from theoretical reductionism and ethnographic presentism. Their main shortcoming is, in my view, that they tend to disregard the long-term social history of the place and the changes of the villagers' working practices during time, which are central in my view. More important, they tend to disregard the slow but continuous process of proletarianisation of these peasants, which had started during socialism and is on its way to completion in the present. I will focus in this paper on this dynamic - of proletarianisation - by following the main facts of the social history of the area, which may also better explain the local competition and its recent aggrandisement.

My thesis is that, starting with the beginning of the 20th century, the peasant population of Oaş Country has been gradually hauled into the country-wide process of proletarianisation of the rural population. However, the "Oşeni" have shared with other groups - peasants located in isolated or resourceless areas, or rural Roma - the path of a weak integration in the formal labour market. In the context in which the agriculture of the region was not collectivised during socialism, this position both constrained and enabled them to search for and be involved in various economic activities that were less formalised within the socialist organisation of labour. As a consequence, they benefited of certain productive and reproductive autonomy, which enabled them to be both connected to the labour opportunities inside and outside the region and to preserve a strong sense of identity and community, objectified through strong social norms. Their peculiar partial proletarianisation may explain

² Dana Diminescu; Lagrave, R.M., "Faire une saison, pour une anthropologie des migrations roumaines en France: le cas du pays d'Oaş", in *Migration Etudes*, No. 91, 1999.

³ Daniela Moisa, "Du costume traditionnel a Barbie. Formes et significations du costume 'traditionnel' de Certeze, Roumanie (1970-2005)", in *Martor. Revue d'Anthropologie du Musee du Paysan Roumain*, No. 13, 2008; Daniela Moisa, "Du couteau a la maison. Pratiques et materialites de la reussite au village de Certeze", in *Martor. Revue d'Anthropologie du Musee du Paysan Roumain*, No. 16, 2011, Nicoară Mihali, *Țara Oaşului. Lumea tradițională și vendeta*, Cluj-Napoca: Limes, 2013.

their economic success during socialism and post-socialism. However, with the post-1990 transnational migration the incentive to speed up the development would embark them, as we will see, on the path of complete proletarianisation, with the associated changes in their individual and collective social life. Focusing the investigation on the evolution of their working practices could explain, in my view, the specific development of the area, the preservation of local cultural norms, the success in transnational migration and could envision further social changes.

Proletarianisation concept

Rooted in the marxist tradition, proletarianisation is seen originally as the result of the primitive accumulation of capital, understood as the historical process of divorcing the producers from the means of production. Otherwise put, proletarianisation reflects the condition of the producer liberated from a previous bonding (initially feudal) relation and dispossessed of his/her direct access to the means of production, who is both free and constrained to work for a wage within a capitalist organisation of production⁴. While the concept was less used in the 80s and the 90s' analysis, it resurfaced more recently, as a useful tool for grasping social phenomena produced by the neoliberal organisation of work and of society, more general. Nuanced as "de-proletarianisation", "re-proletarianisation", "incomplete proletarianisation", it readdresses contemporary aspects related to working patterns, like working for wages, free and forced labour, deprivation of direct means of subsistence, spatial and temporal dislocation of the labour force, lack of control of the labour processes⁵.

⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, Penguin Books, 1990 [1867]), p. 875.

⁵ See Tom Brass, "Debating Capitalist Dynamics and Unfree Labour: A Missing Link?", in *The Journal of Development Studies*, 50:4, 2015; Julien-Francois Gerber, "The Role of Rural Indebtedness in the Evolution of Capitalism", in *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 41:5, 2014; Bryan D. Palmer, "Reconsideration of Class: Precariousness as Proletarianisation", in *Socialist Register*, Vol. 50, 2014; Norbert Petrovici, "Neoliberal Proletarianisation along the Urban-Rural Divide in Post-socialist Romania", in *Studia UBB Sociologia*, LVIII, No. 2, 2013.

Going beyond the obsolete perspective that links the process of proletarianisation only with the classical image of masses of dispossessed workers toiling in foggy factory environments, I use this concept due to its ability to still better address, within a historical-materialist paradigm, the transformations of the world of labour under a capitalist regime, which imply today, as in the past, a set of opportunities and constraints the workers face and have to deal with. In contrast with the literatures that link migration mainly to individuals or families' impediments, choices, opportunities and interests (which represent different variations of rational choice theory), I was particularly interested to stress the objective structural factors, historically rooted, which may force some groups of people who were still in possession of their means of subsistence to abandon them and to join, as new proletarians, the global, metropolitan production regime.

