

GEOGRAPHIES OF CAPITALISM IN ROMANIAN POSTCOMMUNIST LITERATURE AND FILM: VILLAGES, CITIES, MARKETS

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Abstract: This article analyses the ways in which the rural – understood in its double nature, of traditional mythological space, and of degraded periphery of the urban – was both instrumentalized by the cultural and political discourses within Romanian postcommunism, and revealed as a symptomatic field in which the harsh economic realities of the post-1989 implementation of neoliberal capitalism in Eastern Europe became evident. The first part of the article describes how misplaced public policies during 1980s' communism favoured the underdevelopment of the rural. Later, the process of transition encouraged both external migration, which depopulated Romanian villages, and the internal migration of the urban middle-class to an economically more secure rural area. The second part of the article analyses – from a materialist viewpoint – corresponding topics developed in Romanian contemporary literature and films (authored by Adrian Șchiop, Lavinia Braniște, Bogdan Mîriță, and Radu Muntean). These works envision the rural/periurban as an asymmetrical geography, where violence toward the vulnerable is enacted, where the loss of community values leaves black markets flourish, and the capitalist dismantling of social ties becomes striking.
Keywords: ruralism, peripheral geography, Romanian transition, anticommunism, postcommunist capitalism.

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The destructuring of the communist economy brought massive social displacement in postcommunist Romania, shifting dramatically the demographic and economic configuration of both rural and small urban areas. State communism had famously attempted to organize agriculture within large-scale farming cooperatives, while pushing for urbanization and the development of heavy industry, which led to the exodus of the workforce towards the cities.¹ But by early 1980s, the obvious bankruptcy of the heavy industry and the accumulation of external debt made the state turn the guns again on the traditional asset of agriculture. However, this reorientation took the form of an unrealistic project of forced urbanization of rural areas, especially as an increasingly paranoid Ceaușescu was trying to reduce the rural-urban migration and hence control the demographic growth of big cities.² The famous Bulldozer-Politik program, aimed at relocating rural house owners in newly built flats that were clearly

inferior in terms of comfort, was also meant to dismantle the traditional social ties that still textured Romanian villages. By late 1980s, such impulsive measures produced strange cases of semiurbanization, which only made the failure of the communist project of modernization more poignant. They also rekindled, for the years to come, the anticommunist myth of the good peasant that was persecuted by the totalitarian regime.³ Conveying this viewpoint, Romanian exiled intellectuals deemed the 1980s' systematization of the villages as a project targeted at "uprooting an entire nation from its nurturing space."⁴

After 1989, Romania transitioned – with an initial delay, then at increased pace after 1997 – from a centralized system based on state assistance/ property, to an ideologically radicalized version of "disembedded neoliberalism" which "euthanized the state, in its role of owner and investor."⁵ The privatization and restructuring of industry left the many monoindustrial



towns built during communism to irreversible decay, with shrinking employment opportunities. By late 1990s, about 60% of the Romanian unemployed turned to the rural agriculture of subsistence,⁶ some of them by trying to capitalize on family properties, after the 1991 land law restituted the nationalized land to its previous owners. However, the fragmentation of farmland, which was caused by the same law, also made the general living standard decline. All in all, these conditions enhanced the provisionality of the postcommunist job market and led to massive migration of labour, to an extent that was larger in Romania than in any other EU country from mid-2000s. Immigration toward Western markets further depopulated villages and province towns, where the majority of the mostly unskilled, poor Romanian migrant laborers originated.

In terms of internal migration, two types of flows emerged in postcommunist Romania. On the one hand, the economic recession produced by neoliberal measures pushed more people to leave the rural areas that had remained underdeveloped during communism, especially those from Eastern counties of Romania, toward towns or better developed rural areas from Western regions. On the other hand, some urban dwellers, especially from the middle class, relocated into rural areas, in the same conditions of recession that hit Romanian economy after 1997. These rural migrants looked to improve their quality of life in healthier environments, with less costly life conditions, or went on to regain lands inherited from their parents. By the end of the first postcommunist decade, the urban-rural migration reached heights that were unprecedented in the Romanian society, which had usually recorded the opposite direction.⁷ This created the context for “counter-urbanisation combined with rural gentrification,” as urban life patterns “cascaded out and reshaped the rural itself.”⁸

