**REVIEW**

by Assoc. Prof. Petko Hristov, PhD

from the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with the Ethnographic Museum

at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

for conducting a procedure for awarding the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in professional field 3.1. "Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences" for the needs of the Department of Ethnology at the Faculty of History of Sofia University "St. Kl. Ohridski"

for the dissertation "*Migration from town to village: an ethnological study on the example of Bulgaria, Slovakia and Belgium*" with the author Petya Valentinova Dimitrova and scientific supervisors Prof. Dr. Vesselin Tepavicharov and Assoc. Prof. Iliya Iliev, PhD.

The topic of migration has been the subject of increased research interest for decades, but in recent years it has taken on new dimensions, forms, and characteristics, becoming a focus of both political and social life, and enjoying increased media attention. The social and cultural changes that they are causing not only in the country but throughout Europe, once again prove the relevance and multidirectional of the study of migration movements in the contemporary world. Even before the democratic changes in Bulgaria, migration from the countryside to the big cities has been the subject of study by sociologists, demographers, and ethnologists, but recent years have highlighted another social phenomenon - the accelerated growth of migration of a mostly young and active population to the already abandoned and depopulated villages. This is a social phenomenon characteristic not only of the country but of the whole of Europe and many other regions of the world. The entry of permaculture ideas and new practices among the younger generations in Bulgaria both transformed the migratory movements between the city and the countryside, changing its character, and Europeanized the social practices in the country. That is why the choice of an interdisciplinary approach and the comparative (pan-European) perspective of the study undertaken by Petya Dimitrova is original and topical, and the results of the research are not only contributing to Bulgarian science.

The Ph.D. student Petya Valentinova Dimitrova has graduated from the Bachelor's Program in Book Publishing at Sofia University "St. Kl. Ohridski" and the Master's program "Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology" at the University of Sofia (2016-2018) and the University of Warsaw (2018) in the ERASMUS+ programme. She has participated in summer schools and short-term projects in Armenia, Greece, and the Republic of North Macedonia. The dissertation was discussed and proposed for the defence at a meeting of the Department of Ethnology at the Faculty of History of Sofia University on 28 March 2022.

The dissertation consists of an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, a bibliography, and appendices (40 collages with author's photographs from the fields in Bulgaria, Slovakia, and Belgium), 271 pages in total. In the introductory part, Petya clearly articulates the aims and objectives of the research, the questions that motivated the study, and its interdisciplinary nature. Accepting the thesis that migration is a complex phenomenon and affects not only the act of resettlement itself but also the change of lifestyle after migration, Petya Dimitrova undertook a field study in the village of Zhelen (Bulgaria), Zaježová, (Slovakia) and Overijse (Belgium) to follow the trends and factors in urban-rural migration from a comparative European perspective. Alternating the presentation of theoretical concepts and research techniques with the description and analysis of fieldwork among respondents with different generational, social, and occupational profiles in settlements carried out according to different quasi-communities (according to the accepted terminology), the dissertation analyses the change in lifestyle from a variety of perspectives - ecology, quality of life, creativity and change in employment. The focus is on so-called "lifestyle migration", understood specifically as "internal migration from urban to rural environments to change lifestyles" (p. 5), and the dissertation identifies the attitudes (values) and practices that characterize lifestyle migrants in urban and rural settings as the object of study (p. 7). Between 2019 and 2021, the dissertation conducted 44 semi-structured and unstructured interviews with respondents in their twenties and fifties years, and the perspectives of the migrants, the local people, and the researcher are presented. The skilful combination of the analysis of the respondents' impressions, key events, and life experiences with the researcher's perspective, tools, and vocabulary is one of the contributions of Petya Dimitrova's dissertation research.

In the first chapter, where the theoretical framework of the research is presented, the dissertation outlines her understanding of concepts such as identity, authenticity, consumption, downshifting, rural idyll, urbanization, and counterurbanization which the author instrumentalizes further in her research. Drawing on Manuel Castells and other authors, Petya Dimitrova presents the construction of identities as a social process using "building materials from history, geography, biology, institutions of production and reproduction, collective memory and personal fantasies, apparatuses of power and religious revelations" (c. 20). The important conclusion is that in contemporary society it is based on a systematic opposition between the local and the global. For the study, the dissertation also introduces the concepts of authenticity (following Anthony Giddens) and individualism through which to interpret the attitudes and actions of urban-to-rural migrants in the next two chapters. Assuming that "Consumer culture is precisely culture" (following Miller) rather than a loss of culture and authenticity of bygone eras, the author links consumption to the concepts of identity and individualism to show the role of consumption in the formulation of a way of life (lifestyle) and the construction of the media image of the "rural idyll". This chapter also introduces the term *downshifting* in the sense of a moderate form of voluntary lifestyle simplification, with the author emphasizing that it requires a lifestyle change and does not have to be complete and irreversible – some people practice it at set periods. Petya Dimitrova applies this understanding in her research to selected examples from Bulgaria and Slovakia. The accumulation of terms and concepts in this chapter is not an end in itself but helps the author to reconsider the personal experience gained in the course of her research and to offer a variety of interpretative frameworks to her material from the included observation in the three selected eco-villages. Key to the study is the author's research approach, which views migration for lifestyle change as a project in progress, a process of inquiry rather than a single action with a specific beginning and end. This allows her, in subsequent chapters, to consider rural migrants as 'multilocal' actors, constructing contrasting identities linked to diverse places (p. 133). Citizens who migrate to villages change not only their way of life but also the previously traditional rural way of life. Thus, by becoming part of the counter-urbanization process, they are introducing urbanity and typical urban practices and patterns of behavior into the villages. As a result, urbanization as a social process ceases to refer only to the growth of cities, but also actively influences the rural environment.

