

Blocks and Industrial Plants – The New “Crops” of Transylvanian Rurbanity

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Abstract

The retailisation of land, the development of industrial capacity and the expansions of tourist resorts organized by consumption priorities and not by preservation and maintenance of the landscape priority are some of the Transylvanian post-communist features. These became possible as soon as local inhabitants have realized that rural territory could offer something else than subsistence agriculture and low-income. Is it farming in danger? Probably yes, as we know it, but it also gets new meanings due to the perspective changes related to land use of an increasing number of land-owners.

Index Terms: rural-urban relationship, post-communism, land conversion, Transylvania.

1. Introduction

Although the common language of social sciences is widely spread, its nonrestrictive or almost relativistic character grounds for each specific topic many hermeneutical differentiations, which could lead to dissimilar even opposite conclusions. Furthermore, diverse empirical backgrounds interact differently with the conceptual frameworks, meaning either the realities enclosed by our concepts are not always fully covered by them or vice versa, the concepts are presenting something about what in fact is barely existing. The Romanian society shows plenty of examples from both categories. At this point I will briefly mention two of them: *rurban realities* – observable but not yet strongly theorized and *post-communism* – over theorized and still more diverse than the fragments of post-communist reality described in the authors' books.

Romania joins since the beginning of '90s the large family of capitalist states based on free trade, market economy and not in the last instance: democratic elections. The shape of our "capitalism" was and is molded by the ways in which was represented [1], [2] by policy-makers, stake-holders, decision-takers etc. that finally appropriate it of the western types. It brought in individualization, social atomization, fractures of social relationships, multiple types of dissolutions and so forth; mentioned by almost all scholars involved in Romanian community studies. I am quoting here some examples: [3], [4], [5], [6], [7] which are underlining the predominance of mistrust in people, state, institutions and the omnipresence of individualist cultural orientation [8].

The features of a new moral order (*i.e.* cosmopolite, entrepreneurial, urban), which highly valued the success and personal wellbeing were at hand even before the '89 Romanian revolution, but only after it the possibilities of articulate them at mass-scale became available. We grabbed very quickly the idea that personal interest must be achieved regardless if will harm or not the others – often family members, friends, and neighbors – people with whom we used to have close social relations in the former communist period.

As soon as social and territorial mobility became available and affordable for masses an ample process of settings reconfiguration took place in the name of modernization and development. These have reached the rural space and villages (did it in the former time too with the dramatic consequence involved by territorial systematization: the replacement of individual houses with communist blocks of flats and of the peasants with factory workers) and foster them to take one step up in their way of becoming townscapes. Aggressive urbanization and some vaguely defined counter-urbanization tendencies in rural areas are accompanied by gardening in the city, by gated communities of "green believers", by a new range of rural culture which is catching the urban space alongside with the new inhabitants that are coming from outer city regions. We have now in various degrees almost everywhere rurban realities or urban-rural mixtures [9].

My intention was neither to look after a holistic approach of Transylvanian rurbanity nor to find a *statistically representative* form of it, but to illustrate some of the process which might redesign and irreversible change its nature. Our scientific story [10] or narrative [11] is about the new logics of Romanian local development which make settlements to increasingly loose their traditional/classical specificity and the local praxis to get new meanings [12]. The empirical background is my 2004-2007 fieldwork, done in the region of Transylvania, in the neighboring rural areas of Cluj-Napoca city, respectively villages from communes such as Floresti, Bontida, Gilau etc., situated between 5 km and 50 km distance from the city core. As methodological tools we used qualitative (in-depth) interviews [13] with local

inhabitants and their representatives from various socio-economic categories (approx. one hundred interviews were done).

2. The “Post” Context

During more than one and a half decade of transformations and democratic consolidation the myth of *far-off globality* has collapsed in Romania like everywhere else. Gradually, at the traditionalism – probably inherited from the in-between world wars period and modernism – brought in by communists, the post-communist society (built on the ruins and with the ruins of the communist regime) added the flavors of late modernism anchored in an unknown future of worldwide consumption society. At the beginning of the new millennium became common knowledge the fact that we are also moving in the global age:

“We have to go forward; we cannot do anything against that. The globalization is a word which is saying something about the direction towards which the world is moving. We can call it non-globalization but the world is moving in that direction anyhow” [man, 46 years, inhabitant of Poieni commune; interview from 2006].

At the beginning of '90s the influence of 2nd modernity economy has gradually expanded towards Eastern Europe. (The new economy of modern capitalism differs from the 'iron cage' bureaucracy described by Weber with regard to the erosion of certainty and the need to adapt to changing circumstances [14].) The practices of de-territorialization and re-territorialization by trans-national corporate capital created a new geography of centrality and marginality, a very dynamic geography with flexible positions for their places.

