

DEGROWTH AND 'REGROWTH': SUBJECTIVE PERSPECTIVES OF THE NEW PEASANTS

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ABSTRACT. This paper investigates the emerging phenomenon of neo-rurality in post-socialist Romania through the theoretical lens of degrowth, analyzing the lived experiences of urban-to-rural migrants ("new peasants") pursuing alternative, sustainability-oriented lifestyles. Combining ethnographic interviews and participant observation, the study reveals how these actors reconfigure notions of labor, consumption, and community while navigating tensions between their aspirational practices and the socio-cultural norms of traditional rural settings. The analysis identifies neo-rural initiatives as sites of ecological experimentation and grassroots innovation, yet critically interrogates their ambivalent role in perpetuating or subverting power hierarchies tied to cultural capital and social class. By foregrounding the dialectics of individual agency and structural constraints, this work contributes to transnational debates on sustainable transitions, emphasizing the need for context-sensitive strategies that reconcile ecological resilience with emancipatory social transformation.

Keywords: Neo-rurality, Degrowth, Alternative Lifestyles.

Introduction: Reconfiguring the rurals

Especially in the last decade, amidst social, economic, and climatic crises, the rural space has begun to be rethought by a segment of the urban population not only as a place of refuge or retreat, but as a terrain for experimenting with an alternative lifestyle. This phenomenon, most often referred to as neo-rurality (Bessière, Tibère, 2013), has acquired distinct characteristics in Central and Eastern Europe, where the history of the post-socialist rurality and the relationship with the land imprint a specific configuration on this type of internal mobility.

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Amidst the growing systemic uncertainty and failures of the dominant economic model, the rural offers a fertile ground for existential, social, and political experimentation, sparking new forms of dwelling, production, and communal life. This shift is quietly yet powerfully reshaping the Romanian countryside through the arrival of new residents—often individuals with advanced education, with professional experiences in creative and liberal sectors, and a deeply articulated ethical and existential compass. These “new peasants” aren’t simply replicating traditional agricultural models, but instead, they are pioneering hybrid lifestyles rooted in autonomy, self-sufficiency, voluntary simplicity, and ecological regeneration, aligning with the tenets of the degrowth movement (van der Ploeg, 2008). Degrowth highlights a growing trend among citizens, that implies that the new settlers, doesn’t see at countryside only a source of food, but a model of community and local government (Duda, 2020). Far from a mere quest for tranquility or lost “authenticity”, this movement can be understood as a deliberate choice to live outside or on the margins of late capitalism (Patocka et al., 2024), and as a form of critique enacted through practical experimentation with alternative structures of living (Latouche, 2009:7).

This voluntary rural migration, however, is far from a unified or ideologically coherent process. Rather, it opens up a critical zone of sociological inquiry concerning subjectivity, class, cultural capital, everyday politics, and the reconstruction of community. In this context, some questions arise: Who are these new rural residents? What values and lifestyles do they bring with them? How do they relate to notions of work, development, sufficiency, and well-being? And how do de-growth ideals manifest practically in a post-socialist context? Correspondingly, this re-ruralization process has less to do with the recuperation of traditional ways of life and more to do with rethinking development, labor, and well-being in terms that prioritize local autonomy, self-sufficiency, and mutual relations (D’Alisa et al., 2015:6; van der Ploeg, 2008). Practices adopted by these new rural arrivals transcend conventional divisions between public and private, individual and collective, economic and symbolic, reflecting an emergent form of ecological and communitarian subjectivity (Grasseni, 2013; Soper, 2020, Letters, 2021). The analysis of such practices allows for a more nuanced understanding of neo-rurality in the present context, emphasizing the importance of exploring the motives, values, and practices of those who choose to settle in the rural environment. Investigating rural subjectivities thus becomes essential to understand the complex dynamics of social and ecological transformations, as well as for identifying the potential of these initiatives to contribute to revitalizing rural communities.

To explore these dynamics, the present study undertakes a qualitative investigation between September 2024 and June 2025. This research utilizes in-depth interviews with self-identified “neo-rurals”—individuals who have

consciously relocated to rural areas and embraced de-growth principles—alongside participant observation and engagement in voluntary work on neo-rural farms. Through this multi-faceted approach, I tried to capture the nuances of evolving rural subjectivities, both in their narrative dimensions (the values and representations of rural life articulated by participants) and in their tangible manifestations (the choices they make regarding dwelling, agricultural practices, and community engagement). The study thus aims to contribute a more nuanced understanding of the re-ruralization process by foregrounding the perspectives of those who experience it as a deeply personal, yet politically charged decision, thereby illuminating the complex interplay of individual aspirations, class dynamics, cultural capital, and the ongoing reconstruction of community in the Romanian rural context.

Degrowth: Between economic critique and rural autonomy

The concept-platform of degrowth (Fr. *décroissance*) was introduced into public debate in France in the 1970s, in the context of the emergence of environmental movements and the increasingly vocal contestation of unlimited industrial development (Duda, 2020). The publication of the report “Limits to Growth” (Meadows et al., 1972) under the aegis of the Club of Rome, constituted a moment of reference for articulating a systematic critique of the economic model focused on growth, warning of the impossibility of maintaining an expansive economic metabolism within a finite planetary system.

After a period of relative marginalization, the social and intellectual movement called “degrowth” was reactivated starting in the 2000s, especially in France and Italy (Buch-Hansen et. al., 2024) and then throughout the Western world. In a contemporary context marked by accelerated ecological degradation, increasing global inequalities, and multiple systemic crises, degrowth proposes a deliberate decoupling between social progress and economic expansion (Patocka et al., 2024; Kallis et al., 2025). From this position, the degrowth paradigm increasingly clearly contests the dominant equivalence between economic growth and societal well-being, advocating for a profound reconfiguration of the imaginary of development (Buch-Hansen et. al., 2024).