All these entangled, yet sometimes contradictory processes – of village depopulation caused by migration toward Western Europe, and of internal migration from urban to rural, respectively – were rarely reflected, in their sociological immediacy, within the mainstream ideological narratives of postcommunism. The developmental scenario of these narratives, in which capitalist projections fed on rekindled anticommunist feelings, allowed little in terms of tackling the underdeveloped status of the greater part of the contemporary society. The lobby made for neoliberalism, which was more intense in Romania than in countries like Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic, explains why the reasons that drove people out of, or back to the rural areas rarely became actual topics on the public agenda.⁹ The same mainstream discourse conveyed by the media and by leading intellectuals depicted rural Romania in terms that were rather out of touch with reality. On the one hand, the myth of the “authentic” peasant as keeper of the national spirit, which was claimed ever since late nineteenth century in moments when the cultural identity needed to be asserted, resurfaced during postcommunism. As Tom Brass explained speaking about the postmodern return of the agrarian myth, this new populism recast peasantry as “a bearer of natural historical features which form the basis of an

eternal folkloric nationhood.”¹⁰ Anticommunism furthermore encouraged an idealized view of local peasants as victims of the economic and political violence of the totalitarian regime that destroyed their habitat and, therefore, was also responsible for the postcommunist deterioration of the village life. On the other hand, the urge toward Europeanization professed alongside neoliberalism depicted local peasantry as an epitome of backwardness and by antagonism with Western forms of civilization. This rather self-colonizing viewpoint was often informed by electoral concerns, especially those belonging to the right or the conservative spectrum, which tried to delegitimize in cultural terms the rural backbone of left-wing parties’ voters.¹¹

What the aforementioned discourses shared was, however, the tendency to employ traditional images of the village within different forms of ideological propaganda. Their conceptual matrices also bypassed the practical realities of the postcommunist village, for which the neoliberal state did, in fact, little to nothing. At the same time, the ideological productivity of the rural topic coalesced with a certain artistic interest either for the countryside, or, generally, for places outside the orbit of the big urban. This phenomenon occurred in other East-Central European literatures as well during postcommunism. Rajendra A. Chitnis explained it by polemical needs (to debate the disillusion of reuniting the East to the West, to revisit or even revise the great collective narratives on communism and its extensions after 1989), but also by the desire to fit within the West’s “renewed fascination with the East [...] as a source of less pampered and enfeebled, more rounded humanity.”¹²

Although they did not occupy main stage in postcommunist Romanian literature, the topic of the countryside or the background of the small town did emerge in certain entanglement with recent or contemporary ideological narratives. Prose published in early 2000s by Dan Lungu, Lucian Dan Teodorovici, and Florin Lăzărescu¹³ provided grassroots depictions of postcommunist patterns of the everyday which were frequently set within province cities. These writers documented in humorous, script-like sequences the lives of ordinary people from various social groups who struggled to make ends meet outside the big city, and make sense of all the confusion of postcommunism. However, the third-person narrative voice in these texts often suggested that “old mentalities” inherited from communism stood at the root of the living difficulties faced by these characters. Ghost-like small towns slowly decomposing in the 1990s in economic precarity also emerged in the background of the dark realist, biographical literature written by “millennial” authors. But while they tended to identify the province with burdensome, patriarchal, sometimes traumatic family histories, these writers focused their angst-ridden first-person accounts on the big cities in which they were trying to start adult lives. On the other hand, the rural topic resurfaced spectacularly in the second decade of the 2000s, in the maximalist prose authored by critically acclaimed senior writers like Marta Petreu and Florina Ilis.¹⁴ Unfolding as family sagas, in various degrees of

fictional sophistication, their complex narratives recomposed decades-long family histories set in the Transylvanian (economically and culturally richest, and sometimes more idealized) countryside. As these histories encompassed both the communist violence exerted on peasants, and the postcommunist decay of village life, they suggested certain, though different, stances taken by their authors toward the anticommunist discourse (of the type that prevailed during the 1990s) and toward the myth of the pre-communist unaltered village life.

It was only recently, and after three decades of ideological sedimentation, that artistic reflections on postcommunist capitalism could become more aware of present economic conditions, and of the social stratification and power structures enforced by the neoliberal system. The literary and cinematic narratives we further analyze abandon agrarian myths or neo-communist obsessions, in order to address the toll that capitalism itself has taken on the postcommunist society. They make that critique by setting their scenarios either within the big urban (namely, Bucharest) or in wasteland province geographies, which have become, however, cogs in the same machine of capitalism. Novels by Adrian Schiop and Lavinia Braniște regard the big city as an instrument of social exclusion, from the viewpoint of marginal narrators who fail to integrate themselves within corporate culture or middle-class aspirational standards. But, as the aforementioned novels and films by Bogdan Mirică and Radu Muntean equally suggest, the margins, the province, the countryside are no longer alternatives to the crushing urban, but are often the stage in which even cruder forms of capitalism enact themselves. Up to a certain extent, Adrian Schiop and Lavinia Braniște carry on the “millennial” project of zero-stylized, biographical account epitomized in the genre of the autofiction. But contrary to their predecessors’ tendency to confine themselves within the self, Schiop and Braniște display stories of existential drift which, despite the subjective experience they register, mirror with clarity the overarching system. These protagonists struggle with financial precarity in Bucharest, which pushes them toward ghetto neighborhoods or even towards childhood hometowns, only to discover that the margins can display in an even more striking manner the inequalities lying within the capitalist core.