Subsistence system and social relations

Against the perspective that the geographical and occupational mobility of the people from Oaş is a recent phenomenon, as the above mentioned studies of the region assume, I will argue that this is an older feature and is structurally built within the subsistence system of the region. I will discuss this system along the following lines: 1. the land and its productivity; 2. the property system; 3. the main economic activities; 4. the social status system.

Within a dominant hilly landscape, the land of the area has a low agricultural productivity. Compared to other Romanian territories, the availability of arable land is reduced to a third of the total, with the other usability being, in equal proportions, that of pasture lands and orchards.

Consequently, up to the middle of the 20th century, the main occupations of the locals used to be, in this order, cattle breeding, fruit growing and grain and vegetable production. While historically large forests dominated the area (and are still bordering the region), the present structure of the productive land had been acquired through gradual deforestations, a process that started with the formation of some of the present villages, in the 17th century, continued steadily during the next two centuries and was accelerated by the systematic capitalist exploitations in

the first decades of the 20th century⁶. The property structure of the land was defined from the 18th to the middle of the 20th century by the free peasant's private ownership of the productive land and by the nobility's and collective village's ownership of the forests. The productive land property was organised around the patriarchally-led households, which had in possession rather small surfaces of land (an average of 3-5 ha), hereditarily inherited on the male line⁷, and composed of all three categories: arable land, pastures, and orchards. As well-documented cases of forms of Romanian peasant ownership underscore⁸, this structure is a later form of a previous collective ownership. This collective form of property required a communal organisation of labour, be that of agricultural activities, or of livestock breeding. This archaic practice of collective livestock breeding tended to diminish and to disappear in the Romanian areas with high agricultural production after the private segmentation of the land, but was preserved in some, few, mountain areas due to the constant need for soil fertilisation⁹. In the Oaş Country the practice (which exists in a diminished arrangement till the present day) was maintained in an elaborate form until the sixth decade of the last century, and, I would argue, gives the key feature for understanding the particular local social organisation, local culture and recent development. In order to underline its centrality I will present it within the framework of the overall economic activities of the area.

As I already mentioned, the need for a constant fertilisation of the soil required the breeding of important amount of livestock. While cattle breeding was individualised, being linked with the households' current working routines and consumption needs, sheep breeding was a communal endeavour, having the function of fertilising the land allocated for fodder production and providing the main products for being exchanged on the market. Producing goods for the market was here not a marginal activity, like in the case of other agricultural groups, but central for the Oaş

⁶ See Gheorghe Focşa, *Țara Oaşului. Studiu etnografic. Cultura materială*, vol II, Bucureşti: Muzeul Satului, 1975, p. 150.

⁷ Lucian Cucuiet, "Vechi obiceiuri juridice în țara Oaşului", in *Acta Musei Porolissensis*, vol. X, 1986, pp. 673-680, *apud* Nicoară Mihali, *op. cit.*

⁸ Henri H. Stahl, *Contribuții la studiul satelor devălmășe românești*, vol. III, Bucureşti: Editura Academiei RPR, 1965; Gheorghe Iordache, *Ocupații tradiționale pe teritoriul României*, vol I+II, Craiova: Scrisul Românesc, 1985.

⁹ Gheorghe Iordache, *op. cit.* vol I, pp. 83-84.

subsistence system, while the households' grain production, which is of a key importance in a self-sufficient agrarian economy, was of a low quality and was not sufficient to last from one productive cycle to the other¹⁰. The communal organisation of sheep breeding, under the lead of specialised herdsmen, was determined both by the high level of land fragmentation and by the variety of the labors that the peasants had to carry out on a daily and seasonal basis. The sheep collective herding took place from the beginning of May to late November on the upper hills of villages' perimeters, and had to conciliate a number of different interests of the locals.

Namely, there were the interests of the herdsmen chiefs, who were members of the villages, and often prominent owners in terms of land and number of sheep. Their interests were to fertilise their larger parcels of land, to collect as much as possible of the dairy products of the collective herds, and to get an advantageous pay for herding. There were also the interests of the villagers associated for herding, associations that were composed of about 10 households, with 10 to 20 sheep each, who grouped themselves on the principle of kinship and vicinity relations. Their first interest was, obviously, to have their animals cared for (at the lowest price), but also they had the interests of having their land fertilised and of getting the fair amount of dairy products produced by the herdsmen according to the number of the sheep they associated in the herd and to their productivity. A third category of interests belonged to the people employed by the herdsmen chiefs to help with the herding routines and labors. They were generally poorer and younger members of the villages, with less or with no land or sheep ownership. They worked for a wage, paid in money and goods, under the direct command of a close relative (generally a son) of the herdsmen chiefs¹¹.

These common yet also divergent interests produced strong social interactions, but also sparked intense conflicts, which often led to feuds between families and, as many sources indicate, to murders¹².