The distinct boundaries of the past that shaped everybody's socio-cultural experiences nowadays are continually erased (by globalization) and *enhanced* (by localization processes). It is important to notice that in a more similar world each region, neighborhood of villages and cities, corner of the street or individual wants to be perceived differently and fights for that. *What, how, where, when we look, choose, see, hope, make* etc. are now endless questionable and changeable.

From the stock market to the traditional cuisine everything is in the same local and global or *glocal* as Robertson called it [15] with more than one decade ago. Even though the world becomes more similar as globalization proceeds, it does not necessarily lead to a homogeneous world. Lechner and Boli, qtd. in [16], illustrates three reasons for that:

- “general global rules are interpreted by local actors and world models are edited in light of local circumstances;
- increasing similarity at the global level brings about various resistances from the local;
- cultural diversity and local differences have themselves become more globally appreciated and recognized as valid social facts”.

In sum, the local and the global are not dichotomous categories but rather dialectic ones and therefore, the contemporary phenomena and processes are dual by nature: empowered but also constrained by localism/globalism.

For rural Transylvanians the global is generally seen as EU – the level from where the restrictions come:

“you must cultivate only that much, breed that number of animals...” [entrepreneur, man, 45 years, inhabitant of Poieni commune; interview from 2006].

Those limitations are filtering down by

“a variety of institutions, which claims that EU request something, come and impose all kind of conditions that makes our enterprise impossible to run it” [farmer, woman, 56 years, inhabitant of Baciú commune; interview from 2004].

Under the EU frame, the life in the Romanian countryside becomes harsh even before the accession data.

“In Mociu was a small size milk factory. It was closed down. Why? Because did not fit the European standards although all those years it was perfect for us” [local councillor, man, 36 years, inhabitant of Mociu commune; interview from 2004].

The interplay between globalness and localness added new complications in the rural inhabitants’ life, inexistent before when the disputes and the implicated stakeholders were local.

3. Rural internalization of urban externalities

This section is about the decline of other important myth: of *pure rurality*. We have already mentioned that people for whom city-ness and village-ness (geographically and socially whatever defined it) are in the same time familiar and strange – *the rurbans* – are getting in size lately but we did not say much about who they are. They can be low-income urban people who had difficulties in maintaining a decent level of life condition within the city and because of that are searching for low prices of land and houses, available in the nearby rural areas, but could be also high-income urban inhabitants, who look after rural idyll and unspoiled landscape.

If those are the permanent residents of the locality, among them we can find urban inhabitants who have a second rural residence or city people who spend their holidays or leisure time in the rural environment. (See my earlier work [17] for a more complex model – the *triple-P continuum* – which incorporates elements concerning propinquity/sociability, praxis, and presence of one inhabitant in a locality.)

That was the *newcomers* category and it is reasonable to think that they could reshape the rural areas accordingly with their worldviews. In such endeavor they are in fact not alone, being helped by the *natives* and in the first place by all those who understood that they should find other sources of income than agriculture.

“The peasant starts the harvest, comes home with its corn car from the fields... but what is he doing with it? He cannot sell it because is so cheap... but the winter will come soon and he needs money for the next year. I’ve made my own calculations and I have decided (as many others) that is useless to go on with agriculture. The same with the animals: I had 7-8 cows at some point but not anymore. We do not consider the costs of our work within the households... when will do we’ll realize that is worthless to make agriculture” [worker, man, 27 years, inhabitant of Mociu commune; interview from 2004].

The cost of agricultural productivity, the fragmentation of land propriety, the reluctance of doing association due to the former collectivization practices made land retailization and its selling an ordinary activity for many Transylvanian landowners. That was impossible to conceive not more than two decades ago when achieving land and keep the ownership intact (even against communist practices) for generations were unquestionable.

Could be other way when everybody sees that any small size commercial enterprise is able to make more money than a household involved in agricultural production? What is the rational for doing it when the weather is against you, local and central authorities the same, EU is against you too? These more or less rhetorical questions were whispered all the time by our interviewees. Rural products, they say, cannot compete against the supermarkets monopole and if try they cannot sell them without breaking the law: “to many regulations related to quality, security, transportation makes us unable to access medium and large markets”. Unfortunately the small size markets from the neighboring areas were cancelled long time ago.