Adrian Schiop’s *Soldații. Poveste din Ferentari* [Soldiers. A Story from Ferentari] (2013)⁵ tells about the same-sex relationship between an anthropology PhD student, who assumes the first-person narrative, and his Roma friend, a former convict. The story is set in Bucharest’s most impoverished, ill-famed neighborhood, Ferentari, which is where the precarious protagonist only affords to rent. This ghettoized, almost self-governed territory is located geographically close to the heart of Bucharest, but, symbolically, it remains an epitome of the periphery that middle-class aspirational values have repressed. Ferentari allows the narrator to confront the dark side of the ideological climate in which capitalism was being advertised. Riddled with junkies, convicts, homeless, and (legally) unemployed,

with a Roma-dominated population, filled with miserable, overpopulated one-room apartments, Ferentari is a picture of squalor, where most job opportunities amount to illicit speculation, prostitution, thievery. What the protagonist finds within this anachronical enclave of Bucharest, which seems stuck in the economic chaos of the 1990s, represents the debris of local capitalism. At the same time, it is precisely within this miserable periphery that capitalist power mechanisms become clearer, without the progressive rhetoric that sugarcoats them in the center. As Andrei Terian recently put it, this is a textbook case for “hypermarginality.”⁶ The Mafia culture of speculation and thievery, the social stratification in terms of financial privilege (which distinguishes, for instance, successful smugglers from homeless junkies), the ostentatious display of wealth made by local black market “entrepreneurs” who own it, and the many everyday petty rituals of “tricking” others for a few coins more, all point to the simple truth that it’s all about the money. Schiop brilliantly captures economic and social inequalities through power relations within the homosexual, yet the profoundly asymmetrical couple. While Adi is indeed poor and marginal himself, he does have a social identity and he is only renting in Ferentari, but he could get out of there anytime. Alberto, instead, despite seeming to exploit his partner for money, stands no chance of climbing the social ladder in any way, and of ever escaping the ghetto in which he survives without even owning a birth certificate. By this token, Ferentari no longer stands for a secluded area of grey economy and for a monstrous exception from the clean center, but appears as the logical outgrowth of the system itself.

Lavinia Braniște’s novels depict provisionality under capitalism through semi-biographical female characters who struggle between temporary rents and temporary jobs, against equally insecure family backgrounds that include long-absent fathers, mothers who work abroad, and relatives forgotten in isolated villages. Unable to buy a home in Bucharest or make a solid career out of the professional expedients to which they resort, these characters travel toward the end of the novels to their province hometowns or to their relatives’ villages, which is seen as a fragile attempt to anchor themselves into life. Significantly enough, Lavinia Braniște herself moved in 2019 from Bucharest to Brăila, her small hometown by the Danube River, while Adrian Schiop bought a studio in Ferentari, and relocated during the pandemic in his hometown village from central Transylvania. Lavinia Braniște explained her move to godforsaken Brăila by the fact that she “felt closer to real Romania, here, rather than in the urban centers of Bucharest or Cluj.”⁷ Braniște’s *Interior Zero* (2017)⁸ portrays Cristina, a thirty-something Letters graduate, now working as a secretary in a small construction company. Although hoping to find here a milder environment than in the big firm for which she had previously worked as a translator, the protagonist finds herself confronted with the same corporate abuse and exploitation. She clings on the occasional talks and encounters with her immigrant mother and sometimes nostalgizes about her childhood town. But all news she gets from Brăila, where she eventually returns, point to an economic circle that duplicates



itself to the margins, making the rich become richer and the poor remain the same, regardless of the geography. The eponymous protagonist of *Sonia ridică mâna* [Sonia Raises Her Hand] (2019)⁹ is a scriptwriter documenting for a story about Ceaușescu's daughter. Sonia's attempt to grasp some truth about communism is entangled with a longer journey to the rural roots of her family, as she tries to recover some paternal inheritance. But just as communism remains an elusive reality for the young drifters through the capitalist jungle which has become all-encroaching three decades after 1989, the bourgeois dream of ownership that the protagonist still nurtures proves to be equally unattainable among the conflicts and the competition unfolding between family relatives.

