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## Neoliberal Transformations of the Romanian Agrarian Landscape<sup>1</sup>

Among other profound social and economic changes, the breakdown of the socialist regime in Romania led to fundamental land reforms. Land restitution occurred partly to redress historical injustices—land was given back to its original owners—and partly to increase economic efficiency in agriculture. State bureaucrats in charge of postsocialist land reform regarded it as a way to unmake the system of collective agriculture, to improve the land tenure system, and to increase the economic efficiency of a country that was once dubbed the “granary of Europe.” The centrally designed land reform had to be implemented by the lower levels of state bureaucracy: the mayor, the secretary of the mayor’s office, the agricultural officer, and the representative of the Local Inspectorate of Forests (LIF) were all empowered by the state to implement land reform at every level. However, to paraphrase an old Romanian saying, many go out for wool and come home shorn. The local bureaucrats had their own economic interests, interests that rarely coincided with those of central government. Their embeddedness in local social networks, whose interests they represented and defended, and their struggle to acquire or maintain privileges, had not been foreseen by central government (Verdery 2003).

This paper explores the unintended local outcomes of the centrally designed land reform in postsocialist Romania. I examine two strands of this story in order to understand how land reform was thwarted at a local level. First, I show villagers’ local ecological responses to wider neoliberal economic changes. The return to private ownership, a tenet of both neoliberal ideology and postsocialist policies (Hann 2007), did not suddenly turn the villager into an indomitable farmer aiming to conquer the market. Rather, villagers have revived pre-collectivization agricultural practices, such as intercropping and crop diversification, in their attempts to survive the changes. Instead of increasing animal husbandry, the mountain villager has reacted by changing the emphasis of the local economy to rural tourism. Secondly, this paper argues that local state bureaucrats had the power and the incentive to affect the desired results of restitution of land and forest to pre-socialist owners. The bureaucrats have made use of this power to thwart

1 This is a shortened version of the introduction to a book, tentatively titled *The Wrath of Change: State Elite, Land Politics, and the Transformation of Postsocialist Landscape in Romania*.

the intentions of land reform. Indeed, as I will show, such local power relations have shaped the postsocialist agrarian landscape.

Peoples' responses to neoliberal assumptions—that private property will turn the villager into a capitalist farmer producing for the market—and the local bureaucrats' struggle for privileged access to natural resources have left deep marks on the agrarian landscape. These radical changes include land fragmentation, agricultural extensification, deforestation, and the extension of built-up areas at the expense of pastures.

This paper suggests that only a comprehensive discussion of the agrarian landscape, which includes natural resources such as cultivated land, forest, orchards, and pastures, would give an account of the magnitude of postsocialist changes in rural areas. Unlike other authors working in postsocialist settings who have looked only at the socioeconomic relations (Hann 1993; Verdery 2003), I include in my analysis non-human agents such as land, trees, crops, and animals. By allocating a more central role to the non-human agents influencing human relations in postsocialist studies, I seek to add to a scarce but continuously growing body of literature (Staddon 2009; Stahl 2010).

Before proceeding with the analysis, I wish to indicate that I understand landscape as being produced through land-use practices in a certain place in a certain historical moment (Wiersum 2004, 131). Seeing landscape in this way suggests that landscape is not only a social product, a consequence of the human transformation of nature, but that it is also defined by perceptions, meanings, values, and struggles (Crosgrave 1998). While land use is a technical term defining human activities concerning the land—frequently with an economic and political emphasis—landscape is a much broader term. It incorporates the different historical meanings that people attach to their land, ranging from personal and social identity to social status, morality, and economic value (Hann 1993; Verdery 2005; Dorondel 2005). Landscape, produced by land-use practices, bears the marks of different ideologies and of state power. One example is the constitution and established functions of national protected areas throughout the world. Different groups view this land in different ways: for the state or for conservation agencies, it is an area of precious biodiversity, while for local villagers it is a space for hunting or cultivation.

Landscape is thus invested with various ideologies and becomes the arena for a political struggle between different groups (Moore 1993; Walker and Fortmann 2003).

This struggle involves imposing one's view of landscape and its uses and asserting who should define how it is managed. Forests, for instance, play an essential role in determining local social dynamics. Forests have a history, interpreted in different ways by locals and the state, and a political life. Patronage relations have been built around forests, and local politics depend significantly on access to forests. Animals populating forests, such as the wild boar, play a central role in shaping the local economy. By contributing for years to the destruction of the pastures of the mountain communities, the wild boar has contributed to the steady shift to rural tourism.