Degrowth is defined, therefore, not as a simple quantitative reduction of production and consumption, but as a political, cultural, and existential project (Schmeltzer et al., 2022), oriented towards the radical transformation of how human societies organize their collective life, economic relations, and relationship with the environment (Kallis et al., 2022; Schmeltzer et al., 2022; Patocka et al., 2024). It is not about imposed austerity or technological regression, but about

a deliberate re-signification of prosperity, which privileges autonomy, voluntary simplicity, (self) sufficiency, and slow-life (Duda, 2020; Patocka et al., 2024). These values constitute the pillars of a post-growth imaginary, which emphasizes the quality of social relations, distributive equity, and care for ecosystems, to the detriment of material accumulation and unlimited productivity. In this sense, rural space gains strategic relevance in the degrowth vision, being perceived not as a remnant of incomplete modernization, but as a potential arena for socio-ecological transitions. Characterized by ecological diversity and potential for food and energy autonomy, the rural offers favorable conditions for reconfiguring the relationship with time, work, and consumption. Practices such as agro-ecological gardening, ecological construction, non-formal education, the use of local resources, and participation in alternative exchange networks – such as barter or the solidarity economy – become expressions of the degrowth, in which the “good” life is reconfigured in terms of autonomy, interdependence, and sustainability (Grasseni, 2013; Soper, 2020).

Although the origins of the degrowth paradigm are deeply rooted in the Western European context, the idea has begun to be adopted and adapted in Central and Eastern Europe, where the post-socialist specificity introduces a distinct historical dimension. In Romania, Bulgaria, Poland, Czech Republic, and Hungary, theoretical reflections and empirical research are still in an early phase (see, for example: Velicu, 2019; Frankova and Cattaneo, 2018; Takács-Gyögy et al., 2017), but increasingly more approaches explore the link between the crisis of neoliberal development and the emergence of initiatives for economic re-localization and community reconnection (Duda, 2020; Pungas et al., 2024). In this space, the memory of totalitarian regimes and of shortage economies can ambivalently influence perceptions of the idea of degrowth: on the one hand, the evocation of a simpler life resonates with degrowth values; on the other hand, it can generate a reflexive rejection, due to the historical association with the deprivations and constraints of the socialist past. This ambivalence reflects deeper societal tensions rooted in historical experiences with authoritative regimes and economic hardship, which shape contemporary attitudes towards alternative development models (Patocka et al., 2024). This ambivalence is essential for understanding the forms of degrowth manifestations in the region. The choice to move in a rural area does not only represent a retreat from the urban, but an implicitly political form of reorganizing daily life. Therefore, the practices of these actors are not only functional or adaptive, but can be interpreted as critical gestures towards the hegemonic model of a capitalist-consumerist life, articulating an alternative imaginary that values self-sufficiency, conviviality, and voluntary simplicity (Franková, Cattaneo, 2018; Graber, 2021).

Degrowth subjectivity, as manifested in the practices of the new peasants, can also be understood through the lens of the concept of downshifting. This refers to a practical manifestation of the degrowth movement (Duda, 2020) and describes a voluntary reduction in income and consumption, associated with a reorientation towards non-material values (Duda, 2020; Lindsay and Lane, 2020). The new peasants, by choosing to live in the countryside, to work on the farm, and to participate in alternative networks of production and consumption, adopt a form of downshifting that allows them to reduce their ecological footprint and increase their autonomy (Lindsay and Lane, 2020; Nuga et al., 2023). This decision is not without sacrifices and challenges, but is often perceived as a way to live in accordance with personal values and to contribute to a more sustainable society. However, it is important to mention that the downshifting of the new peasants is not always a purely individual choice, but is often accompanied by involvement in collective initiatives and a critique of the existing economic and social structures.

Implementing new values represents a heterogeneous and contradictory activity, situated between normative ideals and structural constraints. It reflects a process of continuous social learning, often informal and precarious, in which new relations are negotiated between the individual and the collective, between the economic and the ethical, between the local and the global. In this light, rural life becomes a laboratory of post-growth transition, in which incipient forms of alternative organization and community regeneration are tested, opening new horizons for the critical sociology of development.

Reinventing the peasant: rural (re)growth and social ecology

While degrowth marks a departure from the development paradigm, the concept of (re)growth – more often encountered as revitalization – proposes a repositioning of the rural not as “residual” space, but as fertile ground for reconstituting social, ecological and economic connections (Woods, 2011). Thus, a strategic repositioning of the rural is involved as a place of social and ecological innovation, where new forms of organization and production can thrive. In Van der Ploeg’s view (2008), new peasants are distinguished by the ability to combine modern knowledge, often coming from outside traditional agriculture, with the recovery and valorization of local, ancestralized techniques, developing forms of agro-ecological production and alternative distribution networks. The new peasants are promoters of forms of production oriented towards sustainability, biological diversity, and reducing dependence on external inputs (Mollinga, 2011). They also develop alternative distribution networks, such

as local markets, solidarity purchasing groups, or direct sales, which reconfigure the relationships between producers and consumers and contribute to the revitalization of local economies (Van der Ploeg, 2008).

This “return to the land” must not be understood as a simple nostalgia or a passive return to tradition (Van der Ploeg, 2008). On the contrary, the phenomenon represents a revitalization of the rural as an active political arena, in which the dominant industrial agricultural models are contested and alternatives based on values such as autonomy, cooperation, and respect for the environment are promoted (Mollinga, 2011). As Van der Ploeg (2008) argues, the new forms of agriculture are in antithesis with the logic of the market and with the capitalist commodification of labor and production, and the “autonomy” gained or maintained by peasants must be understood as a form of “resistance” and of refusal of the ideals of “progress” imposed by the dominant economic paradigm.

