

BOOK REVIEW

Noile subiectivități ale capitalismului global. Spiritualitate, dezvoltare personală și transformări neoliberale în România (The New Subjectivities of Global capitalism. Spirituality, Personal Development and Neoliberal Transformations in Romania), Sorin Gog and Anca Simionca (eds.), Cluj-Napoca: Tact, 2020, 206 pages.

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A growing number of Western studies have tried in the last decades to critically reflect upon the social, political and cultural factors behind the rapid expansion of self-help industry, a highly lucrative business with an eclectic offer which ranges from exotic *spiritual* world-views to more down-to-earth and psychologically informed narratives addressing *personal development*. According to many of these studies, societal changes brought by neoliberal policies favouring market forces against state regulations or collective interferences can be related with the explosion of a self-help industry often promising to deliver the tools that would allow individuals to adapt to the pressures of a highly competitive environment. Although post-communist Romania is no exception going through the same process of a booming self-help industry and harsh neoliberal policies, very few studies have tried to address this phenomenon. The present book is the first systematic attempt to focus on the Romanian context through the critical lenses provided by this (relatively) new and rapidly expanding field of research.

The fundamental sociological problem that the book tries to address is what kind of subject is required by the neoliberal economic and social transformations and which are the concrete forms and techniques of subjectivation that can be detected in the field of spirituality and personal development (Gog and Simionca, 2020: 18). Such an approach explicitly rejects the attempt to reduce spirituality and other cultural ideas activated by individuals to an economic base (Marxism). In the spirit of critical sociology, the authors believe that far from being mere puppets controlled by impersonal structural processes individuals actively and reflexively react to them. Consequently, the studies oscillate between two main approaches, one inspired by Foucault's analysis of neoliberal governmentality and another informed by researches focused on the

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emergence of new cultural formations which shape our understanding of the self (Gog and Simionca, 2020: 22). Because of the ubiquitous while also subjective nature of their topic, the authors use a qualitative method which combines discourse analysis (targeting Romanian books, podcasts, blogs etc. dedicated to spirituality and personal development), participant observation (workshops, courses, spiritual retreats etc.) and semi-structured or unstructured interviews (80 interviews were taken in two major Romanian cities: Bucharest and Cluj-Napoca to participants and professional providers of psychological or spiritual services). While in processing the empirical data, the authors try to supplement the standard critical analysis of various scripts or normative texts with one that registers and interprets the reactions of the participants to them.

As Gog and Simionca rightly observe, starting with 1996, Romania has gone through a painful social process triggered by the implementation of one of the most aggressive neoliberal programs from Central and Eastern Europe in which large privatizations went hand in hand with deregulations of the labour market (Gog and Simionca, 2020: 10). This has also created incentives for significant foreign investments paving the way for the emergence of a new middle class often with jobs in Romania's services sector. Because of this highly competitive environment, new narratives of coping with the pressure have been offered to individuals whether by companies themselves through new management strategies or by other providers. Promising both practical and philosophical advices of how individuals can become more flexible, creative, resilient, productive etc., the basic imperative, however, underlying these narratives is that of an individual who holds the entire responsibility for changing himself/herself for the better. Though, as the authors rightly emphasize, the social function of celebrating personal responsibility is mostly to legitimize capitalist economic processes oriented towards dismantling any possible form of collective resistance to profit-making.

Once the larger social and cultural context is settled, the studies can focus on the two major types of discourses centred on the self: (1) *spirituality* and (2) *personal development*. This analysis is, undoubtedly, the most original part of the book.

(1) In his study, Sorin Got usefully identifies several features of a "neoliberal spirituality" spreading after the financial crisis from 2008-2009: (a) an active subject being defined not as a member of a community (like in traditional religions or even in spiritual movements from 1990's), but as someone who can single-handedly change his/her life; (b) a focus on the present moment (Eckhart Tolle) as an expression of a radically immanent approach uninterested in future salvation or emancipation; (c) the rapid implementation of spiritual techniques (through workshops, retreats etc.) which undercuts the traditional highly