This set of interests accurately represents the status system of the villages: a higher status defined by sizeable land and sheep ownership, a

¹⁰ Gheorghe Focşa, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 160.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p.178.

¹² Nicoară Mihali, *op. cit.*

middle strata, defined in terms of the well organised, self-sufficient households, and a lower one, with scarcer possessions. This system regulated the social life, in respect with occupying positions in the church councils, in the town hall, and within the very important institution of god-parenting or wedding sponsoring. Marriages were a good reflection of this system, being in the past, as in the present, very complicated arrangements, in which people seek to make good alliances, to marry within their own strata (*neam*), and to avoid old rivalries.

Thus, while everybody had interests in the collective sheep breeding, and its organisation was an arena where central social relations and statuses were played, I consider it as a total social phenomena, in Marcel Mauss's meaning, which structured the social reproduction of these communities for a long period, and have consequences up to the present.

As elsewhere in Romania, socialism produced important transformation in the Oaş Country. However, because only one out of the 22 villages of the area was collectivised, these transformations were different, had a lower pace and a different amplitude than in other regions. The peasants maintained their agricultural subsistence system with few changes up to the end of the 1950s, when the production quotas and property taxes required by the socialist state produce a pressure for change¹³. Namely, while larger amounts of their production was taken by the state, the incentive to produce a surplus diminished. For example, if before the 1930s in some of the villages there were organised 20 to 25 collective sheepfolds, in 1969 there were only 5 to 7 sheepfold¹⁴, numbers that give a good insight about the occupational changes during this period of time.

What actually happened, was that peasants started to looking for work outside the region. Importantly, though, while they were still committed to agriculture, they were not full-time employable, and they seldom follow the path of the peasants belonging to other mountain regions, who used to work as commuters in the near-by towns' factories or mines.

Instead, starting with the 60s, and then consistently during the 70s and the 80s, they traveled within the country looking for type of labors that

¹³ Gail Kligman; Katherine Verdery, *Țăranii sub asediu. Colectivizarea agriculturii în România (1949-1962)*, Iași: Polirom, 2015, p.122.

¹⁴ Gheorghe Focșa, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 79.

could be fulfilled seasonally. The labors they performed were always marginal, but intensive labour jobs, especially deforestations, or agricultural land cleaning, bridges and high voltage electric pile painting, and the like. While these were hard jobs, at the beginning especially people from the lower and the middle strata, as well as the younger ones, pursued these activities.

The work was organised in teams, in a similar way in which the sheep breeding was organised: in groups of people related through kinship or vicinity. The jobs were contracted by some team-leaders, who in time got accustomed to dealing with socialist bureaucrats, and were paid not with an individual wage, but on the basis of a wholesale negotiated agreement. Their interest, consequently, was to fulfil the job as fast as possible in order to maximise the number of contracts they could engage during a season.

During these displacements they regularly worked all day long, lived in very precarious conditions, and spent as little money as possible. The result was that they earned and saved considerable amounts of money, which were sufficient to invest in the construction of new, modern houses back home.

What happened thus is that from the middle of the 60s onwards, their communities became slowly dependent on money, and money could be made in large amounts by working outside the area. Gradually, the hierarchy of the villages, previously defined in terms of land and sheep ownership, was partially redefined by money ownership, which was codified through a new status landmark: the modern house.

Nevertheless, while Romanian socialist economy had never been truly oriented towards consumption¹⁵, and being also hit by a deep crisis in the 80s, the informal system of the townsmen for providing food from the countryside kept up the impetus of the peasant from Oaş country for farming, and preserved important parts of the farming-related superstructure.

Transnational migration

The changes that begun in 1990 affected very early the people from Oaş Country, especially those who relied on internal migration for earning

¹⁵ Katherine Verdery, *Compromis și rezistență. Cultura română sub Ceaușescu*, București: Humanitas, 1994.

a wage. Soon after 1990 the collective farms, as well as state forest exploitations, who used to provide seasonal jobs for Oșeni, shut down.

However, due to their high mobility, they were in a good position to try their fate abroad. A classic push-pull factor combination¹⁶ set the path for their transnational migration: lacking work at home met the availability of social financial compensations in western countries. While initially they searched for work, the peasants of Oaș discovered, especially in France, the mechanisms of social aids for the asylum seekers. They took advantage of it by developing in the 90s a “faux migration” routine¹⁷. Shortly put, they managed to illegally pass borders to EU countries, reach capital cities (especially Paris), and after asking for political asylum they lived for several months in very precarious conditions in order to save the financial compensations for later consumption at home. After their applications were rejected, they were sent back to Romania, and other members of their families took their place. While in France, they received 1200 F per month (which was double the Romanian monthly income of the time), sell the poor peoples’ newspaper *L’itinerant*, and slept in abandoned houses or even on the street. They used to call this routine “making a season”¹⁸, obviously linking this practice with their previous seasonal migrations within Romania.