The new residents, often carriers of high cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1984), coming from urban environments or from other highly qualified professional sectors, bring with them a transformative potential that manifests in educational, cultural, or economic initiatives that redesign the dynamics of the village (Woods, 2011). These can include educational farms, permaculture centers, cultural associations, or small artisan businesses, which contribute to economic diversification and the creation of jobs in the rural environment (Paddison, 2021). (Re)growth/ revitalization can thus be a form of re-appropriation and re-signification of the rural, in which the land, the community, and autonomy become key elements in a deliberate and critical life project, aimed at building a more equitable and sustainable future (Hagbert, Bradley, 2017).

To understand the complexity of rural subjectivities in Romania, an additional theoretical anchoring is needed in the concept of social ecology, developed by Murray Bookchin (1982, 1987). This perspective, which combines ecology with a critical social analysis, offers a pertinent framework for understanding how environmental problems are inextricably linked to power structures, socio-economic inequalities, and forms of alienation specific to human societies (Best, 1998). More precisely, social ecology argues that the domination of nature has its roots in social domination, and to resolve ecological crises, we must fundamentally transform the hierarchical and oppressive relations between people (Holohan, 2018). Moreover, social ecology allows for a nuanced approach to neo-rural initiatives, surpassing both romanticized and reductionist visions and grounding a critical analysis of their transformative potential.

Social ecology starts from the premise that ecological crises are not the result of isolated natural factors or individual behavior, but are generated by hierarchical systems and social domination (Bookchin, 1989). In this sense, the analysis of new ruralities requires a careful examination of how the historical

heritage of the region, marked by forced collectivization, intense industrialization, and then neoliberal transition, influences social relations and the relationship with the environment. Rural communities in Romania often face depopulation, economic precarity, and limited access to resources, which generates feelings of social mistrust, alienation, and lack of agency (Dumitru et al., 2021). In this context, re-ruralization initiatives can be interpreted as attempts to counteract these negative effects, by rebuilding social ties, revitalizing local economies, and renewing the relationship with nature.

In this sense, we can identify a correlation between the ethics of self-sufficiency promoted by the new peasants and the principles of decentralization and local autonomy, fundamental to social ecology (Altieri, 2015). By adopting agroecological practices, building ecological dwellings, or participating in alternative exchange networks, the new rural residents not only secure their means of subsistence, but also demonstrate a capacity for self-governance and for building resilient communities (de Molina Navarro, 2015). This local autonomy, in the vision of social ecology, is not merely a matter of economic efficiency, but also an essential condition for the development of an ecological consciousness and an ethics of responsibility towards the environment and community.

Moreover, social ecology invites us to examine how the new rural residents relate to the concept of "progress" and "development." In contrast to the dominant model, centered on economic growth and unlimited consumption, the new peasants promote an ethics of sufficiency, voluntary simplicity, and connection with nature (Soper, 2020). This redefinition of well-being, which accentuates the quality of social relations, distributive equity, and respect for the environment, can be interpreted as a form of resistance to the alienation and instrumentalization of nature, characteristic of capitalist society (Duda, 2020). However, it is essential to avoid an idealized vision of this ethics and to subject it to critical analysis, considering the economic constraints, social pressures, and difficulties related to access to resources and technologies, which often confront the inhabitants of the rural, a situation that can generate compromises and ambivalences in the application of degrowth principles. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate how these constraints influence the practices and discourses of the new rural actors, in order to understand the limits and transformative potential of social ecology in the specific context of Romania.

When attempting an analysis of the new rural residents, it is essential to avoid a romanticized vision of this lifestyle. Rural realities are often marked by economic precarity, limited access to public services, and deficient infrastructure (Pineiro, 2022). In the specific context of the CEE, these challenges are often amplified by the heritage of the post-socialist transition, by accentuated rural depopulation (Czibere et al., 2021; Dumtru et al., 2021; Guzi et al., 2021), by the

desire for accumulation and consumption as a counterpoint to the period of precarity characteristic of the 80s and 90s. Moreover, it is important to critically analyze the potential for “rural revitalization” to reproduce, in a new form, pre-existing social and ecological inequalities (Ahlmeyer, Volgmann, 2023). Access to land, capital, and specialized knowledge may favor certain social groups to the detriment of others, perpetuating or even exacerbating rural disparities. Recent analyses in CEE highlight the risk of “degrowth” initiatives becoming enclaves of an urban “creative class,” with a limited impact on local development and the potential to generate social tensions with traditional residents (Anitra, Liegey, 2025; Patocka, 2024). Thus, it is crucial to examine to what extent the initiatives of “degrowth” contribute to an equitable redistribution of resources and power, or whether they become simple privileged enclaves, isolated from the rest of rural society.

Methodology

This research investigates rural subjectivities within Romania’s degrowth movement, exploring the experiences and perspectives of “new peasants” who seek to align their lives with the values of autonomy, self-sufficiency, voluntary simplicity, and ecological regeneration. To address the central questions – Who are these new rural residents? What are their values and lifestyles? How do they relate to work, development, sufficiency, and well-being? How does degrowth manifest in a neoliberal and post-socialist context? – I employed a qualitative approach.

Data collection involved in-depth interviews with at least one member of each of ten households, ensuring representation of both female and male perspectives. Households were selected based on their residents’ active pursuit of degrowth principles and a minimum of two years of rural living (ranging from 2.5 to 15 years). Interviews, conducted within the participants’ homes, followed a flexible framework of themes and sub-themes, tailored to each respondent’s experiences. Topics included reasons for relocation, degrowth values and practices, food procurement and income sources, community relationships, and aspirations and challenges in their new lives.

