

Opinion

For the dissertation titled

***Urban–rural migration: an ethnological study based on examples from
Bulgaria, Slovakia and Belgium***

for obtaining the degree of Doctor in professional field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Studies

Author: Petya Dimitrova

Supervisor: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Iliya Iliev

The proposed dissertation is dedicated to a topical and intriguing, albeit modest in scale phenomenon: the migration from cities to rural areas in search of an alternative to urban life, known as “lifestyle migration”. Despite its modest scale, this phenomenon has attracted both media attention and research interest. It is with great satisfaction that I state at the outset that Petya Dimitrova has intervened competently and authoritatively in this field, through her serious field research and through her ambitious comparison of three case studies in three different countries.

I find the dissertation’s approach, which sees migration not as a single act but as “a set of choices made by the individual, which condition that movement” (p. 6), particularly apt, in line with other contemporary research trends that view migration as a state rather than an act of movement, denoting this state with the newly-coined term “migrancy”. In this case, the author’s approach is justified by the fact that the movement in question is inseparable from other choices, such as the fulfillment of the self, the construction of a vindicated identity, a responsible attitude towards nature and consumption, etc.

The aims and objectives of the dissertation research are clearly formulated in line with the complex nature of the phenomenon under study and the author’s ambitious comparative agenda. A set of relevant methods has been used, which complement and enrich each other. The choice of the three field study sites is aptly defended. The comparative perspective is particularly valuable in this respect, especially as the author is clearly aware of the limitations of comparison. The research questions highlight both the motives of the resettlement and its consequences,

through the eyes of the researcher and the settlers themselves. The author's reflexivity in terms of her distancing from the communities studied, in particular that of Zhelen, is impressive.

As a merit of the work, I would like to highlight the construction of the object of study by combining several conceptual angles that complement each other to capture the complex and multilayered nature of the phenomenon under study. The author reaches out to theories of identity, authenticity and individualism, on the one hand, and theories of contemporary consumption and its refusal or limitation (the so-called downshifting). The resulting theoretical construct is complemented by yet another dimension directly relevant to the topic of the dissertation research, namely migration from urban to rural environments. By systematically referring the considered concepts with her own project the author has successfully overcome the self-purposefulness of such "theoretical" sections, often encountered in dissertations. At the same time, the argument in this first chapter suffers from a certain repetitiveness: the author demonstrates familiarity with several thematic fields, but does not always manage to go beyond the layering of concepts to their synthesis in terms of her own research. As a particular achievement in this first chapter, I would like to highlight the deconstruction of the "rural idyll" both as a way of self-ideologizing/self-mythologizing and as a niche market.

The second chapter thoroughly examines the preconditions for migration, the life of the migrants in their new environment and the attitude of the local people towards them. Although the argument is well structured according to the seven prerequisites for urban-rural migration, they are not well grounded: some of them (such as consumption, the search for authenticity, the need for a change in life style) clearly follow from the previous argument; others, however (infrastructure, work, child-rearing) are postulated and it is not clear how they were selected. I hope the author will defend these choices during the discussion.

Nonetheless, this second chapter is contributory. I am pleasantly surprised by the young researcher's ability to organize the material from her three field sites by subordinating it to the identified common themes, and to highlight similarities and differences, sometimes rather subtle ones. The empirical density of the text is noteworthy. I single out as a particularly good interpretive achievement the

reflections on the creation (or not) of community, the difficulties, dynamics and failures in this regard. The author concludes that migrants are preoccupied with their own projects rather than aiming to integrate into the rural community (p. 149 ff.), that they bring elements of the urban into the rural environment and thus distinguish themselves from the local community. It is no coincidence that the author qualifies them as a “quasi-community”. The very notion of quasi-community, which the author introduces to describe the field realities she observed, speaks of a careful and thorough analytical work, going beyond the interviewees’ statements. Another valuable contribution is the exploration of relations with local residents and the delineation of dynamics and tensions within them. It allows the author to carry out a truly thick description in Geertz’s sense, i.e. showing the perspectives of all social actors. The finding that identity based on locality is key for the natives, but not for the settlers, seems logical and well founded.

The title of Chapter Three, “Examples...” is misleading, as it forms the expectation that it is mostly illustrative. In fact, the author’s dense description and reflection on the few case studies presented contributes significantly to deepening and refining the study, to capturing subtle but important details that the preceding comparative survey cannot reach. It makes it possible to present the phenomenon under study in its complexity and its contradictory nature. I also note with approval Dimitrova’s observations on the ambivalence of the migrants’ business ventures and their self-ideologizations in this regard, as well as in relation to community life.

Last but not least, I appreciate the clear and coherent structure of the work, the good academic style, the conclusions at the end of each chapter. The author demonstrates knowledge of a wide range of specific research and theorisations of key concepts as well as skills in working with different kinds of empirical material. The visual materials in the thesis, whose role is not only illustrative, are excellent.

The contributions formulated in the summary are real and proven.

Seven publications in Bulgarian and English are listed, four of which are related to the topic of the thesis.

In conclusion, I would like to put a couple of questions and remarks:

1. Two terms with similar meanings are used in the dissertation: way of life and lifestyle. The former, which is key to the research and occurs more frequently, is in the title of Chapter One and Section 1.3.3. The second is in the title of section 2.1.6. of chapter two and in several places in the text. The two terms are not clarified in relation to each other and it is not clear whether and in what way they differ from each other. I get the impression that these are non-uniform translations of lifestyle. I hope that the author will bring clarity to this matter during the oral defence of the dissertation.
2. In addition to the theory of pull-push factors, which the dissertation refers to in Chapter I, the sections on the rural environment in Chapter II make it clear that the theory of migration networks is also applicable, i.e. that migrants often follow relatives or acquaintances who have already settled somewhere in migration. Would any other migration theories be applicable to the case studies, and which ones?
3. While the contributions listed in the summary are correct, I would add to them the systematic and disciplined comparison as yet another contribution. It allows the author to find different meanings and different values behind the similar rhetoric of the residents in the three places. For example, regarding the two types of downshifting, career/work and consumption (Zhelen): how are they distributed in the three communities, are there differences, and what would be the explanation for this?

The above remarks in no way question the merits of the thesis as a whole. Petya Dimitrova has carried out an original research that meets all the requirements for awarding the PhD degree. I will confidently vote for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in professional field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Studies to Petya Valentinova Dimitrova.

I declare that I have no publications co-authored with Petya Dimitrova, nor any other conflict of interest. I did not identify any plagiarism in the dissertation.

Prof. Dr. Daniela Koleva

Sofia University

Department of History and Theory of Culture