As a consequence of these practices, a culture of migration¹⁹ emerged within the villages, putting pressure on individuals and families to join the migration path. Kinship networks were once again activated in order to ease the migration difficulties, and the local competition has been reset on the bases of the newer laboring strategies and available resources.

The migration episode of the 90s is remembered today with great embarrassment, especially by the older people, as “something that we don’t want to talk about any longer”.

¹⁶ Douglas Massey et al., *Worlds in Motion. Understanding International Migration at the End of the Millennium*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.

¹⁷ Doina Petrescu, "The Tactics of Faux Migration", *Pavilion. Journal for Politics and Culture*, 2014, [<http://pavilionmagazine.org/doina-petrescu-the-tactics-of-faux-migration1/>], accessed on 05.03.2016.

¹⁸ Dana Diminescu; R.M. Lagrave, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ Horváth István, "The Culture of Migration of Rural Romanian Youth", in *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 5, 2008.

This episode was, still, instrumental for their later successful migration because: a. it provides an enculturation context (at one point in time the Oşeni made almost a monopoly in sending *L'itinerant*, a practice that enabled them to socialise and to learn the basics of the french language), and b. it accustomed them to live within a transnational space, while at any point in time some members of the kinship network were left abroad.

More importantly, it broke down the rhythm of time they were previously accustomed to, a time that used to beat according to the natural seasons and religious feasts in relation with the farming practices. Now any time of year was as proper as any other for “making a season”, namely, for working outside their home place.

After 2002, when visa was no longer required for Romanian citizens, living transnationally became a collective life-style, involving adults as well as children, and working patterns have changed once again: most men are working in construction, while women have specialised in housekeeping.

Labour is still collectively organised: some men, who in time acquired the needed social and managerial skills, get contracts in construction sites or in refurbishing apartments, and assemble and lead teams of workers. Women, on the other side, help each other when the load of work in a household is high, replacing one another at times, and recommending other women from their kin or village when there is a request.

Consequences of transnational migration

Back at home, the former continuous display of statuses when attending churches, visiting regional fairs, or in a daily context, has been replaced by punctuated community gatherings, taking place during the most important events of the year, especially with the occasion of Christmas, Easter and Saint Mary feast. Weddings have also become a very complicated business in terms of calendar: because they are celebrated only in the home villages, in time a “wedding season” was set, precisely between the 15th of August, when the fasting time that anticipated the Saint Mary celebration ends, and around the 1st of September, when the holiday period ends in France, and many are required to be back at work.

Most visibly, the “battle of houses”, as they call it, or the objectification of the status competition in the modern house possession, which started, as we saw, during the 60s, reaches a whole new level. It involves constant refurbishing of the old houses, building new houses, providing houses as dowries for the children’s marriages and so on. All these houses have become less and less inhabited, or inhabited by older people, while many of them, especially the younger generations, live and work most of the time abroad.

Conclusions

In this paper I identified a central pattern of organising labour in the Oaş Country, which is related to their past agricultural subsistence system and which explains their status system, the local competition and their geographical mobility.

My analysis traced how the collective labour organisation was reproduced across time and adapted to the changes of the social and economic context brought by socialism and post-socialism.

The Oşeni’s preservation of their autonomy in organising labour had as results the preservation of the local competition, of the communitarian values and of some archaic norms and practices and made a pressure for surplus production. This need for surplus, as well as the specific socialist constraints in regard with their farming practices, made them prone to search for work outside the region. Consequently, they slowly entered on the path of proletarianisation, being more and more dependent on wages. This proletarianisation process was incomplete during socialism, while farming was still a secondary occupation, and while their relation with land and agricultural temporality remained unchanged; however, their internal competition and status systems were strongly affected by the money influx, with the consequence of changing the logic of prestige accumulation from the possession of land and sheep to the possession of a “modern house”.

In the context of transnational migration agriculture lost most of its previous importance and labour became dependent not on natural seasons but on the metropolitan needs. Working abroad brought into the villages a high influx of money in a short time. As a result the local competition has been ignited at a new level, determining a development comparable with those specific to the post-socialist neighbourhoods from the larger cities.

Their inhabitants live and work most of the time abroad, being now entirely dependent on wages, which fluctuate according to economic cycles and crises, and while the younger generations are more and more detached from the village life, I can assume that a process of complete proletarianisation is, at least in their case, on its way.

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