### **The Worker-Peasant and the Entrepreneurial Peasant**

There are two intertwined stories regarding changes in the landscape. The former concerns the villagers' reactions to neoliberal, centrally planned land reform. In this narrative, the villagers have adapted their agricultural practices to the land fragmentation. The outcome of this adaptation is the extensification of agriculture. The latter story concerns the clash of interests of the local state bureaucracy with the central planners of land reform. This clash left physical marks in the agrarian landscape by transforming the pastures into built-up areas and by initiating severe deforestation.

In order to analyze the subtle mechanisms behind the drastic changes in the landscape, I propose to conduct an ethnography of both villagers' and local bureaucrats' practices in two communes<sup>2</sup> in Walachia, Arges County (in the southern part of Romania, close to the Meridional Carpathians). One characteristic of these two communes is that villagers are not entirely dependent on agriculture: in one commune (Dragomiresti), they are worker-peasants, and in the other (Dragova), they are involved in rural tourism. The practices of worker-peasants can be seen as a way of reacting to wider economic changes, with a dynamic that differs from that of a peasant relying exclusively on land cultivation. A farmer, whether he or she produces for subsistence or for the market, will concentrate all of his or her working time on the land. The worker-peasant simply cannot afford such a luxury, since he (most people working in this industry are men) splits his working time between an industrial job and agricultural labor. The time he allocates to agricultural labor also dictates the type of crops grown by the family. A worker-peasant household must diversify the crop not only as a safety net against the weather or as risk avoidance (Scott 1976),

2 Commune is the smallest administrative unit in Romania.

but also because only a limited amount of time can be invested in one single, larger crop. Cultivating and then harvesting a single crop requires intensive labor in a certain period of time, a period that, in general, a worker-peasant family does not have. Diversifying the crop provides a safety net and risk avoidance; it also spreads the agricultural labor over a longer period of time.

All of these constraints have a serious impact on the type of crop that is cultivated, which in turn influences the economy of the household. The collective socialist farms used machines and cultivated seeds that had been industrially produced in agrochemical laboratories so as to resist different corn diseases. Postsocialist villagers can no longer afford to continue such practices. They cultivate the seeds that are selected from their previous crop, seeds that are more vulnerable to diseases and pests. The overall production per hectare has thus dramatically decreased and has further contributed to the reluctance to buy new land.

The steep slopes surrounding Dragova and the altitude of the village make it impossible to grow crops. Animal husbandry—the traditional economy of the commune—was therefore maintained under socialism. Villagers owned their pastures throughout the socialist period and earned their living by selling dairy produce and meat on the legal socialist market. Often, they also sold their dairy produce illegally in the socialist enterprises in nearby cities through family members working there. I name this villager the “entrepreneurial peasant.” The worker-peasant and the entrepreneurial peasant each have particular ways of dealing with the land. The different ecological environments, socioeconomic conditions, and socialist histories have conditioned the antagonistic responses of both villagers and local state officials to land reform.

### **Land Reform, Land Fragmentation, and Agricultural Extensification**

The postsocialist land reform led to the breaking up of the collective farms and to land restitution. One of the outcomes was land fragmentation. Anyone travelling today in the rural areas of Romania would notice the highly fragmented land. Although in some parts of Romania (especially in the lowland villages) people joined new land associations (Verdery 2003), in the hilly region landowners preferred to work their crops, pastures, and orchards independently.



**Figure 1:**  
Land fragmentation  
in Dragomirești,  
Romania.

Land reform was an attempt on the part of the postsocialist governments to impose new meanings and new values regarding land on local people, along with a new economic language in accordance with neoliberal tenets (Hann 2007). It was part of a plan to completely reorganize socialist societies, including the people, economies, and landscapes within them, and to transform them into something radically different. Postsocialist economic reforms were often neoliberal policies, enacted by the national government but promoted by international financial institutions (Schwegler 2008).

The reaction of villagers who had recently emerged from a socialist society to these rapid changes was not the reaction expected by central governments and their Western supervisors. Instead of transforming themselves into ferocious capitalist farmers, the worker-peasants rediscovered pre-collectivization agricultural practices. The collective farm aimed to cultivate a small number of crops intensively, following the supreme aim of the socialist government to not only achieve national food sovereignty but also to export agricultural products. Postsocialist landowners had a different aim and different means of achieving it. The worker-peasant adapted fairly well to the land fragmentation by diversifying the crops, by reintroducing the intercropping of corn,

beans, and pumpkin (*Curcubita pepo*), and by shifting to the type of plums suitable to make *țuica* (plum brandy), instead of those that could be sold on the market for immediate consumption. The worker-peasant had less capital, less time, and less interest in maintaining intensive cropping. In other words, farmers opted for agricultural extensification.