Films by Bogdan Mirică and Radu Muntean confront the web of capitalist relations that are specific to the Eastern European transition through a systemic reconfiguration of the rural geography. Although these cinematic renditions only allow within their own medium a limited commentary on the social totality, the class dimension of the peasantry is constructed here by relying on less idyllic ideas about land ownership. The characters of these films crave for land not because they want to cultivate it for food or entertain an archaic mythology of the countryside. Instead, they value the rural land from a geo-economic viewpoint. In *Câini* [Dogs], directed by Bogdan Mirică (2016) – which is a glocalist thriller imbued with naturalist western elements –, the local cop warns the young man who wants to sell the huge property inherited from his grandfather Alecu: “He kept all this land empty, this is how he wanted it. The communists themselves did not manage to make a cooperative here.” We gradually come to understand that Alecu had led a band of peasant smugglers, whose black market dealings unfolded in this largely unseen middle of nowhere from the vast Dobrogea fields. The transfer of property would have entailed compromising or, at least, changing the terms in which illegal transactions might further take place. For this reason, the confrontation between Roman (the anxious heir who is eager to convert the land to money) and Samir (the Lipovan lieutenant who remained in charge after old Alecu's death) is only apparently a class confrontation. Samir gives a self-ironical account of his own condition: “This is how we live our life in the countryside, we wrestle, we kill each other once in a while. It's because we are uneducated.” However, the tension and condescension in Samir's voice suggest a threat and foreshadow the several crimes that would occur at the end. Bogdan Mirică's peasant perceives the land as a territory that can enable the illicit accumulation of capital, a process which intensified during late transition, although not being specifically characteristic of that period. The rural space no longer relates to a particular social class. Instead, it stretches like a wasteland,²⁰ providing the securing backdrop for the illegal trafficking of goods and people, performed by cruel dealers whose single community view is to preserve the status-quo of the economic value of their surrounding geograThe most recent cinematic approach of this topic is provided by Radu Muntean's *Întregalde* (2021). The film tells about a group of young entrepreneurs led by charitable intentions, who

venture into an unknown rural geography, only to be revealed realities they cannot comprehend. If the territory from *Dogs* made plenty of room for illegal dealings, the mountain forest into which the urban characters raid with their off-road cars marks an area that is picturesque only insofar as it is seen from the viewpoint of tourists, while the young men chat about their love affairs or about their corporate job schemes. But the place where the road of civilization ends and the muddy paths of green wilderness begin, is also the place where nature raises with crushing force. The ingenuously environmentalist discourse promoted by the progressive postmodernity which the film's protagonists channel proves to be irrelevant as far as their actual experience in the wilderness is concerned. Their fear of death, their wandering through the night with no cell signal, point to their misapprehension of the territory in which they found themselves. The city dwellers still resort to their hipster stereotypes on trying to make sense of the peasants encountered in this wilderness, and thus they racialize and primitivize them. However, the camera eye helps reveal the rural inhabitants' character complexity. They move from cynical pragmatism, verbal violence, relational aggressivity, to altruistic, empathetic gestures which can neither be explained through traditional village values, nor can they be codified through modern, progressive concepts.

The underdevelopment of the Romanian village has been one-sidedly related to the totalitarian heritage, as far as both the mainstream public discourse, and artistic depictions of the rural throughout the 1990s and the 2000s, are concerned. The village still lags behind, without great economic prospects or any substantial demographic, its communities unraveling after the four decades of communism that eroded its traditional values and idyllic way of life. This dominant narrative has, however, remained profoundly reductive, by refusing to address the ways in which the social and economic changes of the postcommunist transition contributed, at least to the same extent, to the underdevelopment of rural life. Blaming the communist history might be a convenient “truth,” which has been conveyed in a wide range of artistic works, from short films to massive sophisticated novels. But such a perspective only leads to the museification of a nostalgic ruralism, which provides for the peasants' problems a simplistic, idealistic, yet rhetorically efficient solution by explaining social-economic effects through cultural causes. Ineffective modernization and lack of infrastructure, poverty, massive migration – they have all been explained by backwards mentalities that could no longer change after being altered by communism.

