



Book Review

David A. Kideckel: *România postsocialistă. Munca, trupul și cultura clasei muncitoare*
Iași: Polirom Publishing House, 2010

Orsolya GERGELY

Department of Social Sciences
Sapientia – Hungarian University of Transylvania, Romania
gergelyorsolya@sapientia.siculorum.ro

The book titled *România postsocialistă. Munca, trupul și cultura clasei muncitoare* was published by the Iași-based Polirom publishing house in 2010 and it is the Romanian version of Kideckel's original book called *Getting By in Postsocialist Romania: Labor, the Body, and Working-Class Culture* (Indiana University Press, 2008). The Romanian edition does not come as a surprise. Since the fieldwork and the empirical data collection were done in Romania, publishing the findings in Romania can be regarded as a 'must'. On the other hand, a book which describes and gives insights about processes that were experienced by so many Romanian people, can be considered an opening towards laymen, towards a wider public, besides professional readers.

The Romanian version (translated by Șerban Văetiș) at first glance and according to the table of contents is an exact match of the original book, however there are some differences as well. The Romanian version does not use the metaphoric title (i.e. *Getting by*) of the original. The illustration on the paper jacket is also different. While the English cover has a photo of miners who take a rest by sitting and passing the time (a picture which appears on p. 86 of the Romanian book), the Romanian version has an illustration of industrial work – which recalls memories of the media-gallery of the period before 1990. These subtle differences might suggest a little bit different perspective. For the *outsiders* of this world there appears

post socialism (in accordance with the title), while the more *insiders* (workers, readers, scholars from Romania) are still “facing” a memory of socialism.

Based on a detailed ethnographic anthropology, Kideckel seeks to understand and to present two special subgroups of the typical Romanian socialist working class. He tries to show what the new era has brought for these social groups and how they can get through the post socialist reality. The two groups Kideckel chooses to describe in details are the *ex-miners* from the Jiu Valley and the *ex-industrial* workers from the chemical industry of the town of Făgăraș. Before 1990, these two groups of workers were part of a relatively privileged labour class. As far as they were employed in the heavy industry, in the socialist period they represented the socialist ideology of work: they embodied the class who had built socialism. For these workers transition means (the beginning of) a new world, a world which is totally different from the world they had experienced before the change of the regime. Although the whole society is struggling with the same situation and everybody tries to adapt to the new life circumstances, the author is convinced (and the reader will be convinced as well) that the survival of this ex-privileged working class will be much harder than expected.

The almost 300 page long book is structured in eight chapters. In the first chapter we meet Constantin and Ioan together with their faces, voices and narratives. By getting to know them, we get acquainted – among others – with feelings like fear and alienation. Furthermore we even get to discover the effects of transformation. By using the “canary-metaphor” (p. 26), “workers” are presented as objects and subjects of a political-social-economical transformation period. They are being associated with canaries, who are the first to experience the change. They do this not only by entering the coal mine but in suffering the social re-structuration as well. For this social group the whole situation is perceived as a paradox: although they are organically connected to the old system (we have the impression that they still live in that old system), they are forced to adapt to the new one. This fact generates a positional conflict as far as old habits, skills and knowledge seem to become useless in the new era. According to Kideckel, this conflict which manifests itself on both personal and collective levels is generated by the historically and structurally advantageous position in which working classes have been put during communism. This position however has been restructured into the “private personalism”¹ of the post-socialist era (p. 26), while its advantages have become disadvantages. The work of this group was important *then*, it was well paid, ideologically it served the benefit of the whole society. *Now* the members of this group do not have work, cannot find jobs, their professional skills

¹ During the decades of communism everything had a strong collectivistic character, the notion of private was almost unknown. In post-socialism the omnipotent state disappeared, but the people socialized in the old system cannot deal (easily) with the *private* (possession, house, decision, problems), which are left all to personal skills and abilities.

are not in demand any more and, consequently, income problems are constantly present. By describing in details the transition process, the author presents the ways in which this ex-privileged group has been pushed to the periphery of the society.

In the second chapter the author gives us an insight into the history of the Jiu Valley, the life of the people and the character of work that has been done here (and in Făgăraș). We can also read a few interesting thoughts about the history of industrialization. Referring to the region under discussion, Kideckel speaks about the cultural changes which were induced by socialism and presents the “heavy heritage” (p. 56) left behind by those times: heroism and the cult of work. Apparently, in the workers’ narratives the socialist period is euphemized, even if the everyday life of the working class had been very ambiguous² in the past as well (p. 64). While the author talks about socialism, he frames also the era of post-socialism (p. 63). Presumably this continuous parallel drawing, the dependency from the glorified past will be an everlasting (clogging) characteristic of these people’s mentality.

Privatization, unemployment, black market, the backsliding of the quality of life are some of the *keywords* that can activate every worker’s personal discourse about the (*hard, problematic, confusing, insecure*) *present* and about the (*easier, clearer, more understandable, securer*) *past*. By listing the main aspects of the economical-political changes, the author presents the discourse of estrangement. By doing this he helps the reader to give individual answers to the question of how this working class has been changed and has experienced the differences between then and now. Knowing this process of transformation is crucial in understanding what has really happened with the working class. Formally this section is dedicated (according to the subtitle) to this discourse of change, but the idea of estrangement characterizes the “anthropological coverage”, pervading the argumentation and the message of this work. We might say that estrangement is one of the main key words of the book.

