

Miladina Monova (Bulgaria)
Institute for the Study of Societies and Knowledge
Bulgarian Academy of Sciences
e-mail: miladina.monova@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION:

CHANGING ECONOMIES AND CHANGING SOCIETIES IN THE AGE OF GLOBAL CAPITALISM: POST-SOCIALIST CASE STUDIES

This special issue addresses peoples' economies and the way in which individuals, families and communities find their own ways in dealing with the constraints of neoliberal capitalism. We present six original studies from young researchers working on North Macedonia, Bulgaria, Greece, and Poland, with an emphasis on household economy, production, economic life in rural and urban settings and migration. Sexual workers, illicit tobacco growers, self-enterprising families in rural tourism, food producers, well off urbanites imagining more comfortable life in romantic villages and vendors on the market place invest in their entrepreneurial venture something, if not everything that can be defined as their family capital: labour, land, house and money.

Three decades after the fall of the Berlin wall, these societies can no longer be understood within the analytical frame of post-socialist, the one that has been often used in analyses of postulating an uni-linear model of transition from socialism to capitalism. In fact capitalism is already an established system, and at some level remnants of socialism are more likely to be found in big western democracies than in most of the formerly communist countries. And yet, in the postsocialist context, as elsewhere, people transmit something from their past every time they try to erase it, and open new possibilities and ways of thinking every time they claim to eagerly conform to capitalism.

This special issue is however less focused on the continuities with the past than with the making of neo-liberal capitalism and its gradual "domestication" (Creed, Tocheva here) within the last 30 years. An entire generation was born, grown up and today is raising children in an Eastern-European capitalist context. The study about Greece, an "old" capitalist country, points to processes that are strikingly similar to those analysed in the case studies from postsocialist countries. While in this special issue the case studies are merely presented side by side,

taken together they suggest a comparative approach to the social embeddedness of neoliberal capitalism beyond the usual division of “old” capitalist versus “postsocialist” capitalist societies. Indeed, the analyses of these transforming societies demonstrate the embeddedness of the economy in social relations and simultaneously allow insights into some surprisingly close trajectories of the changing norms and values. Everywhere, the economy is both a social institution and a vehicle of ideology. Everywhere, the economic sphere interacts with state, kinship, religion, and politics.

Drawing on rich ethnographic data, Crvenkoska presents a thick description of the economy within the community of “sisters” - Roma sexual workers in Skopje. Playing different gender roles (“both man, and woman”) they provide not only for themselves and their families but also for the larger community and contribute to the continuation of ritual life in the neighborhood. Their legitimacy partially comes from the original social organization they have created – a sisterhood that functions as a symbolic kinship system. Migration as a major feature under neoliberalism is of particular relevance here. For sexual workers in Skopje, power and prestige are mostly gained through long term illegal migration to Western countries where “sisters” have “enhanced” their “sexual knowledge” and skills. The “old sister” is the most respected in the sisterhood, she plays the role of the leader, and her duty is to give shelter to others, run the common budget and organize parties, where knowledge is exchanged between the youngest and the more experienced.

The impact of EU agricultural policies, and the way in which families engaged in an entrepreneurial venture adapt to neoliberalism is addressed in two original ethnographies. Whether they strictly follow the rules of the state and EU institutions (Tocheva), or consciously transgress them (Yannakopoulos), self-enterprising households cherish a common ideal of self-reliance, motivated by a mixture of desire for adaptation to the neoliberal world and resilience. Yiannakopoulos examines the case of families in a small town in Greece who have decided to return to the cultivation of tobacco, an old crop in this area, and since then launched an illicit trade throughout the country. By doing this they act against EU policies and overtly challenge the state and local officials who have chosen - so far - to ignore illegal cultivation. For these families, undeclared cultivation and illicit trade are more than a subsistence strategy – they refer to notions such as rights and morality, with an idea of self-reliance framed as expression of their personal freedom. Tocheva’s study relates the case of a Bulgarian family who have lost almost all their possessions after enrolling in an EU program designed to support small-scale tourism business. They created a family hotel after having contracted a large bank loan in order to comply with the program requirements. But the Bulgarian fund running the program locally

refused to support them and the family ended up heavily indebted. Eventually, two men from the family migrated to England. They earn money as migrant workers, pay back the Bulgarian bank and hope to retrieve complete ownership of the hotel, the embodiment of their ideal of self-reliance.

In a top down approach, Stancheva asks how global ideas of sustainability are received by rural households involved in a global NGO's project on slow food. Similarly to other contributors, she shows how in the current political and economic context, rural families cannot make a living from tourism and agricultural production alone. Despite efforts of the international foundation to promote and give visibility to local crops and food specialities, their marketing approach can hardly help agriculture achieve sustainability without the active support of the state and the EU institutions. The failure to respond to the expectations of the targeted communities is also due to the neoliberal logic of the state prioritizing interests of external stakeholders (donors and NGOs) who empower local political and economic elites relatively disconnected from the rest of the population. Justification narratives among local representatives of the NGO are particularly revealing. From one side, they accuse "peasants" of "backwardness" and "conservatism", and from the other they admit how difficult it is "to motivate the people" with ideas on sustainability, when "small people do not exist for the state".

Urban elites aspiring to settle on a permanent basis in a rural setting are studied by Dimitrova. The actors of this rather recent phenomenon are young and well off individuals who see themselves as active agents of rural economic development. Most of the informants are making their first steps in their project for a new life. This lifestyle mitigation also rests on a certain idea of sustainability according to which urbanites bring wealth and new skills in response to local needs. Narratives from Poland shows the discrepancies between the urban ideal of rurality and revival through sustainability, and the variety of unexpected problems that the proponents of this movement encounter while discovering village life.

In the last contribution, Venkov describes the complex economic system of the central marketplace in Sofia, shaped through the interaction of producers, traders, and consumers. His analysis underscores the embeddedness of the economy in politics, tracing in particular how changing ideologies have transformed the urban site throughout history, until the neoliberal turn after the fall of socialism. At present, neoliberal ideology tries to eradicate the specific sociality of the marketplace as a setting where people from different backgrounds, social classes, and ethnic groups meet and interact. Despite these efforts, migrants

and refugees who have arrived since 2014 find their ways to explore new market niches that connect old and new settlers.

In conclusion, we believe that this special issue illuminates the dynamics of global capitalism approached from its new, relatively understudied periphery. We also hope to offer the reader an understanding, certainly partial, of what it means to engage the local neoliberal areas of economic life from the point of view of the people struggling for making a living and at the same time creating new forms of togetherness.