Participant observation, conducted during approximately one day in each household, provided valuable contextual insights. I participated in daily activities such as gardening, cooking, and preserving, and observed interactions among household members, volunteers, visitors, and neighbors. Field notes from these observations were integrated with interview data to provide a rich,

nuanced understanding of degrowth practices, social dynamics, and the challenges faced by new peasants. Additionally, online materials, including Instagram profiles and YouTube podcasts created by the participants, were analyzed to capture their self-representations and public engagement. This multi-method approach aims to provide a holistic understanding of how degrowth values are embodied in concrete practices, social relations, and aspirations.

This study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how degrowth values materialize in concrete practices, in social relations, and in the aspirations of new rural residents. Furthermore, through a critical analysis of the structural constraints and inherent ambivalences of this process, the paper can offer valuable perspectives for public policies and community initiatives aimed at rural revitalization, ecological transition, and the promotion of more equitable and sustainable forms of development. Ultimately, this investigation aims to open up new directions for research, stimulating a broader academic and public dialogue about the transformative potential of degrowth movements in the specific context of Romania.

Findings: The Ethics of Sufficiency and the Aesthetics of Simplicity

One of the challenges of studying neo-rurality lies in understanding the subjective dimension of decisions to live “differently.” Recent literature on post-growth living (Soper, 2020) emphasizes that choosing a simpler life, outside the city, is not just a form of renunciation, but also a choice based on redefining well-being in terms of time, relationships, health, and meaning. This ethic of sufficiency contrasts with dominant productivist norms (Duda, 2020) and generates distinct forms of identity and belonging. As empirical research has revealed, the new peasants not only “work the land” but produce themselves as subjects in relation to a set of values related to autonomy, ecology, interdependence, and voluntary simplicity. Through this lens, everyday gestures – such as composting, collecting rainwater, or participating in collective purchasing groups – take on an ethical-political charge and become expressions of an emerging degrowth subjectivity. However, while these values are commendable, their implementation can be complex and challenging in the real world. For example, while the pursuit of simplicity is a core tenet, it often requires significant resources (time, knowledge, initial capital) to achieve, creating a potential barrier to entry for those with fewer advantages.

Who are the new peasants?

Further clarification of the characteristics of the investigated population is needed to circumscribe the specificity of this niche of “neo-peasants.” It is a distinct “group,” defined by an accumulation of socio-economic and cultural traits. The present research intentionally sought to identify and discuss individuals who fit a specific profile: people with higher education, who have lived a significant period in urban centers (Cluj Napoca, Sibiu, Oradea, Braşov, Târgu Mureş) and who, previously, obtained income from non-manual activities, often involving high professional qualifications. Of the 18 “neo-peasants” included in the study, belonging to 10 households, 16 have completed higher education, and 14 have previously held jobs that required a university degree. The structure of households varies, with most being composed of the nuclear family (with or without children), but I also visited a single-person household and another formed by two adult sisters and their mother.

Beyond the educational level, their social trajectory is essential. These individuals, possessing a distinct habitus, have accumulated cultural and symbolic capital in the urban environment, internalizing its codes and values (Bourdieu, 1984). However, in adulthood, they chose to deconstruct this initial habitus, opting for another lifestyle, characterized by “slow living” and a re-evaluation of the relationship between work and consumption, but not under the sway of material precariousness. Their distinction, therefore, does not reside in the simple practice of gardening, but in an acute awareness of the contrast between two worlds: on the one hand, the urban universe, governed by the imperatives of consumption and production and, on the other hand, a reconfigured rural space, which privileges self-sufficiency, local production and distribution networks, and a slower existential rhythm. This ability to navigate between the two realities, to understand and critique both the urban logic of consumerism and traditional rural practices, represents a defining trait of those I decided to study.

Even if some decisions to move from urban to rural areas were spontaneous, and others involved years, the discourses of the members of the ten households are very similar when talking about the motivation for moving to the countryside: “the need to live simpler and better”, “the desire to grow in the true sense of the word”, “a better life for my family”, “the need for authenticity”. From the broader answers, I was then able to encompass the following categories of motivations: healthy food; detachment from global markets (independence); the need for slow living; the difficulty of coping with a schedule imposed by others and the desire to experience a lifestyle closer to the values they believe in (responsible consumption).

None of the respondents wants to return to the city (in a locative sense), but neither a total break from urban networks (acquaintances, family, social relations, including activities in NGOs or environmental actions). Those who have children of school age (middle or high school) are discussing options to facilitate the relocation of their children to large cities to accumulate a type of typically urban life experience; then the decision regarding the adopted lifestyle will belong to the children, who have become young adults in the meantime. Those who have young children say that they have not yet intensely analyzed the aspect related to the education of children in high school, and for primary grades they opt either for home schooling or for the school in the village.

"So far it has been very good here. The eldest was at school here, the youngest at kindergarten. I don't think there are any shortcomings so far. We still have time to think about how we will proceed, but they will do high school either in Medias or in Sibiu and I will then ask my mother for help." (M.H.)²

That being said, the interviewed subjects do not fall into the category of those seeking an escape from reality, but rather adopt a lifestyle aligned with the principles of nature, in opposition to consumerist values. They pursue, especially for their families, an ethical and anti-consumerist lifestyle, engaging, to varying degrees, in information campaigns on environmental issues³. It is important to emphasize that the subjects do not show adherence to traditionalist or conspiracy ideologies. On the contrary, they promote progressive visions, with increased attention to the negative impact of excessive technologization and consumption on the environment.

Reconfiguring Work

Many of the subjects (especially those who know the terminology of degrowth, downshifting, off the grid) use the term "(re)-growth" when referring to the reconfiguration of relationships with work, consumption, and community. In what follows, I will try to develop, as it emerged from the field research, the way in which these "new peasants" reinvent their work, integrating it into an ethic that prioritizes human and ecological values to the detriment of unlimited economic growth.

