

# UTOPIA AND NEOLIBERALISM

## Ethnographies of Rural Spaces

*Hana Horáková, Andrea Boscoboinik, Robin Smith (eds.). 2018.  
Berlin: Lit Verlag. ISBN 978-3-643-80315-6. 256 p.*

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*Utopia and Neoliberalism: Ethnographies of Rural Spaces* is a welcomed volume that brings together three conceptual categories – utopia, rurality, and neoliberalism – from various case studies. It sets out to assess the present-day global economic forces and their critiques from the perspective of rural spaces. The volume is the outcome of a panel during the International Society for Ethnology and Folklore’s 12<sup>th</sup> conference in Zagreb in June 2015. The panel’s conveners – Hana Horáková, Andrea Boscoboinik, and Montserrat Soronellas – invited its participants to investigate rurality as idealized space under neoliberal transformation. The book, edited by three anthropologists, Hana Horáková, Andrea Boscoboinik and Robin Smith, not only provides anthropological accounts of modern countryside, but creatively complicates the definition of and relationship between utopia, rurality and neoliberalism.

The volume opens with a theoretical chapter written by Hana Horáková. She reminds the reader that the “rural” is not as much a physical space as a social construction. Moreover, it is a social construction that has informed much of Western critical thought. For example, Tönnies’ *Gemeinschaft-Gesellschaft* and Durkheim’s mechanic-organic solidarity as two distinct ways of making society are based on an analytical opposition between the rural and the urban, the traditional and the modern. This analytical distinction has contributed to a popular idea of a rural idyll, an imagined rural past constructed out of present urban dystopia. In other words, the popular imagery of rural idyll is a utopia that implicitly critiques the ills of modern, predominantly urban lives, which, according to the editors, are shaped by neoliberalism.

Therefore, an investigation of rural idyll and how it encounters actually existing physical space permits us to learn not only about utopia and countryside under neoliberalism, but about neoliberalism itself. Moreover, the volume engages with the countryside and rural idyll from different locales. An analysis of how different countrysides intertwine neoliberalism and utopia promises to see the three concepts anew – that is, not as ready-made analytical tools where rurality forms the radical other to (urban) modernity, but as historically constructed, lived and evolving realities. As put by Horáková, all three concepts are “political,” i. e., located on a timeline with past, present and future that contestingly inform a critical assessment of the existing socio-economic order and longing for a better future.

Chapters two to ten are empirical chapters. Each focuses on a different case and theme, deserving attention in its own right. To give an idea of the diversity of contributions, I shall

fleetingly summarize the contents. In the order as presented in the book, chapters describe the following phenomena: the contestation of the European Union agricultural policy through definition of “animal welfare” in Sardinia, Italy (Zerilli and Pitzalis), agroecology as a mode of life and production distinct from EU-encouraged organic agriculture in Catalonia, Spain (Soronellas-Masdeu and Casal-Fité), distinction between traditions that can and cannot be turned into sellable heritage goods in the Spanish Pyrenees (del Mármol), lifestyle migration in the Swiss Alps (Cretton), reproductive crisis in the Spanish countryside (Bodoque-Puerta), the impossibility of making ends meet in Istria, Croatia and locals’ longing for past times of economic prosperity (Smith), diverging nostalgic narratives of Poreče, Macedonia and the complicated relationship between unspoiled tradition and economic prosperity (Bielenin-Lenczowska), peasantry as a distinct mode of life and its transformations in post-socialist Fundata, Romania (Mihăilescu and Duminecă), tourism in Chinese Naxi areas and contradicting perception of money, economic development, and tradition (Bingaman).

The main innovation and contribution of this volume, however, hides in its comparative perspective. The book brings together case studies from old capitalist countries (chapters two to six), post-socialist countries (chapters seven to nine) and a Chinese case of a communist state-led market economy (chapter ten). Case studies on the states that have a different relation to the capitalist modernity add an extra layer of complexity: rural utopia intersects with other utopias and nostalgias that serve to critique the present socio-economic system, blurring any analytical lines between the three concepts. In some cases, utopia is forward-looking; it struggles to construct a particular type of society for the future. In other cases, it is backward-looking, *i. e.*, the present socio-economic system is critiqued through nostalgic discourses. In some instances, utopia demands traditional harmony (usually associated with pre-capitalist society), in others more economic development (usually associated with modernity).

In short, the Western European cases show the rural utopia of authentic life, pristine nature and millennial tradition thriving strong, mainly through heritage goods, tourist services, and lifestyle choices (chapters by Zerilli and Pitzalis, del Mármol, Cretton). This yearning for radical alterity to urban lives that is projected to the countryside – and mainly consumed as an image or experience – however remains utopian. In reality, the countryside has been transformed by the industrialization of agriculture, outmigration and difficulties in making a living (del Mármol, Bodoque-Puerta). To face such hardship, some locals jump on the bandwagon of tourism to diversify livelihood strategies (del Mármol), others try to appropriate the heritage discourse to invest it with their agendas (Zerilli and Pitzalis), and yet others try to resist it by relying on uncompetitive, autonomy-encouraging ways of life (Soronellas-Masdeu and Casal-Fité).

The post-socialist cases show that market liberalization and a lack of clear agricultural strategy at the national level has led to fragile rural livelihoods with unclear perspectives for future development (Smith, Bielenin-Lenczowska, Mihăilescu and Duminecă). As in the Western European cases, tourism that fetishizes rurality as the antidote to urban dystopia is an appealing narrative (Bielenin-Lenczowska, Bingaman) and an emerging livelihood strategy (Mihăilescu and Duminecă). However, it might propose livelihoods inferior to those of

socialist regimes (Smith, Bielenin-Lenczowska) and increase inequalities (Mihăilescu and Duminecã). The implicit comparison with post-socialist cases draws out the ambiguous relationship between utopia and economic development. Increased market integration is not always seen as deplorable neoliberalism; it also inspires nostalgia, a backwards-looking utopia that critiques the present socio-economic order as lacking economic prosperity. The volume, however, could further complicate the post-socialist narrative that demands more economic development, by including cases from post-socialist countries that have achieved a considerable level of economic prosperity (e. g. the Czech Republic) or those who stigmatize their socialist pasts (e. g. the Baltic countries).

The book finishes with an afterword by Andrea Boscoboinik, who compares the different chapters and concludes that various imageries of rurality and utopia are essential in shaping realities. Andrea Boscoboinik emphasizes that neoliberalism and utopia do not mean the same thing in different contexts and can be employed for different ends. She argues that unlike the neoliberal project that promotes the spread of rational *homo œconomicus*, imaginaries, including utopian imaginaries, remain central for guiding action and dealing with challenging lived realities.

In sum, the book proposes a stimulating read and takes up a daring challenge, i. e. to demonstrate how countryside can shed light on transformations of both late capitalism and its critiques through utopian imageries. It powerfully shows that neither utopia, nor neoliberalism or rurality is a singular or dematerialized phenomenon. However, a reader might remain yearning for more analysis and theory-building: how is the shape and evolution of present-day capitalism to be understood from the countryside? How is rurality constructed as a balm to the ills of modernity: as a place, a lifestyle or a different mode of life? What makes different constructions of countryside comparable? Alternatively, how is (or was) rural utopia related to different, non-capitalist modes of living? One might hope that this volume will inspire further research on the intersection of rurality, utopia and late capitalism.