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Hope stronger than anguish – timber traders imagining future in times of crisis.

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[possibility, freedom, anticipation, courage, risk]

Workshop: Imagination, crisis and hope, or, do futures have a future?

Conveners: Steve Coleman & David Graeber

Recent fieldwork in the highlands of Romania brought me to a village of "non-complainers" set in the midst of a mass of postsocialist "complainers". Living by selling timber for construction, in all parts of the country, they are being dramatically affected by the global economic crisis. Recent elections as well as environmental regulations may threaten their trade as well. Despite the crisis and looming changes, they are serene: "nobody will starve here". I shall explore how they envision their future in relation to their economy. How do we explain their optimism? What makes hope stronger than anguish?

In our job to write about life, we are always torn apart between what people think, what they say and what they do. We see what they do, but don't know how thought contributed to action; hear what they say, but never trust that discourses express reality or disclose finally anything about doing or thinking.

So, how to deal with the future? Thinking together with Jane Guyer, one can ask if "we can identify the push of intention, the pull of the future or if those are altogether wrong terms" (Guyer, 2006)? And, if we keep them, how to approach them methodologically? Hear what people say they will do and relate to how they act? Hear stories about their dreams from the past and what became of them? Then, how to put those things into concepts; to speak about imagination or possibility, anticipation, expectation or virtuality? Furthermore, which kind of future to consider, how long the sequence to put under microscope? The about-to-be present, the near future, the distant future, the future of children?

When I submitted my title, I was in the middle of fieldwork. Now I approach its end. I was struck by the serenity of people around me. They inhabit a mountain village at relatively high altitude in Romania and they are timber producers and traders. They share a terrible faith in human agency through work, despite viewing the outside world as merely hostile, as a source of constant worries. So, I thought this paper would be an answer to the question “why hope, why optimism, why serenity?”. Further on, being inspired by the idea expressed often by my informants that “life is in one’s hands”, I decided to take issue with the construction of life as a chain of sequences in which anticipation and possibility play an important part, together with experience, examples of others or constraints. And, at the core of enacting a possibility, I take the idea of courage, which I like better than the more impersonal and structural ‘risk taking’.

In one of her papers, at the end, Jane Guyer draws on Levi Strauss in *Mythologiques* and speaks about the idea of possibility as a tension between being and not being as a circular itinerary which has at the center the insertion of courage (Guyer 2009: 368). People’s imagination is more or less populated with possibilities, and to move into one or another, even to dare imagining some of the more ‘risky’ possibilities it takes courage. The term inspired me a lot in relation to the vivid community that I have seen, which moves away from the stereotypical view about Eastern Europeans as stuck in an expectation from the state or other authorities to shape their future.

People in the village experienced dramatic ups and downs during their lifetime. During communism they were poor and life was difficult in the mountains. Men worked hard in the state forests and some of them succeeded to swindle some timber and trade it in the plains. Women raised children and cows at home. After the fall of communism they

experienced an economic boom, when the forests were privatized and trade was suddenly free. The area went up economically pretty quickly.

Ancuta

Anca married and left her village for the nearby town exactly twenty years ago. She is 40 now, she has a daughter and a son. The daughter is 20 and works in Italy, and her husband works in Spain already for a few years. For the moment, it feels like her life is a bit falling apart. She's on the verge of separation from her husband because she did not like to stay in Spain; her daughter is no longer with her. This summer I found her in the village, working hard to pick up blueberries and sell them. She stays here for almost a month in the blueberry season, to 'make money'. During winter, she worked as a baker in a luxury hotel in the nearby touristic valley, where she worked hard only for 3 days a week, then having 4 free days. In June she went to pick up strawberries in Germany for a month and in September she plans to go to her daughter to work in Italy. She doesn't like a stable job, she doesn't want to be tied to a working schedule, not to be able to come home in the village or to have time for herself. She says, "I praise freedom. I want to make money, I work hard and quick". The sequence of her life that I could follow directly, connected to the life story that she told me, deploys a courageous take on life as a permanent succession of possibilities for work. One can dismantle the future of this woman in multiple different 'futures', according to different spans of time and to different domains of life: her marriage is finished, she will be alone; she has children, but she does not imagine their future, it is for them to construct it. The imagined future for herself, relating to the economic domain, concerns two temporalities: the near future, meaning the future working season – where to go for work in the next months? She is

kind of stepping into this future with courage; her experience tells her that something will come up and she is curious to go somewhere new, she anticipates meeting new people, seeing new places. As long as the value that guides her is to be free, she is not constrained by a bleak picture of instability. This courage might also be enhanced by the distant future that she imagines – the other temporality concerned. This distant future resembles a safety net: she will ultimately be back to the village, where livelihood seems to spring out of the giving nature.