² M.H.: Former corporate employee; herb grower, micro-farmer.

³ Organizing local fairs and training sessions for the community; organizing village days; organizing screenings of environmental documentaries; Member of environmental NGO; member of international informal environmental communities; environmental activists.

"I know what degrowth means because I'm interested in discussions on this topic. Now, I don't know if the term degrowth is the best or if what we experience on a personal level is regrowth or a different kind of growth. Or rather super-growth (laughs) (V.D.)⁴."

Households were chosen based on the criterion that at least one member was exclusively engaged in domestic work on micro-farms but the types of work that generate income for my respondents are more diverse: two respondents continue to carry out gainful activities in corporations in a remote system (one of them in the ESG department, the other in the IT department, with the intention of giving up the job in the coming months), and one person each is involved in physiotherapy, professional photography activities, architecture, and management in performative artistic projects. With the exception of the two who continue to work in the corporation, all other types of economic activities function by integrating principles that do not contrast with the downshifting process. The types of work in which the subjects are engaged – whether we are talking about household work or other flexible work – are decentralized and self-managed, and workers have control over work processes and can carry them out respecting at least partially principles specific to degrowth ideology. More precisely, they can decide what types of materials, products or projects they use and propose, which respect the principles of sustainability and responsible production, reducing the negative impact on the environment. Choosing ecological materials and local products, the emphasis is on regenerability and energy efficiency, in order to minimize waste and promote a circular economy. Through these choices, subjects contribute to promoting a culture of conscious consumption, which combines ecological concerns with increased autonomy over their work.

"Coconut and shea oils are very good, but they are produced far away and come from far away. I chose to work (massage) with local products and mostly I produce my own oils." (R.V.⁵).

"I don't have total independence because I depend on a source of funding, but I can decide what projects to write or what projects to get involved in. For several years I have managed to get involved in activities with a more socio-political character. [...] Maybe this is also a form of activism." (I.T.)⁶

⁴ V.D.: She graduated of the Faculty of Letters and worked as a copywriter, now she is a micro-farmer, involved in different forms of environmental activism (mainly in virtual communities).

⁵ R.V.: Physical therapist, micro-farmer.

⁶ I. T.: Cultural worker; micro-farmer.

Returning to the work in micro-farms, the main problem encountered in all the visited households is the lack of labor from outside the family. This problem is deeper in villages where social networks are weaker, but it was mentioned even in the case of those who live in a village that still maintains the tradition of "clacă" (community work):

"We still have clacă. When I chose to move here, I already had a long period of research related to the villages in the Transylvania area. I was definitely looking for a village where there were neighborhoods and the idea of community was maintained. Just last week, 40 villagers participated in the claca, out of the 60 who are officially registered (n.r. the number of villagers is higher on weekends or during the warm period of the year). But you can do claca for specific activities, such as building a house. I need people to work for milking goats, for cleaning the stable. I can't appeal to claca for that" (A.J.)⁷

The scarcity of available labor significantly limits household activities, often restricting them to the capacities of household members alone. This reliance on internal resources underscores the challenges new peasants face in adapting to rural life. While only two of the analyzed households employ a permanent worker, and others occasionally hire day laborers, the limited access to reliable help is a persistent obstacle. Attempting to overcome the local labor shortage, four households have turned to volunteers, sourcing them either through specialized international networks or by leveraging knowledge networks to mobilize individuals from urban areas. However, even with these efforts, the difficulty in securing consistent and skilled labor remains a key factor shaping the adaptation process for these new rural residents.

"I tried with Nelu, a man from the village good at everything. The problem is that if it's a holiday he doesn't come, the second day after the holiday he doesn't come again because he's "recovering." You can rely on him, but it's harder to get along with him and if you understand his rhythm, you do good work with him." (T.H.)⁸
 "We wanted to work with a younger girl from the village and somehow get her a work permit. She has eight grade education, but she is very capable and serious. She came for a short period and helped us with the preserves because it happened to come in August and September. But in the autumn she left because she said it's better to go to Târgu Mureș to work and maybe stay there. She says she doesn't want to stay here because it's still going to be hard for her." (S.F.)⁹

⁷ A.J. : Ex-engineer. Now he raises goats and cows.

⁸ T.H.: Photographer and micro-farmer.

⁹ S.F.: After graduating the college, he worked abroad before becoming a farmer.

In contrast to the capitalist model, in which work tends to be alienating and oriented exclusively towards maximizing profit, the new peasants reject the logic of unlimited productivity. They all told me that they work in the rhythm of nature, respecting the limits of the body and the environment, and attach great value to manual labor and practical knowledge. This paradigm shift highlights a redefinition of success, where value no longer lies in the accumulation of capital, but in the quality of life, in balance, and in contributing to the well-being of the community and the environment. The new peasants thus become actors of their own destiny, taking control over how they work and live, promoting a more conscious, holistic, and degrowth-aligned form of labor. In this sense, the process of downshifting is not just a reduction of activities or lifestyle, but an update of values and relationships with work, oriented towards a more authentic and responsible existence.

In all ten visited households, the main source of income remains the production made within the micro-farm, and the prices practiced for commercializing the goods are considered “fair.” For example, C. C. explained in detail the method of setting the price: she calculates the cost of production, to which he adds the number of hours worked and the value of her work. The goal is not to generate surplus value, but to pay as correctly as possible both for the work of the producer and for the product itself. I found the same logic in other micro-farms: a “salary” or a payment per day of work is fixed, the investment is recovered, and the accumulation of capital over these amounts is not pursued. This approach indicates a redefinition of economic success, centered on equity, sustainability, and well-being, rather than on the unlimited accumulation of capital. But here I think it is necessary to emphasize a crucial aspect: the estimation of the payment of labor is significantly above the usual rate of payment/hour in Romania (often 1.5- 2 times higher), aligning more with highly qualified salaries., and many of the products enter the niche of luxury products, with prices above the average in the conventional market.

