



“It was the least painful to go into Greenhouse Production”: The Moral Appreciation of Social Security in Post-Socialist Serbia

Research Article

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“It was the least painful to go into Greenhouse Production”: The Moral Appreciation of Social Security in Post-Socialist Serbia

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This paper deals with the agricultural production of social security. By representing a rural case study from Central Serbia, it contributes to the economic history of post-socialist former Yugoslavia and explores the conditions of the possibility for social alternatives to neo-capitalism. In the case study, a male actor - embedded within family and wider social networks - successfully accommodates the adverse macroeconomic conditions through hard work, micromanagement of limited resources, and the production of social relations. He also combines new micro-spatial fixings - productive facilities - with revaluing morally depreciated older ones. In sum, this case study shows how networks of actors can invest their energy into reversing the moral depreciation of labor and capital under conditions of capitalist competition and growing inequality. These practices point to an emancipation from the inegalitarian moral economy of capitalism, a process I conceptualize as “moral appreciation”. As its goal emerges the production of a relatively egalitarian society within the lived space of the urban-village continuum.¹

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Introduction

Modernist historians have bemoaned the *longue durée* of “underdevelopment”² and

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² Underdevelopment is understood in development studies, e.g. in the dependency school and in systems theory, as a consequence of unfavorable value exchange relations resulting from the peripheral integration of a region into the capitalist world system. Sundhaussen critiques these explanations as lacking systemic “inevitability”. See Sundhaussen, Holm. 1989. *Die Verpasste Agrarrevolution: Aspekte der Entwicklungsblockade in den Balkanländern vor 1945*, in *Industrialisierung und Gesellschaftlicher Wandel in Südosteuropa*, edited by Roland Schönfeld. München: Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft, 50-51. By contrast, he explains Central Serbia’s underdevelopment in comparison to Northwestern Europe culturally with a historically lacking “capitalist spirit” (Sundhaussen, *Die Verpasste Agrarrevolution*, 45, 49, and 59).

“underemployment” in the Central Serbian countryside starting from the late 19th century, attributing underdevelopment to a lack of work discipline as well as capital.³ Compared to the very unfavorable conditions in Yugoslav agriculture until the interwar period, characterized by “regional developmental differences, rural overpopulation, low degree of industrialization, scarcity of capital and low level of education”⁴ combined with rapid population growth and the fragmentation of landholdings, the socialist history of Yugoslav agriculture between 1945 and ca. 1985 was a relative success story. The increasing use of experts, machinery, fertilizer, etc. led to yearly productivity growth of over 3%.⁵ However, in the three decades since, agricultural trends are more contradictory. In the fertile river plains, land tends to be bought up and amassed by external investors. Meanwhile, in hill villages, the fragmentation into small land-holdings continues and the industrialization of agriculture decelerates because of very limited capital and declining returns for smallholders. Should this be seen as a mere reversal to cultural patterns observed before the Yugoslav era, cementing “underdevelopment”? Sundhaussen’s and Palairet’s usage of the term underdevelopment is problematic - it induces them to compare non-Western experiences with the yardstick of an idealized “Western” history and ends up narrating “defective” histories. Unfortunately, such research artifacts have been reproduced by Palairet in his more recent studies of Yugoslav industry. He interprets the irregularities of industrial mismanagement as having so negatively affected the attitude and productivity of industrial workers that it led to the “attrition of human capital” resulting in a “return to underdevelopment” since ca. 1978.⁶

However, during my fieldwork in a Serbian village, I was struck by the intensive work habits and skillful management practices of the farmers, whether of recent “industrial worker” origin or of “older peasant” pedigree. My informants’ social practices contradict allegations of underemployment, slack, and mismanagement. They evince strategic planning and self-exploitation. Following Sundhaussen’s recent call to return to economic history, which had been relatively neglected since the late 1980s because of the cultural turn in history,⁷ in this paper I critically unpack Palairet’s “attrition of human capital thesis”. I show how the allegedly “uneconomic” work ethic turns out to be an elastic strategy of “moral appreciation”, which serves to organize the social security of a population under constant capitalist crisis conditions.