It was only recently that a new generation of artists could develop a more nuanced ideological awareness and the aesthetic means to reflect on the present of transition. As such, they were able to grasp the structural causes of the decay of the rural and urban peripheries, and link them to the social-economic processes of transition. Adrian Șchiop's Ferentari and Bogdan Mirică's Dobrogea are widely capitalist geographies, where social inequalities dictate ways of life, the individual is held responsible for his/her lack of progress, work relations rely on massive exploitation, the middle-class

prides itself in making charitable acts, and the pursuit of profit justifies murder. The social commentary made by the fictional, semi-biographical narratives we analyzed, can be summed up as such: capitalist transformations have made the periphery both more difficult to inhabit, and harder to understand.

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Notes:

1. Dorin Dobrinu and Constantin Iordachi, eds., *Transforming Peasants, Property and Power: The Collectivization of Agriculture in Romania, 1949-1962* (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2009).
2. David Turnock, "Romanian Villages: Rural Planning under Communism," *Rural History* 2, no. 1 (1991): 100.
3. Fully representative for this approach is the exhibition *The Peasantry and Communism: Requiem for the Romanian Peasant*, organized starting with March 2009 by the International Centre for Studies into Communism, part of the Sighet Memorial to the Victims of Communism and to the Resistance – Civic Academy Foundation.
4. See Dinu C. Giurescu, *The Razing of Romania's Past. International Preservation Report* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress/The Preservation Press, 1989), 67.
5. Cornel Ban, *Dependență și dezvoltare. Economia politică a capitalismului românesc* (Cluj-Napoca: Tact, 2014), 86.
6. *Ibid.*, 162.
7. See T. Rotariu, E. Mezei, "Asupra unor aspecte ale migrației interne recente din România," *Sociologie Românească*, no. 3 (1999): 5-38.
8. Liliana Guran-Nica and Michael Sofer, "Migration Dynamics in Romania and the Counter-Urbanisation Process: A Case Study of Bucharest's Rural-Urban Fringe," in *Translocal Ruralism. Mobility and Connectivity in European Rural Spaces*, eds. Charlotta Hedberg and Renato Miguel do Carmo (Springer: Geo Journal Library, 2012), 88-89.
9. Vladimir Pasti, *Noul capitalism românesc* (Iași: Polirom, 2006). See also Victor Rizescu, *Tranziții discursive. Despre agende culturale, istorie intelectuală și onorabilitate ideologică după communism* (Bucharest: Corint, 2012).
10. Tom Brass, *Peasants, Populism and Postmodernism: The Return of the Agrarian Myth* (London: Routledge, 2000), 122.
11. See Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, *A Tale of Two Villages: Coerced Modernization in East European Countryside* (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2010)
12. Rajendra A. Chitnis, "A Need for Greater Openness: The Countryside in Czech Fiction since 1989," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 91, no. 3 (2013): 463-464.
13. Lucian Dan Teodorovici, *Cercul nostru vă prezintă* (Iași: Polirom, 2002); Florin Lăzărescu, *Ce se știe despre ursul Panda* (Iași: Polirom, 2003); Dan Lungu, *Raiul găinilor (fals roman de zvonuri și mistere)* (Iași: Polirom, 2004).
14. Marta Petreu, *Acasă, pe Câmpia Armaghedonului* (Iași: Polirom, 2011); Florina Ilis, *Cartea numerilor* (Iași: Polirom, 2018).
15. Adrian Schiop, *Soldații. Poveste din Ferentari* (Iași: Polirom, 2013).
16. Andrei Terian, "Communitarity: Un-Disciplining Race, Class, and Sex in the Wake of Anti-'PC' Monomania," in *Theory in the 'Post' Era*, eds. Alexandru Matei, Christian Moraru, and Andrei Terian (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021), 107-120.
17. Lavinia Braniște, "Capătul lui 10," *Scena* 9, January 31, 2019.
18. Lavinia Braniște, *Interior zero* (Iași: Polirom, 2017).
19. Lavinia Braniște, *Sonia ridică mâna* (Iași: Polirom, 2017).
20. See Zsolt Győri, "Ruralising Masculinities and Masculinising the Rural in Márk Kostyál's *Coyote* and Bogdan Mirică's *Dogs*," in *Postsocialist Mobilities: Studies in Eastern European Cinema*, eds. Hajnal Király and Zsolt Győri (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021), 101-123. The author's idea according to which the film represents "a departure from modernity and consumer society towards the ancestral land" (101) is debatable, given the absence of any visual or narrative element which would encourage associating the rurality of Mirică's film with an ancestral geography. On the other hand, Győri is right in observing that the rurality in *Dogs* is configured within a conflictual geography, given that Dobrogea is a junction area, where a Latin Romanian, Europe-oriented background meets a Balkan one – the protagonist's negatively connoted name, Samir, is significant in this sense.

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