Unlike local workers who often adhere to agricultural practices incompatible with permaculture, organic, and sustainable cultivation principles, volunteers typically arrive with greater flexibility and a pre-existing understanding of best practices from similar farms. Working with international volunteers is valued for their diverse skills, increased visibility, and time resources, while involving local labor offers contextual knowledge, social legitimacy, and continuity. While the new peasants actively seek to involve locals in their household work, contrasting visions on how things “should be done” can make collaborations difficult. This tension, rooted in conflicting agricultural philosophies and community development approaches, can hinder the establishment of a strong, collaborative social ecology.

"If I were to do classical agriculture or monoculture, I could put only wheat on the whole land, let's say, and with a tractor I would work everything alone and maybe I would also get a subsidy. This type of production [organic, micro-crops with rotation] is not done like that. Here you need people, even if we don't dig [refers to the no-till technique]. [...]. Rather than have someone who works to take money, but doesn't care about what I have in the garden and "knows better" how big onions grow and without worms, I'd rather look or wait for a volunteer. Or we'll see..." (L.)¹⁰

In addition to own production or the purchase of products, in two of the households, bartering constitutes a significant way of accumulating goods, reflecting a strategy of avoiding, as much as possible, the use of money. The fact that the inhabitants manage to feed themselves throughout the year almost exclusively from local products (from their own household, from neighbours and from neighbouring localities), mobilizing as few financial resources as possible, is appreciated as a desirable behavior among the new peasants. This food autonomy and the reduction of dependence on global supply chains represent a key element of the degrowth philosophy. However, it's crucial to acknowledge that this lifestyle, while admirable in its principles, is largely accessible only to those in a more beneficial position within the current societal structure. This advantageous position stems from a combination of factors: their pre-existing social and economic capital, which allows them to absorb initial financial risks and access resources; their education and skills, which enable them to market their products effectively; and their access to networks that support their alternative economic model. This raises questions about the scalability and wider applicability of this degrowth model, highlighting the need for systemic changes to make it accessible beyond a select group.

Consumption: The Ethics of Sufficiency and Alternative Networks

Beyond reconfiguring the relationship with work, the new peasants also adopt a distinct approach to consumption, characterized by an ethic of sufficiency and an aesthetic of simplicity. They do not present themselves as mere passive consumers, but as conscious actors who critically question their needs, express a pronounced interest in the modes of production of goods, and prioritize non-capitalist economic relations, such as short chains, local markets, and bartering. One can observe, therefore, a transition from a consumption model guided by abundance and materialistic aspirations towards one based

¹⁰ L: is a farmer and studied agronomy at university.

on moderation, durability, increased attention to resources, and a more direct relationship with the sources of production.

One of the most prominent aspects of this transformation in consumption practices is food. Most respondents chose to give up products from supermarkets, opting for a diet based on food grown in their own household or purchased directly from local producers. This preference for local products is not just a matter of taste or concern for health, but also a way to support the local economy and reduce the ecological impact associated with transporting food over long distances. Reorienting towards more “conscious” food consumption often involves (re)learning traditional practices, such as preserving food, preparing pickles, or baked goods. These activities are not only ways to ensure long-term supplies and expressions of increased autonomy and a closer connection to the rhythms of nature, but also, increasingly, a marker of distinction and cultural capital, particularly amongst a certain segment of the urban middle class. While often framed as a rejection of consumerism, this aesthetic can, paradoxically, transform these practices into a form of conspicuous consumption in themselves – one where the emphasis is on ethical and sustainable goods. This highlights a potential tension: the pursuit of degrowth ideals can inadvertently reinforce existing social hierarchies if these practices become exclusive or performative. At the same time, these practices also have a therapeutic dimension: connecting the self with natural frameworks, identifying a meaning of actions, the satisfaction of producing one’s own food, caring for resources (non-invasive agriculture). However, it’s important to acknowledge that the emphasis on ethical and sustainable goods can also become a form of status symbol. For example, organic produce from local farms is often more expensive and less accessible than mass-produced alternatives, potentially limiting participation to those with greater financial resources.

“Being urban dwellers for at least 3 generations, before we bought almost everything from the supermarket. Especially us, those who were children in the 90s and could afford to buy everything that appears new... phew... everything that appeared had to be tested. Now, almost everything we eat comes from the garden or from the neighbors. [...] We have educated ourselves in such a way as to eat well, but from short networks and to replace foods that are fashionable, let’s say, like avocado, with a paste of rehydrated nuts, for example.” (M.H.).

Food procurement relies primarily on household resources, bartering, and short production chains. For instance, R.V. provides approximately 70% of her household’s food needs internally and supplements this through bartering or purchasing from the local market, such as buying oil from a neighboring producer, milling wheat for bread and pasta, and selling excess through her

networks. This approach, often involves extensive research into food production principles, reflects a commitment to ethical and sustainable consumption, aligning with the broader 'critical consumption' movement (Littler, 2008). This detailed understanding of food choices empowers individuals to regain control over their livelihoods amid ecological and economic uncertainty (Spaargaren, Mol, 2011).

The principles of the ethics of sufficiency go beyond the sphere of food, influencing choices related to clothing, housing, furniture, transport, and other aspects of daily life. The new peasants tend to prioritize the quality and durability of products, opting for items that can be repaired, reused, or recycled. Thus, products are purchased either from acquaintances (ex: a stroller can be used by 5-6 babies and remain functional), or from second-hand stores or fairs. They avoid excessive consumption and impulsive purchases, preferring to invest in durable and functional goods that meet their real needs. Regarding products made of organic materials or anything that comes under the label of "sustainable," most apply additional information filters, being very sensitive to green washing campaigns, but also to the resources involved in the manufacture of products (ex: skepticism towards solar panels, which even if they offer energy independence, involve high production costs, risk breaking down quickly, and there are no systems for recycling the materials). This reorientation reflects an implicit critique of the culture of conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899/2017) and a preference for a simpler and more responsible lifestyle (Alexander, 2011). Moreover, it can be interpreted as a form of "downshifting" (Duda, 2020), whereby individuals consciously choose to reduce the importance of paid work and consumption in favor of values such as free time, social relations, and personal development.