The land reform outcome was very different from the one expected by the central planners: villagers resisted by appealing to local knowledge and practices that they believed to be better suited their interests. I thus suggest that villagers did not simply resist the neoliberal governmental plans but also found their own way of dealing with them. Some rediscovered prewar agricultural practices, while others—the villagers of Dragova, for instance—turned to new domains of activity, such as rural tourism.

### **Local State Bureaucracy, the Postsocialist Elite, and Landscape**

In postsocialist Romania, the local state is composed of two types of state officials. One type, which I call the local bureaucracy, includes policemen, forest guards, and employees of the mayor's office. They are appointed by higher-level state bureaucrats, who hold them accountable. For instance, the local police officers have their superiors in the county capital and are accountable to them. They are not accountable to villagers. State forest guards are appointed by and accountable to their superiors from the Local Inspectorate of Forestry (LIF). The chiefs of the LIF are politically appointed, and they are accountable to the employees from ROMSILVA, the National Forest Administration. ROMSILVA's high bureaucrats are also politically appointed. All of these bureaucrats therefore depend on the party in power. Postsocialist politics and politicians represent a crucial element in understanding the impact of the state on the agrarian landscape. The local government members and the mayor represent a second body of institutions. They are elected and should be accountable to the villagers. However, accountability is a Western notion that is barely applicable in non-Western locations. For instance, the accountant from the mayor's office, who was undoubtedly involved in illegal deforestation in Dragomirești, was charged by the prosecutor's office, yet despite these legal issues in 2004 he was elected as mayor of the commune in 2008.

Looking at the interaction between local state officials and villagers makes several things clear. One is that, although this is an unbalanced power relation, it is still one in which

both parties have agency. In response to the state's formal prohibition on tree-felling, villagers engaged in illegal logging. In response to the state's ban on grazing within the national park, villagers brought more animals onto the pastures. In response to the state's claim over forest management rights, villagers emphasized their historical rights. "Is this my forest or not? If this is my forest, then the state has no business imposing regulations," is a claim that one often hears in the two communes where I carried out fieldwork.



**Figure 2:**  
Construction of  
houses in Drago-  
mirești.

One of the outcomes of the local elite's takeover of the state in rural postsocialist countries is the institution of patron-client relationships.<sup>3</sup> The patron-client relationship left deep marks on the local landscape in Romania. The transformations of the pasture into built-up areas and the severe deforestation represent the biophysical embodiment of such social relations. These visible marks have been triggered in each commune by different social mechanisms, and they have different social meanings. In Dragomi-

<sup>3</sup> I define this relationship as an exchange of services between two parties: the patron ensures protection and provides guaranteed work for the client; the client ensures a flow of services for the patron, such as cheap labor and goods (Scott 1976). The core of this relationship is a disequilibrium with regards to the bargaining powers of the patron and the client in favor of the patron (Littlewood 1980).



resti, communal pastures have been transformed into built-up areas by a marginalized ethnic group involved in patron-client relations with local state officials: the pastures were an informal “gift” made by local state officials to illegal loggers, in return for their providing cheap labor and for contributing to the enrichment of bureaucrats. In Dragova, the transformation of pastures into built-up areas was triggered by the boom in rural tourism in the period following the breakdown of the socialist regime. Beautiful mountainous scenery, the caves, and the possibility of tasting the famous locally produced smoked cheese attracted a significant number of visitors. Building new guesthouses (“*pensiuni*”) was made possible by the influx of tourists into the commune, and the local state officials were the first to build.



Figure 3:  
Deforestation in  
Dragomirești.

Deforestation is an even more visible and more dramatic consequence of patron-client relations. The dismantling of the socialist government, the decentralization of administrative decisions, and forest restitution were steps that transformed forests into a gold mine just waiting to be exploited. Local state bureaucrats, such as mayors, forest guards, and police officers, increased their power and their chances of getting rich. The liberalization of the timber market has given an added incentive to those keen to exploit the forest. All these factors contributed to the production of a forestless landscape.

Such examples are evidence of a state that is very present in people's lives and whose actions directly shape the landscape. I therefore seek to give more credit to an idea that is opposed to what some authors describe as a "distant state" (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 1997) or the "absence of the state" at the local level (Stahl 2010). In Romania, the state has not only conditioned the behavior of farmers and landowners through its decisions, but has intervened at every level, often in ways that conflict with the edicts of central government. The consequences in Romania have been stark: land fragmentation, deforestation, and a transformation of the role of worker-peasants within the neoliberal environment.

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