In the third chapter a new kind of work and work culture is being presented along with a series of problems that are enabled by it. The title (*Postsocialist Labor Pains*) already suggests a daunting impression by using the words *pain, fear* and *distance* as attributes of the post-socialist labour. Before 1990 work and workplace represented – behind a stable income – a clear source of identity, an obvious link between workers and community, between the individual and the society. These connections made people feel safe. And even if the workplace constituted for the

² Although in the narratives the past is always nice and beautiful, the reality was darker. One good example for the imperfection of the past regime (even for this privileged group), is the miner strike from ’77. This was a very important and big demonstration, so that Nicolae Ceaușescu had to go to the Jiu Valley himself to calm the situation. This proves that the miners were not satisfied with their working and living conditions at all. And we can read about nutrition, health, family violence problems even in the past.

state an instrument of control, the post-socialist worker narratives tend to see only the trouble-free side of the old system. The unpredictable changes (transformation of work and production, massive dismissal with severance pay), the sentiment of permanent uncertainty (growing unemployment, black labour, underpaid jobs) reshaped and demoralized the culture of work. Work has lost the surplus meaning of “feeding the family and mind” (p. 112): the *work* started to mean only a *job*. These changes can be identified even in the working class unit and workers’ activism, along with the decline of the workers’ unions, but on household level as well.

The Romanian political arena cannot be left out from this session, since these workers have expected a solution from the state (which catered them before, creating the need of habit). In lack of effective state intervention, they started to apply different strategies in order to escape from this situation: demonstrations, strikes or even “*mineriads*”.³ Similarly to the situation where working class is getting fragmented, the institution of family and community – presented in the 5th chapter – follow the same path. Those contacts which were crucial before have become infrequent or disappeared after the regime change. In the new era, families are diverging from the community, but even inside the family the distances are deepening (The subtitle is very indicative in this sense: *Men, women and children. Together and apart in post-socialism*) and tensions become quotidian⁴, so that stone houses become houses made of straw⁵. The conflicts between men and women inside the households are in strong relation with the new gender roles evoked by the new social structure. The next chapter provides even deeper insights into the phenomenon of alienation. By assessing that people start to feel “*strangers in their own skin*” (p. 167–193), the author concludes that the gender identity (for men and women as well) “is affected, undermined and reformulated in content and meaning by the specific socio-economic forces that they are facing in the Romanian society in change” (p. 192).

Health constitutes the topic of the book’s last investigative-descriptive chapter. Kideckel presents the problematic question of health representation and health condition of the working class. We again meet keywords like *stress*, *work-conflicts*, *health system*, *inadequate nutrition* and *drinking problems*. Kideckel suggests that the decline in workers’ health condition is strongly related to different

³ The term *mineriad* is used to name any of the successive violent interventions of miners from Jiu Valley in Bucharest. They aimed at wresting policy changes or simply material advantages from the current political power. There were *mineriads* in 1990 (the most violent in June 1990) and one year later, and the last one in January 1999.

⁴ We find a lot of statistical data regarding the increasing number of divorces, the low number of marriages (p. 156). The households are struggling even with the minimal eating issues (ex. pp. 153–155), but there are also alcohol and depression problems in case of both men and women.

⁵ The main title of the chapter formulates this question: Houses of Stone or Straw. Here the *house of stone* means not only the stability, the certainty, the unwavering home, but it is also used as a metaphor for happiness, since this is a wedding greeting in Romania.

stress-factors of their lives. Based on the author's findings, the unstable labour market has the most harmful effect on body and health perception (p. 200).

The last chapter undertakes the challenge to formulate a possible package of answers – to the question “What is to be done?” This challenge is enormous and although the author mentions a few programmes that have been implemented in this region in order to produce some positive changes on the labour market, in social structure, in everyday life, but in workers' mentality as well, he does not formulate a clear vision concerning the future. The conclusion is very disconcerting but objective: an important change must take place, since this distorted and inhibited status encountered in Jiu Valley (and in Făgăraş) is “an ominous sign” for the ex-working class and society (p. 222).

It is unusual in Romania that a book with important topics for scholars in social sciences to be addressed to a broad public as well. Since the entire book is filled with illustrative personal confessions, oral histories, retrospections to the past, everyday problems, well known “survival” strategies, the message of the book could sound familiar but provocative and interesting at the same time to both professionals and everyday readers. Surprisingly, these quotidian, but specific problems can be understood not only by insiders (people from that region, from Romania) but also by “outsiders” (foreigners). The author – who is an American anthropologist – represents an outsider in this world, but in the entire socialist regime as well. However, he succeeds not only to understand these social processes, but also to explain them in articulated terms to a wide audience. It can be very exciting – even for someone who is familiar with this literature – to read about the miner strike of '77, about miners' narratives regarding the mineriads, about workers' and ex-workers' beliefs about the duty of the state, their health, or their importance as individuals and as a community.

I assume that the book could be a complete guide to the life of this social class at the edge of regimes even without including Făgăraş-based workers as a second terrain for field work and analyses. Since the world of miners is so particular – it was so in the past and it is also after the regime change – the comparison and parallel drawing with another group of ex-industrial workers is far-fetched at some points. And the balance is hardly fulfilled: in the book the accent is always being placed on miners. So maybe presenting only the working class from the Jiu Valley would be enough and complete as well.

Kideckel's work is as complete as it can be. He manages to draw an entire image of these groups which were known as the representative groups of the working class in socialism. The unfavourable circumstances of miners' and industrial workers' everyday life in post socialism is always presented by making reference to symbolic and social capital. Social capital constitutes a recourse which this social class used to have during communism, but had lost during the period of transition. Kideckel's most creditable realization may be that he observed

and noticed – among a series of everyday happenings – the “terra incognita” of the working class. The author considers that the process of transition for the working class of the Jiu Valley and Făgăraș will not be as fast as the government, the media discourse, etc. would prefer. This process of change does not follow a uniform path; it is different for each social group, or even for each citizen. As such, the author concludes that the ex-industrial working class – which had a series of advantages in socialism – might be one of the most affected strata of the transition, since the new system pulls the security of the past out from under their feet.