This theoretical overview lacks, in my opinion, the comparison and connection with the social movements from the village to the city in the previous era and in the decade of transition in post-socialist societies at the end of the twentieth century. Especially for Bulgaria, such sociological surveys are not lacking. Tracing the "paths of the jars" (following Eleanor Smollett) of previous decades would help the author to better understand some of the stereotypes around the "rural idyll" and the exchange between urban centres and countryside in the years of accelerated urbanization, as well as the forms of reaction against it in recent years.

The second chapter analyses the different aspects of migration from urban to rural environments to change lifestyles, annotation singles out and analyses specifically seven key prerequisites for such a migration: infrastructure, labour, consumption (with a quest for alternative lifestyles), environment (moving away from any kind of "pollution"), a perceived need to change lifestyles and raise children, and of course - the quest for authenticity. The image of the city as sprawling, progressive, technologically advanced, and cosmopolitan is juxtaposed with the image of the rural environment, where we see "ruralites" with predominantly backward and limited notions of the world and progress, on the one hand, and on the other, new settlers who have fled the city in search of contact with nature and alternative living conditions (p. 73). The analysis of these premises leads the author to conclude that the resettlers in the ecovillages they have organized seek to reconcile the best of both urban and rural lifestyles, taking advantage of the positive aspects of both while trying to avoid the negative ones. The term used by the dissertation is "bricolage", i.e. creating "urban life outside the city" using bits and pieces of old and new values and practices. The research is constructed methodologically correctly, seeking the perspectives of both settlers and locals. Tracing the complex relationships between migrants and other residents in the study settlements leads the author to the conclusion that a stable social community is not built, but rather the migrants create their quasi-community, according to the terminology chosen by the dissertation. This chapter also contains the dissertation's most contributory analysis.

In this chapter is the most important analysis of the dissertation. The analysis is not limited only to push-pull factors, but goes into details about the causes, motivation, inner feelings and consequences of migration of both those moving out of the city and the locals who welcomed them. Migration is seen as a process that takes various forms, but involves migrants seeking and constructing new identities related to what respondents themselves call the "search for authenticity."

The third chapter tells us the story of the three settlements where the research was carried out, presenting specific personal stories that Peta Dimitrova has touched. Due to the specifics of the settlements selected for the field research, the individual inhabitants and their individual eco-projects are presented, and not the observed quasi-communities as a whole. Lifestyle migration is analyzed in two aspects - the attitude of migrants to the nature and the attitude to the city. The material presented in this chapter is a good illustration of the results of the analysis carried out in the previous chapter. The described stories highlight the typical practices of migration from urban to rural areas, such as: conscious production, including agriculture; conscious consumption, including living with zero waste; observance of daily routine and practices, which according to the migrants favour their health and well-being, etc. Emphasis is placed on the desire to build with natural materials and make objects by hand, the desire for privacy, upholding values such as autonomy, peace and freedom, daily contact with nature (most often in the form of care for plants and animals), etc. The presentation is based on the model of "thick description" with a constant change of views, which allows us to hear both the voices of respondents and the researcher. In addition, Petya Dimitrova conducted her field research with included observation, which allows her at certain moments to identify herself with her respondents. In this self-reflection presented in this chapter, we see a complete researcher who can conduct in-depth research in a diverse environment not only in the country but also abroad.

The conclusion summarizes the most important observations and the conclusions made in the previous chapters of the study. Finally, topics are proposed to work on in the future with the idea to deepen the study of the social phenomenon of movement and migration from urban to rural areas. I accept the contributions formulated by the dissertation as adequate.

Petya Dimitrova presents seven publications on the topic of the dissertation research, published in the country and abroad, in Bulgarian and English. The abstract corresponds to the content of the dissertation. The procedure corresponds to the Law for the development of the academic staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, the Regulations for its application, as well as to the internal Regulations for the conditions and procedure for acquiring scientific degrees and for holding academic positions in Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski ”.

Therefore, expressing my positive opinion, I propose to the esteemed Scientific Jury to award the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" to Petya Valentinova Dimitrova for the dissertation research on "*Migration from urban to rural areas: ethnological research on the example of Bulgaria, Slovakia and Belgium*" and I will vote in favour.

21.06.2022 Petko Hristov