Though we know that the farmer is the future, told me other respondent, but if we will kill the peasant (*i.e.* no subsidies, no micro-credits, no facilities) will be no farmers at all. In the meantime the peasant looks for alternatives. S/he is shifting between selling all and doing some kind of agriculture for *the neighbors’ eye*: “though we know that is not at all profitable, our neighbors will start laughing and joking when will see that we do not cultivate our land”.

“Monthly we have here stock fair. The man puts on the market his animals to get away from the daily painful duties of taking care of them. The money which may get back are nothing comparative with the costs of breeding” [mayor, man, 53 years, inhabitant of Vișoara commune; interview from 2007].

To sell goods is easy when you have buyers and plus your commodity is demanded on the market. The fulfillment of these basically requirement will probably solve many problems of rural communities. Thinking in this manner the inhabitants and local authorities of Cluj-Napoca’s neighboring rural localities fought for being *part* of the city’s metropolitan area and *partners* in the project of region development. That was seen as mean/tool/way of getting *investors in* and their *problems out* or at least partially solved. In this respect the Jucu case (a commune with 4120 inhabitants according with the 2002 National Census, situated at 20 km distance from Cluj-Napoca) is well-known for the arising *Nokia village* and the Florești commune (6250 inhabitants, situated at 5 km distance from Cluj-Napoca) for becoming Cluj-Napoca’s “largest dormitory”, *i.e.* having an impressive number of ongoing projects in the real estate sector.

“We adhered without any restriction at the metropolitan region/area. In the first instance «they» will help us with the infrastructure. They must help us either they want or don’t, since we are together. It sounds great, looks appealing to be in the metropolitan area of Cluj-Napoca city” [mayor, man, 45 years, inhabitant of Bonțida commune; interview from 2005].

“Being integrated into a metropolitan area, with a certain number of inhabitants, will be possible to have a uniform economic, industrial and agricultural development of this zone” [public functionary, woman, 50 years, inhabitant of Gilău commune; interview from 2005].

Motivations and justifications of that kind were stressed by each local representative. Still, a critical eye could see that from a reverse angle: as the urban solution – *i.e.* spreading out towards nearby rural spaces – for solving its own yard difficulties (*e.g.* lack of houses, of cheap plots for investments, of affordable land for constructions etc.). This is actually happening, together with the investors *new problems came in too*, adding supplementary needs (of the newcomers) at those already present (issued by natives) and subsequently dissatisfactions and disputes. An old and rusty infrastructure must solve all of them, or stated in another way: the bills of urban externalities will be paid by rural sites.

Due to the shape of Cluj-Napoca city landscape – practically without any unoccupied plot left – the developers, in their search for immediate profits, reoriented themselves towards places where building as high as you can and disrespecting the regulations are not considered exceptions. Seeing the opportunity, in 2004 the local

council of Florești decided to change the destination of 1000 ha of open fields which were outside the built environment (“extravilan” territory) and “shift” them inside.

That was prepared without taking in consideration any medium and long-term consequence which irreversible affects the living condition of a village [18] that is becoming town over the night. That huge enlargement of the “intravilan” (*i.e.* the land considered non-agricultural, space for construction of houses, blocks, offices, industrial capacities etc.) was neither then nor now accompanied by infrastructural developments (*e.g.* roads, gas and water pipes, electricity and communication cables etc.). It was done mainly to rapidly increase the wealthy of those who had land in the respective territory: council members, acquaintance of them and generally all those who knew or were informed that this political decision will take place soon.

Being at the edge of a big city this land – which before has only symbolic value if we look at it throughout the farming lens – became after a gold mine. Each plot was split in small pieces – *i.e.* the retailisation of land –and sold to the real estate developers when money was needed. The land that we have – told me with a warm smile one subject – “is not measured anymore in empty square meters but in thousands of euros”. Neither he nor others mentioned the chaotic expansions of their locality, did not say a word about the spreading of the built environment without any respects for minimum standards of functionality, all possible when you have as backup the public authorities.

4. Conclusion

In this paper I wanted to emphasize the fact that rural space is more complex and dynamic than we use to represent it. On the one hand the larger context in which it functioning is changing and on the other its shape is redesigned after each encounter with the “messengers” from other context, being them urban inhabitants or not.

The agricultural praxis is instantly converted in something completely different than farming when opportunities exist. Furthermore, natives and newcomers are working together to create such opportunities without taking in consideration the amplitude of the side effects for the long run.

The rurban inhabitants know well the rules of the market and try to maximize the benefits, although failures exist. Selling the land piece by piece shows that they understood that is the time to change the land use destination. The shift from the crops they use to grow by practicing subsistence agriculture, to the development of industrial capacity, tourist resorts, and housing – activities performed by others, illustrates the beginning of the end of *classical rurality*.

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