For Anca, possibility is the word. Unlike many other women, including from the village, which have a definite life track in mind, a narrow path comprising finding a job in the city or working in the house to feed the family, she is challenged by seeing multiple possibilities opening up. She has the courage to imagine these futures and the courage to move towards them.

This freedom of movement and courage is not an isolated feature in the village where I have done fieldwork. It appears in many instances.

I told you the story of a woman. However, courage becomes an interesting feature when seen in the economic activity of men, in trade.

In the past, men defied authorities and practiced illegal long distance trade; while on the road, they were sleeping in barns during winter and enduring famine. In the present, they are much better off. Now they deploy rhetoric of independence, they do not want to be tied to one another, they do not want to be indebted or to have obligations, they have a saying: “when you ride the horse of another man, be sure you will fall in the deepest river”.

The period which followed the fall of communism, until 2008, was the golden age of the village. The economic upheaval of constructions cumulated with the demise of the law meant a gold mine for timber traders. All of that flourished in a legal chaos. The timber trade structured itself in harmony with this thrive. Traders had many possibilities; there were many marketplaces to go to, many customers to connect to. They were not stuck in heavy dependences on particular places or persons.

Courage, which could be termed also risk, is the landmark of a whole generation of the village, the generation that was 15-20 years old in 1990.

At that time, the villagers bought second hand forestry equipment from the dismantling state enterprises – sawmills, trucks, tractors and woodchoppers. After a few years of commercial effervescence, the young men of the village, 20 years old in '95, felt that it was their 'moment in history'. They borrowed money, sold possessions, went abroad and bought 3 German trucks, kept one and sold the other two, and went into timber business. Back then, almost every man in the village lined up to the existing sawmills to process timber, day and night. They loaded their own trucks and other rented trucks and went to recently established marketplaces, weekly local fairs and to people's houses to sell their merchandise. They have felt the mirage of easy and fast money; they felt that 'their prosperity was in their own hands'.

Anca's brother for example sold his only apartment in the nearby town without the approval or the knowledge of his wife. He just announced her "dear we have to move in with this friend, cause I sold the house". He invested in production equipment and in one year he made the apartment money 6 times more. He says 'he felt the moment', he

anticipated the gain; he did not risk, it was something certain, as people around him showed him the example. Another 'child' of that era became the owner of the timber marketplace in the large city of Timisoara. He explained to me that he first saw other people buying new cars, building big and beautiful houses, starting a business, so the desire to make money awakened in him. He began to trade, but money was running out of his hands in the beginning; in time, he gained more experience, he could anticipate the moves of the market and to calculate risks more and more precisely. When I talked to him in March, in the middle of the economic crisis, he felt so confident as to say: 'I have the courage to do anything in terms of business, if I do not succeed, who else will?!' So, the future feels like a challenge for the mind of the confident trader; the risk can be calculated; he praises anticipation by experience. However, very recently he was so courageous as to trade illegal cigarettes and he got caught and prosecuted; he was released, but he is still under trial.

As an old men told me, they are the children of the "Las Vegas era of the village". They are now well-off, enjoying the fruits of their achievements in the sphere of consumption. They are all in their 30s, have good lives, well dressed wives and smart, beautiful little kids to enjoy. They worried about the future of their business last winter, but not too much. Now, in summer, "merchandise passes" much better, the price raised again, so they smile again and say the crisis is almost over.

I have presented mostly cases of people whose courage drove them to leave the village. However, people who stayed in the village move into future possibilities with the same nerve. They risk their lives in the forest everyday without insurance or other kinds of protection; they sell timber on credit to firms on the verge of bankruptcy in times of acute

uncertainty without contracts. They all have a saying which I heard in many instances, even very common ones, like making hay - they say 'keep going'. Even when making hay, one can choose between working and resting, between being and not being. The courage to push the limits of your body once, then twice, until courage itself becomes a routine, makes the future and the sequence of life.

Conclusion

Don't want to stay caught in a sterile argument that everything implies at least two possibilities of yes and no..... my paper shows that people dare to imagine possibilities, to avoid authority and the view that the system imposes. The negative stance of closing the horizon into misery and underdevelopment that a system of ex communist authority and a state of corruption imply is left by these people 'out there', in the discourse about life in Romania in general. Most people that I have encountered here do not guide themselves according to it . They choose and live: The safety net of the village, autarchy and black market instead of dependence and regulations; independence and trusting 'one's own hands' instead of waiting for authorities to provide; and 'keep going' instead of contemplating a state of misery.

So, why are these people courageous, while others don't? Does it come from a kind of habitus, from experience? Is it more freedom from the state-related oppressive context, since they might be called people at the margins? Is it because they imagine the safety net

of the community as always being there? For me, at this stage of my research, it might be too early to answer the why question.