ritualistic socialization processes; (d) the focus on personal wellbeing and authenticity which goes not only against the rigors of traditional moral codes, but also their tendency to bring societal changes; (e) an anti-dogmatic approach favouring the eclectic combination of ideas which fits well with the tendency of urban middle-class of rejecting traditional dogmatism (Gog, 2020: 44-57). In her analysis, Cristine Palaga concentrates on the concept of “inner strength” defined as the ability of the self to access his/her inner material, psychological and spiritual resources in order to overcome external obstacles (Palaga, 2020: 100-101). While the activation of spiritual resources means, among other things, to become aware that the self is the only creator of his/her own world. Andrei Herța starts by noticing that while the emergence of early Western capitalism is related to a process of “disenchantment” (Max Weber), contemporary capitalism might well be understood as going through a process of “re-enchantment” considering its impressive appetite for spiritual narratives that usually mirror and legitimize working requirements (flexibility, autonomy, creativity etc.) driven by profit-making. Andrada Tobias turns her attention towards the problem of leisure in order to shed a new light on spiritual discourses emerging in the 2000’s. By using the distinction between “casual” and “serious leisure” (Robert T. Stebbins), Tobias underlines an important social change: while in the 1990’s leisure time was usually related with pleasurable and short term activities (casual leisure), the rising of a new middle class in the 2000’s has generated a shift towards spiritual activities which, basically, constitute a new type of work operating on the individual himself/herself in order to be better adapted to capitalist processes (serious leisure).

(2) Alongside spiritual narratives, there is, however, a plethora of discourses focusing on *personal development*. After briefly presenting the recent history of these narratives in post-communist Romania, Elena Trifan turns to the concept of “psycho-governmentality” (Nikolas Rose) to capture the underlying neoliberal assumptions operating in the field of personal development (Trifan, 2020: 73). For instance, behind the promise of these narratives that the individual can reach happiness once he/she has access to the right philosophy (full personal responsibility, the believe in the capacity to influence external reality through the mind etc.) and techniques (active listening, assertive communication etc.), the basic presuppositions is that of an individual understood as being cut off from society who should not be interested in addressing systemic problems. In her analysis of “inner strength”, Cristine Palaga also looks at narratives related to personal development by pointing out that they often emphasize a self whose authenticity can be tested through the capacity to connect the will to change with action, a clear sign of the pervasive impact of the neoliberal rhetoric of self-government within such discourses (Palaga, 2020: 108). In the last study of the

book, Delia Petrea addresses the subjectivation process in multi-level marketing companies in which wages do not depend on an internal hierarchy, but on the level of sales realized by each employee. Despite the supposedly meritocratic feature of these companies, the cold profit-making logic might still be unsettling for employees and potential customers who need to be convinced that the ultimate goal is to help people to flourish (Petrea, 2020: 187-189). Thus, the organizational culture of these companies implies an entire spectrum of practices and discourses centred on personal development ranging from ritualization processes in which individuals are taught how to talk and behave to a more “philosophical” rebranding in which selling products to clients becomes a way to spread the good news of how to be healthy, or in which the company turns out to be a community generously allowing employees and clients to develop at both physical and spiritual level (the famous holistic approach).

Although all the studies emphasize the pervasive tendency of these spiritual and personal development narratives to legitimize capitalist processes whether by downplaying social issues and ties, inhibiting criticism or by eroding the distinction between private and public, to name only a few, Sorin Gog and Andrei Herța explicitly acknowledge that not all these narratives are automatically pro-capitalist since many of them also contain, as Herța points out, values (like selflessness, forgiveness, love etc.) that might collide with a competition-based environment (Herța, 2020: 136-137). But such an analysis is beyond the scope of the present book.

Still, if we are to look for a possible alternative take on the issue, we might notice, first of all, that it is not entirely clear where lies the fundamental difference between more traditional approaches to ideology which is understood as a more global phenomenon (we can think of here of Marxism, early Critical Theory etc.) and that of legitimizing neoliberal capitalism through local narratives addressing, in this case, spiritual and personal development. In spite of being the result of reflexive and individualized reactions to capitalist processes, what remains striking in these narratives, as the book aptly and convincingly emphasizes, is still the high degree of similarity between their core ideas. Secondly, we believe that the analysis might have become even more convincing by using and interpreting additional sociological and ethnographic material in order to avoid what in some cases might be perceived as a shortcut between the micro level of local reactions and the macro level of larger social changes. However, these should in no way diminish the importance and relevance of the book. While addressing a widespread social phenomenon which is mostly ignored by local critical scholars, this book is more than simply an attempt to fill the void of local research on the topic, it constitutes a landmark for all the work that, hopefully, will be done in the future.

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