Prioritizing quality and durability in the acquisition of goods and services is facilitated by a strategic combination of financial and social resources - money and networks -, and the new peasants seem to have both. Even if current monetary incomes can be fluctuating, there is often a "secure foundation" given by the support of the extended family or by the possibility of returning to previous professional activities. This material security is doubled by a solid social and cultural capital, which allows them to navigate with confidence in their new life. Thus, in the case of many of the visited micro-farms, I observed the existence of networks where volunteering, loans, exchanges, and even joint purchases operate. Often, certain expensive goods (such as a trailer, for example) are used jointly by up to five households, thus optimizing the use of resources and reducing individual costs. This practice of sharing and cooperation reflects an ethos of reciprocity and solidarity (Mauss, 1966), which is fundamentally different from the individualistic logic of the market. Moreover, the importance of social

capital in facilitating access to resources and in overcoming the limitations imposed by reduced monetary incomes is highlighted. Therefore, social networks play a fundamental role in reconfiguring the lives of the new peasants and are pragmatic tools to ensure access to quality goods and services, in accordance with the principles of the ethics of sufficiency.

Community: Social Ecology and Networks of Interdependence

Networks of interdependence are essential for the new peasants, going beyond the strictly economic logic of the market. As we have seen, sharing resources and joint purchases are not simple saving strategies, but expressions of deep community values, even if the process itself is a niche one, at least for now. Such a mode of operation favors a gift economy, where mutual help and non-monetary exchanges take precedence, creating a solid social fabric and a strong sense of belonging to a community that is not necessarily defined by territorial boundaries, but rather symbolic ones. Relationships of trust and reciprocity are not just surrogates for the lack of money, but an active way of redefining social relations beyond the imperatives of the market. This reimagining of community hinges on shared values and reciprocal relationships, representing a departure from the individualistic, transactional relationships often associated with capitalist economies.

Moreover, the new peasants actively engage in collective initiatives, from the establishment of peasant markets and ecological education workshops to participation in campaigns for more equitable agricultural policies. These actions are not just pragmatic responses to local problems, but also ways to challenge the dominant model of development, based on industrialization, globalization, and excessive consumption. Through these initiatives, they build an alternative model of social organization, in which local autonomy, environmental protection, and social justice are central priorities. The capacity for self-organization and collective action of these networks and initiatives is remarkable, offering a viable alternative to the individualistic model promoted by the consumer society.

“Our practices demonstrate that it is possible to live in a more sustainable and equitable way, emphasizing social relations and environmental protection, instead of the accumulation of capital and reckless consumption.” (A.A.)¹¹

¹¹ A.A.: was a nurse and worked in the UK. After the birth of her first child, she returned to Romania and settled in Jd. Braşov in the countryside. Neither her parents nor her grandparents lived in the countryside. She is dedicated to raising and educating her children through homeschooling. Her family supports itself by selling products from their household.

Nevertheless, the field analysis suggests a more complex reality than emerges from the direct statements of the respondents. The outline of two distinct types of networks is observed: on the one hand, a horizontal network, created between individuals with a similar habitus (here we include the exchange of goods, bartering, sales, but also the interactions with volunteers). This "horizontal" network reflects a community of shared values and lifestyles, often transcending geographical boundaries but remaining largely within a specific socio-economic status. On the other hand, there is a network in the process of development, but still problematic, with the traditional rural community of which the new peasants are part through the lens of housing. This network, bridging social classes and pre-existing community structures, faces significant challenges.

The difficulty in establishing solid links with the traditional rural community partially explains why many new peasants prefer to resort to volunteers (often, people with similar visions, coming from the urban environment) rather than local resources, as I mentioned in the discussion about work. Even in the case of the profile fairs, seed exchanges, workshops or workshops they organize, the audience is formed rather by members of the urban middle-upper class than by traditional rural people. This tendency to create connections with like-minded individuals, while fostering a sense of belonging, can inadvertently create echo chambers and limit genuine integration within the existing rural social fabric. For instance, new peasants might organize a permaculture workshop, but the language used, the scheduling, and the assumed level of prior knowledge inadvertently exclude traditional farmers who have practical, generational expertise but lack formal education in sustainable agriculture. This can lead to resentment and a perception that the new peasants see themselves as superior.

"For 3 years now, we've been organizing the "Seed Exchange" in our barn in February. We talk to the City Hall, we try to advertise through the channels available to us, including the Facebook group of the commune, but most of those who visit us are former collaborators, acquaintances, others who have similar initiatives to our own. The peasants come, but in small numbers, more out of curiosity, because something is happening in the village. ... And maybe they come to ask us for seedlings, but they are not very interested in the seeds themselves." (C.C.)

The distinction emphasizes the importance of analyzing not only the idealized dimension of the community, but also the concrete dynamics of social relations, influenced by factors such as social class, cultural capital, and visions of the world. Building solid bridges between the new peasants and traditional rural communities represents an important challenge for the future, which could contribute to a better integration and a greater sustainability of their initiatives.

L. one of the new peasants said: *"I think the neighbors still see us as odd. Just odd! Not in a good way, not in a bad way. They often say that they wouldn't do this or that if they were in our place. They think we're 'city folks,' and it will take time for us to truly integrate. Slowly, slowly, we're getting used to each other. We can already collaborate well and are good neighbors, but it will take more time until they perceive us as their equals and true friends."* This quote poignantly illustrates the ongoing negotiation of identity and belonging that characterizes the new peasants' experience, highlighting the need for sustained effort and mutual understanding to overcome social and cultural barriers.