My anthropological approach to the contradiction between capitalist market expansion and creative social countercurrents takes its inspiration from the recent debate between Thelen and Verdery and Dunn.⁸ Thelen criticized Verdery’s classic

³ Sundhaussen, *Die Verpasste Agrarrevolution*; Palairet, Michael. 2003. *The Balkan Economies c. 1800-1914: Evolution without Development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁴ Höpken, Wolfgang and Holm Sundhaussen. 1987. *Jugoslawien von 1914 bis zur Gegenwart*, in *Europäische Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte vom Ersten Weltkrieg bis zur Gegenwart*, edited by Armengaud, André and Wolfram Fischer. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 881.

⁵ Höpken and Sundhaussen, *Jugoslawien*, 880-90.

⁶ Palairet, Michael. 2001. The Economic Consequences of Slobodan Milošević. *Europe-Asia Studies* 53(6), 917.

⁷ Sundhaussen, Holm. 2010. Wirtschaftsgeschichte Südosteuropas: Ist und Soll. *Südost-Forschungen*, 69/70, 431-40.

⁸ See *Critique of Anthropology* 2011, 31(1), 31(2), and 2012, 32(1). For an overview, see Thelen, Tatjana. 2012. Economic Concepts, Common Grounds and ‘new’ Diversity in the Anthropology of Post-Socialism: Reply to Dunn and Verdery. *Critique of Anthropology* 32(1), 87-90.

explanation of socialism as an “economy of scarcity” for its reductionism. Such economism resulted unintentionally in the people living under socialism becoming morally valued - positively as resistant selves domesticating the socialist revolution through their shrewd use of networks - or negatively as the “post-socialist other”, whose “corrupted” networks prevented a functioning market economy. More rarely, post-socialist resistance to capitalism was valued positively. As an alternative, Thelen proposes to look at post-socialist social relations to learn something new about human possibility. She also suggests that we need to “re-diversify that [economic] common ground” before diversifying our understanding of (post)socialism,⁹ an approach taken up in this study by using a Lefebvrian relational approach to the social production of space.¹⁰

Methodologically, I take inspiration from the situational analysis and extended case study methods pioneered by the Manchester School of Anthropology, in which theoretical discovery is grounded in the meticulous analysis of the ethnographic material. I use the results of participant observation and targeted interviews to understand the agricultural (re)production of social relations as “moments of social life in the very process of formation”.¹¹

In accordance with Naumović’s study on Serbian organic poultry farming,¹² I argue that rather than “culture” it is the adverse macroeconomic conditions, the unsound agricultural policy in Serbia, and the moral economy of capitalist market exchange, which make agriculture a gamble. Unlike Naumović, who analyzes the failure of an agricultural business, I concentrate on a successful agricultural household in order to point to the possibility of successful relational practices within these circumstances.

1. The production of social (in)security in everyday rural places

A half-century ago, E.P. Thompson explained the resistance of 19th century English working people against the logic of liberal capitalism as a defense of their moral economy against its “disembedding”.¹³ However, rather than understanding market economies as “immoral” economies, I follow Marx’s “incidental moral anthropology”¹⁴ that under capitalism the moral valuation of humans merges with their financial valuation:

*“Whenever, by an exchange, we equate as values our different products, by that very act, we also equate, as human labour, the different kinds of labour expended upon them.”*¹⁵

⁹ Thelen, *Economic Concepts*, 89.

¹⁰ Lefebvre, Henri. 1991 [1974]. *The Production of Space*. (trans.) Donald Nicholson-Smith. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

¹¹ Kapferer, Bruce. 2005. Situations, Crisis, and the Anthropology of the Concrete: The Contribution of Max Gluckman. *Social Analysis* 49(3), 92.

¹² Naumović, Slobodan. 2006. On the Heaviness of Feathers, or What Has Culture Got to Do with the Failure to Establish an Organic Poultry Production Business in Contemporary Serbia? *Etnoloantropološki Problemi* 1, 103-24.

