

BOOK REVIEW

Ce urmează după neoliberalism? Pentru un imaginar politic alternativ [What Follows after Neoliberalism? For an alternative political imaginary], Sorin Gog, Victoria Stoiciu (coord.), Editura Presa Universitară Clujeană, Cluj-Napoca 2024

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Perhaps the greatest merit of the volume *What Follows after Neoliberalism? For an alternative political imaginary* edited by Sorin Gog and Victoria Stoiciu is that it embodies the wish and project it predicates - the coagulation of support for progressive politics, reinforced by a body of expertise that challenges the neoliberal consensus. In a space where leftist ideas are ridiculed as retrograde, communist-nostalgic, and questionable, and the anti-communist ideology has flattened the space of alternatives hailing the left as a failed and expired “other” to market values, this volume and its authors signal the need to build a critique of neoliberalism from the cold, close, diligent examination of its contradictions, injustices, and violences. That such volume could still be published in an ever-fragmenting Romanian leftist space is testimony to authors’ intellectual, activist, and transgenerationally minded habitus and commitment to cultivate hope and critical knowledge. Several collective volumes published in Romanian precede it as products of earlier figurings of the left (e.g. Cistelean and Lazăr 2010, CriticAtac 2011, Poenaru and Rogozanu 2014, Gog et al. 2021).

In part, the volume starts off from and relies on the results of a survey on social-political topics designed by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), and executed by CCSAS, a respectable Romanian institute of social research and marketing (see Bădescu et al. 2022). The survey comprised three waves of opinion polling carried out between October and December 2021, on samples totalling 3,666 subjects, aimed at recording the progressive attitudes and values in Romanian society. Its premise was the increasing social inequality in Romania, despite

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positive global economic indicators posted by successive Romanian neoliberal model of the last two decades, characterized by low wage and fiscal costs, downsizing and privatisation of public education, health, housing, and social services - a massive roll back of the social state. In this context, the survey attempted to measure the public support for progressive policies centered on social justice and equality, solidarity, inclusion, sustainability, and investment in population's health and education.

The survey's results however do not in themselves reveal the "massive support for a strong social state and for an increase of budget spending on social protection that offers a safety net and should achieve a decrease of social inequalities" (p. 18). Not only because the opinions disclosed by the survey are in tension with respect to the role of the state as provider and redistributor, indicating various contradictions and multiple ideological realignments within the population; but also, because there is little materialization of it in the public space and at the working place, and little signs it could coagulate politically or be successfully mobilized against a background of despondency towards the political system. Like several of the questions measuring orientations towards the social state that display a certain level of social desirability, the stake expressed in the volume's Introduction, that the "formulation of research-based expertise that highlights the social dis-functionalities generated by a neoliberal governmentality" may amplify the potential "political mobilization of the Romanian society against measures that generate exploitation and marginalization" reveals more the credo of the authors than a tangible reality.

Expertise has been a difficult question for economists and social scientists who were in the position to produce analyses, models, projections, and policies for the Romanian society and/or act upon them during the 1990s up to the onset of radical neoliberal policies by the Democratic Convention government, instated in 1996. Many perceived clearly the lack of dependable knowledge on what was and how the planned economy actually functioned, and what a meaningful notion of market for such an economy in flux represented. The performative role of expertise, economic expertise in particular, whereby it helps produce the reality it depicts, through the practice of actors and institutions that take it on, is now fruitfully acknowledged by scholars attempting to make sense of various historical social-economic and political processes (Mitchell 2002, Ban 2016). The authors of the Introduction indicate that there existed a body of expertise and commentary that countered the doxic neo-developmental and neoliberal infighting from Keynesian and reformist socialist positions, and, justified by the empirically identified support for progressive values within the population, they argue both for the necessity and the possibility that knowledge

that accounts for the intimate workings and pernicious effects of neoliberal capitalism “dislocate present neoliberal government projects” (p. 19).

Expertise, or a version of it, “social knowledge” - the totality of legitimate knowledge of a society at a historical moment (p. 33, n.1), is at the core of the brief social history of neoliberalism made by Vladimir Pasti in his chapter. In order to ensure its reproduction capitalism as historical form needs to achieve a dynamic equilibrium (p. 39), which depends on knowledge production to overcome its crises. He credits the first stage of neoliberalism to attempts at remaking postwar social knowledge by a fraction of dominant elites, faced with the limits of capitalist expansion to underdeveloped and developing countries (p. 44), which legitimated the reproduction of capital without participation in production, speculative financial markets facilitated by political, administrative, informational etc. privilege, and globalisation as a means to ample redistribution of natural resources, labour, knowledge, and technology from periphery and semi-periphery to the developed core (pp. 46-47).