Applying a social ecology lens to this situation reveals that the challenges are not merely about individual attitudes, but about the underlying power structures and social inequalities that shape these interactions. For example, new peasants, often coming from positions of relative economic security and holding significant cultural capital (education, language skills, access to networks), may unintentionally exert a form of symbolic dominance over the traditional community. This can manifest in subtle ways, such as promoting certain agricultural practices as "superior" without acknowledging the historical knowledge and adaptations of local farmers. To foster a truly equitable social ecology, it is crucial to move beyond a top-down approach, where new peasants are seen as "bringing solutions" to the rural community, and instead prioritize collaborative learning and knowledge exchange.

Given these hurdles, the experiences of "new peasants" are not without disillusionment. The initial idealism often clashes with the realities of existing agricultural practices, bureaucratic hurdles, and the deeply ingrained socio-economic structures of rural communities (Dumitru et al., 2021). The desire for self-sufficiency can, at times, translate into self-exploitation, as individuals push themselves to exhaustion in their pursuit of an alternative lifestyle, blurring the lines between emancipation and a new form of labor discipline (Schmeltzer et al., 2022). Furthermore, the influx of "new peasants" can exacerbate existing inequalities, creating tensions with long-time residents who may perceive them as outsiders with privileged access to resources and knowledge (Ahlmeyer & Volgmann, 2023). This underscores the need for a critical examination of the power dynamics at play and a conscious effort to build bridges based on mutual respect and understanding, rather than a naive imposition of idealized visions (Woods, 2012).

At the same time, there are also examples of successful integration. In some cases, new peasants have actively sought to learn from traditional farmers, incorporating their knowledge of local crops, soil conditions, and weather patterns into their own practices. By valuing and respecting local knowledge, they have been able to build trust and establish reciprocal relationships. Another strategy involves creating inclusive spaces for dialogue and collaboration, such as

community gardens where both new and traditional peasants can share their experiences and learn from one another. These initiatives demonstrate the potential for bridging the gap between these two groups and building a more resilient and equitable rural community, based on mutual respect and shared goals.

Conclusion: Reimagining Rurality. Transformations, Tensions, and the Limits of Degrowth

"I was tired of chasing money and the stress at the office. I wanted to live a simpler life, to have more time for myself and for my family. Here we have all grown and eliminated everything that burdened us a lot in our previous life: we no longer chase money, we seek experiences and a fulfilling life. [...] In fact, we work more because if you want to have something to put on the table, you have to work, but we work differently, with our heads and we know that we are working for ourselves." (A.A.)

This research explored the rural subjectivities of the new peasants, analyzing how degrowth values materialize in their daily practices. The results indicate a reconfiguration of relationships with work, consumption, and community, reflected in the preference for local production and collective initiatives. For these new peasants, (re)growth is not simply about escaping the capitalist model, but about actively constructing a new reality grounded in ecological responsibility, social connection, and a deeply felt sense of purpose. Working in the garden, caring for animals, preserving food, or purchasing local products are not just instrumental activities, but means by which individuals recover an experience of meaning and immediate efficiency: a "visibilization" of the labor that contrasts with the ephemerality and abstraction of productivity characteristic of post-capitalist societies. This temporal recalibration, through the reduction of the pressure of imposed schedules and the recovery of autonomy over time, appears as a central component of the life that has "grown" (in the sense of authenticity and fulfillment). The desire for voluntary simplification and for reducing dependence on conventional economic structures is a distinctive feature of the degrowth approach, but at the same time the practices resonate with neoliberal ideology, of centering the individual on themselves. While the new peasants' values fundamentally oppose capitalist ideologies rooted in resource exploitation and overconsumption, their practices and beliefs prioritize cultivating an individual ecological equilibrium before extending to collective engagement, even within the communities they inhabit.

The analysis also highlights the limits of strictly applying the concept of degrowth, observing that these practices can coexist with forms of distinctive consumption and concerns for the accumulation of symbolic capital, accessible especially to a privileged segment of society. Also, the difficulty of fully integrating into traditional rural communities, highlighted by the distinction between horizontal and vertical networks, raises questions about the capacity of these initiatives to generate a profound and inclusive social transformation.

Applying social ecology frameworks, the study underscores tensions between newcomers' ideals and on-ground realities. New peasants' ecological commitments—local autonomy, environmental stewardship—clash with their inadvertent reproduction of power dynamics. For instance, recruiting urban volunteers over local collaborators fosters “echo chambers,” exacerbating socio-cultural divides. Meanwhile, newcomers' symbolic capital (e.g., educational privilege, urban networks) risks perpetuating pre-existing inequalities, complicating their role as agents of equitable change.

These insights necessitate moving beyond degrowth and social ecology toward frameworks attuned to Romania's unique rurality. Post-socialist legacies, rural-urban migration, and structural inequities critically shape new peasants' capacity to build sustainable communities. Future research must prioritize symbolic power dynamics—how class, education, and urbanity influence rural social hierarchies—and interrogate whether these initiatives can transcend niche status.

The new peasant phenomenon, constrained by middle-class resources and individualistic ethos, highlights the need for systemic change beyond isolated experiments. While degrowth offers valuable lenses, equitable and ecological futures demand a synthesis with Romania's specific context and global inequality frameworks. The tensions this research reveals – between individual and collective action, newcomer ideals and local realities – are inherent challenges requiring a more nuanced understanding. Future research and policy interventions must prioritize these contradictions to foster genuine integration, address structural inequalities, and promote a collective, systemic approach to ecological transformation.

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