¹³ Thompson, Edward. 1964. *The Making of the English Working Class*. New York: Pantheon Books, 63, 66-67.

¹⁴ Varul, Matthias Zick. 2010. Reciprocity, Recognition and Labor Value: Marx’s Incidental Moral Anthropology of Capitalist Market Exchange. *Journal of Social Philosophy* 41(1), 50-72.

¹⁵ Marx, Karl. 2010. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. I. Online. (accessed: 19. September 2014), cited in Varul, *Reciprocity*, 54.

In capitalism, the moral valuation of persons is ideally based on the principle of meritocracy, their ability to produce marketable goods. Concomitantly, non-productive people are financially undervalued, be they old and infirm, incapacitated, unskilled, unemployed, or too young for production. Moral undervaluing in the form of financial inequality translates into a graded liberty to dispose of oneself as one sees fit, thus undermining the liberal promise of freedom for all. An aggravating factor is that these valuations are made on the basis of prejudices regarding gender, race, and class.¹⁶ A final drawback is that under normal conditions the capitalist moral economy cannot fulfill its own promise of meritocratic inequality, because it multiplies inequality to the disadvantage of workers.¹⁷

Thus, the contradictory moral economy of capitalism legitimates inequality and poses the problem of social security. Social security is here understood as the social organization of the satisfaction of material wants, needs, and desires of those persons not able to satisfy them on their own. It is the complex byproduct of six interrelated, non-hierarchical dimensions. These dimensions are defined as (1) cultural ideologies, (2) normative institutions, (3) individual perceptions, (4) social relations, (5) social practices, and (6) social and economic consequences.¹⁸ After having sketched (1) the cultural ideology of capitalism above, and providing (6) some background information on social and economic consequences, I will portray (2) the life story of a social actor embedded in the normative institution of the family and his (3) perceptions of social security. Subsequently, I will show how these perceptions are shaped by and shape his (5) everyday social practices within (4) the forming of social relations. I show how he negotiates the perceptions and cultural ideologies of social security, which leads him to (2) reshape and reproduce several other local normative institutions.

Every society produces its own space: the social production of space is an inscription of temporal social relations into the spatial field.¹⁹ How does neo-capitalist society with its increasing social insecurity reshape the space in Central Serbia? What we gain from a Lefebvrian approach is to think together three dialectically interlinked processes of the social production of space: (1) perceived space (everyday spatial practices and spatial perception by the five senses), (2) conceived space (the space as known and discursively constructed by actors), and (3) lived space (the habitualized living in symbolic space, which may be creatively reshaped by people offering them a surplus of identification).²⁰

Lefebvre's relational concept of space has been narrowed and pushed by David Harvey into a political-economy direction. Harvey provides two important concepts for my article which I use and re-extend in a Lefebvrian mode: "spatial fix", and "moral depreciation". "Spatial fix" is a concept Harvey

¹⁶ Varul, *Reciprocity*, 59, 66.

¹⁷ Marx, *Capital*, 212, 536.

¹⁸ Benda-Beckmann, Franz von and Keebet von Benda-Beckmann. 2000. *Coping with Insecurity*, in *Coping with Insecurity: An 'Underall' Perspective on Social Security in the Third World*. 2nd ed., edited by Benda-Beckmann, Franz von / Benda-Beckmann, Keebet von and Hans Marks, Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 14.

¹⁹ Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 175.

²⁰ Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 38-42.

developed while exploring the *Limits of Capital*,²¹ denoting a heterogeneous set of actions within “capitalism’s insatiable drive to resolve its inner crisis tendencies by geographical extension and geographical restructuring”.²² The concept describes, among others, the tendency to build up space through capital investment in immobile (infra)structures and mobile machines in order to secure increasing capitalist production and exchange, while reducing expenditure of time. This complex and always reversible process, which leads to a “fixed space (or ‘landscape’)”²³ of production is coproduced by many actors on different scales, from transnational corporations and state projects over national to local actors. I expand the notion to micro-spatial fixes undertaken or at least co-produced by Serbian smallholders.