Neoliberalism in Romania emerged, according to Pasti, as a “quarrel of capitalisms”. In a context lacking knowledge of what was the Romanian socialist society to be changed, what was the Western European society into which to be changed, and how to construct a roadmap for such complicated social and economic engineering project (pp. 33-38), the battles were carried out on the “political-ideological plane, while completely ignoring the realities of the Romanian society, irrespective of its post-communist historical period and stage of transformation.” Pasti notes that presently the systemic clash between rival capitalisms takes place at the core, leaving peripheral Romania sort out the ensuing global order and its own society.

Enikő Vincze’s chapter provides a Marxist critique of the political economy of neoliberal capitalism from the lens of housing, and an examination of the political economy of housing. The examination of housing as commodity highlights the contradiction between its use value for social reproduction, as a consumption good, and its investment function as financial asset providing capital gains and rental returns, collateral for borrowing, and store of wealth. In relation to this, she also posits a scheme of housing classes, a dynamic continuum of contradictory positions at the intersection of use and exchange values of housing, or intersection of exploitation at the moment of production and at the moment of reproduction. Vincze examines the transformation of the housing market, from post-war state capitalism, to neoliberalism, to what she calls post-neoliberal capitalism marked by polycrisis, a stage where the state assumes an explicit role to directly intervene to support private capital, and the latter to use any crisis situation for profit making (pp. 74-77). She offers a series of measures as a socialist alternative to capitalism in the sphere of housing,

which gives the state an increased role in the production, distribution, and exchange of housing, and greater social control over the housing sector.

In their chapter, Ioana Florea and Mihail Dumitriu give a commentary to the published figures of the FES survey to complement their account of the mobilisation for the right to housing in Romania after 1989. They show that while it articulated and coagulated at national level and developed transnational links, housing movement remained mostly reactive to violent processes of gentrification and infringements of housing rights such as racism in access to housing, evictions, and demolition for redevelopment, and gained little societal support. They argue that although the survey indicates potential support for housing claims - state provision of affordable housing, building a more significant fund of social housing, rent control, just and equitable access to social housing, and protection of the housing sector from financialisation, there are contradictory positions regarding how these should be achieved.

Andrei Moceanov offers a precise and dry analysis of the neoliberalisation of the energy sector (gas and electricity), part of network industry. They constitute natural monopolies, and have functioned as such for a long time, either as state owned or as state regulated private sectors. The change to a market model was imposed by the European Union (EU) through the liberalisation of natural monopoly public services; the segmentation, privatisation, and deregulation of the gas and electricity provision; the introduction of market-informed measures (affordable prices replaced by competitive prices; drop of a set maximum price on the energy market; encouragement of spot market transactions versus long-term fix contracts, and the development of a financial component of the energy market; the decoupling of the price of gas from the oil price; green energy transition exclusively through market instruments). These systemic changes resulted in increases of energy prices, even before the Covid-19 pandemics and the war in Ukraine, leading to “unpayable prices”, as gas and electricity became objects of financial speculation. Ideology-informed, pernicious measures taken by the EU, and their implementation in Romania by capping household gas prices and compensating the companies the difference between acquisition and billed prices, did not stop the price increase, but forced huge state transfer to companies. The author formulates a series of recommendations to redress the situation, including long term contracts and limitation of spot market transactions; definancialisation and banning speculative operations; a strong involvement of the state in the green transition; restoring gas and electricity as universal public service.

Ovidiu Goran, Aurora Trif, and Dragoș Adăscăliței examine in detail the union movement in Romania after 1989. They show the support offered by EU and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in adopting legislation favourable

to unions and labour at the beginning of the transition. In tackling the 2008 crisis, EU however contributed to dismantling workers' rights by promoting austerity measures, translated into the Law of Social Dialogue 62/2011. Romania held to them when EU shifted back by the introduction of the European Pillar of Social Rights in 2017. In 2022 EU conditioned the implementation of Romania's recovery and resilience plan (RRP) to alignment to ILO conventions, determining the Romanian government to adopt the Law of Social Dialogue 367/2022. Attentive to the results of the FES survey, the authors offer concrete recommendations to consolidate the role of unions by improving worker organisation, union leadership, communication and dissemination, and cooperation among unions and other parties.

Sebastian Țoc and Andreea Gheba discuss the pre-university education system in Romania through the equity principle. They start off by giving a definition of equity as equality of educational opportunity, implying cancelling the impact of social economic factors in educational attainment, and operationalize it along the dimensions of fairness and inclusion. They then show that the system is based on meritocracy, competition among students, teachers, and schools, and transfer of resources towards those who record best results. The few public policies promoting equity have little effect, as the logic of the system reproduces inequalities, benefitting children from privileged families, and punishing children from disadvantaged ones. Education is not conceived as an institution to contribute at ending the intergenerational reproduction of poverty. The authors formulate a series of recommendations to increase the equity of education alongside an assumed redefinition of its purpose.

Tudorina Mihai interprets the figures of the FES survey by focusing on gender as an explanatory variable. Figures indicate a "traditional" gender difference where a lower percentage of women than of men identify with the left, more accentuated in the younger generation (18-34 years of age group). Accounted on a distinct political history of the meaning of the left-right scale in Central and Eastern Europe than in the West, she also brings in the explanation of the lack of substantial variation among political parties with respect to pro-market economic policies or attitudes towards the Church. Women appear to be more concerned by social issues, many related to social reproduction, still these were often captured by conservative political parties in countries like Poland and Hungary, and, as the figures show, in Romania at best they were discouraged to get mobilized politically. An alternative political imaginary where the left plays a central role cannot be conceived outside a feminist emancipatory vision, concludes the author.

Adrian Dohotaru starts from the survey figures too, pondering over the likelihood that the young population may play the main role in ecological mobilisation, considering their social-economic situation and present housing

difficulties. Unlike elsewhere in the West however, Romanian youth do not seem to be more concerned by the environment than the rest of the population. Moreover, ecologism here is rather conservationist, and subordinated to neoliberal projects. Dohotaru's essay discusses several themes as promising for an ecopolitical alternative imaginary to neoliberalism, from the viewpoint of a green developmentalism (improved ecological fiscal discipline, protection of forests, public transportation as alternative to motor one), leaving the larger field of debates around the green transition outside the confines of this chapter.

Irina Velicu and Hestia Delibaş inquire agrarian populisms, in particular its progressive version, through the international movement *La Via Campesina* and its Romanian local member association, *Eco Ruralis*. They examine how it is constituted in relation to two fundamental issues, land grabbing and monopoly over seeds. In a context of usurpation of natural resources at global scale and expansion of neoliberal ideology, the notion of sovereignty may allow variable egalitarian political positions, and, as global movement for food sovereignty, agrarian populism can take emancipatory forms, through transnational and intersectional solidarity, forming collective identities around the functional role of "peasant". Their agenda for progressive rural politics involve not only a politics of recognition for such collective organisation, but also the assertion of their rights to land and seeds, and state support for their life work.

On the background of over a decade of study of the phenomenon of personal development, Elena Trifan tests her observations on the numbers in the FES survey. Her work is confirmed by the data that indicate that the individualist discourse is more pronounced among the educated and the high earners, highlighting personal development as luxury commodity. It is falsely meritocratic, lacking empathy, divisive, and punitive.

In the last chapter, Vladimir Borţun takes a radiography of the trajectory of Romanian left after 1989. He shows that neoliberal ideas grew strong roots easily in the post-communist ideological desert, tested only by the persistence of worsening conditions and life chances of the future generations. The Romanian left emerges as an intellectual project around 2010, which diversifies and mobilises around a few issues like housing rights. He blames the failure of the self-declared leftist organisation *Demos* to its neo-reformism, also guilty of the fall of parties like *Syriza* or *Podemos*, while at the same time asserts the impossibility of historical conditions to overcome capitalism, rather than simply obtaining concession from neoliberal capitalism. His message, and the final pages of the volume are optimistic and preach an effort to vigorous democratic exercise: active involvement of everyone, "dialectic and honest exchange of opinions and arguments, from a dynamic and vibrant internal life" (p. 318).

Still, this leaves us with the question posed at the beginning of the book: how can the progressive potential in the society be mobilised? Offering collective research-based studies such as this one appears to be a necessary step.

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