As the result of the uneven development of capitalism, spatial fixes are prone to devaluation, making way for new spatial fixes elsewhere.²⁴ Such devaluation of fixed capital has been called “moral depreciation” by Marx.²⁵ Moral depreciation results from three tendencies: (1) the social wear and tear of machines, by which a machine transfers part of its value on its products (“straight line depreciation”); (2) the replacement cost of a machine (“what it would cost to replace it with an equivalent machine”) and (3) the innovation of machines which can reduce the average social value of a machine before it has amortized.²⁶ Fixed capital becomes devalued through moral depreciation and falls into disuse. Labor, as well as capital, which from a Marxist view point is the result of “congealed labor”,²⁷ need to be activated in order to produce surplus value. Morally depreciated capital can be reused to produce value in market segments in which lower productivity is off-set by lower machine or labor costs. I call such recycling of underused capital “moral appreciation”. However, moral appreciation also needs to be exerted on the individual and collective human producers of value. I hence introduce moral appreciation to the study of the economy and of social relations.

2. Rural dynamics

In former Yugoslavia, which has been characterized as one of the most rural states in Europe, rural activity rates declined steeply, from 76.6% in 1931 and 73.3% in 1945 to 49.6% in 1961 and 38.2% in 1971.²⁸ By 2009, over one fifth of Serbian employees work in agriculture.²⁹ The change brought about by the integration of the village into wider market relations and urbanization has been palpable.³⁰

²¹ Harvey, David. 1982. *The Limits to Capital*. Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 431-8, 442-45.

²² Harvey, David. 2001. Globalization and the Spatial Fix. *Geographische Revue* 2(3), 24.

²³ Harvey, *Globalization*, 25.

²⁴ Harvey, *Limits to Capital*, 416-17.

²⁵ Marx, *Capital*, 273.

²⁶ Harvey, David. 2013. *A Companion To Marx’s Capital, Volume 2*. London: Verso, 118, 135-39.

²⁷ Harvey, David. 2010. *A Companion to Marx’s Capital*. London: Verso, 128-29.

²⁸ Allcock, John. 2000. *Explaining Yugoslavia*. London: Hurst & Company, 125-26, 136.

²⁹ Bogdanov, Natalija and Dragica Božić. 2009. *Review of Agriculture and Agricultural Policy in Serbia*, in *Agriculture in the Western Balkan countries*, edited by Volk, Tina. Halle: IAMO, 192.

³⁰ Halpern, Joel, and Barbara Kerewsky Halpern. 1984. *A Serbian village in Historical Perspective*. New York: Irvington Publishers.

The regional economy experienced the insertion and the extraction of capital in several waves. Not all influx of capital stimulates productivity, as the history of credit in agriculture shows. The first “credit crunch” of Serbian agriculture happened in the late 1920s. Since 1926, world grain prices had been dropping, and by 1929, the central state founded an agricultural bank to provide credit as an alternative to usury. By 1932, the agricultural bank had to put a moratorium on debt repayment as 700,000 agricultural businesses were on the brink of bankruptcy (often they had borrowed money for food). In 1936, these debts were partly cancelled.³¹ Forty years on, the now socialist economy of Yugoslavia became increasingly integrated into the fast financializing capitalist world market through credit arrangements with international lenders like the World Bank. Through the mediation of “socialized agriculture”, part of this money was productively invested in agriculture in the Green Plan between 1973 and 1985.³² By that time, “social property” made up ca. 15% of the agricultural land in Yugoslavia, but it accounted for higher intensification, land concentration, and productivity than the “private sector” and offered valuable services to the small producers, including provision of credit and production materials, or the buying up of products.³³ Inauspiciously, the necessity of debt repayments as part of Structural Adjustment policies in the 1980s seriously undermined the Yugoslav economy and led to a spiral of economic quarrels between its constituent republics, constituting an important factor of the breakup of the Federation in the early 1990s.³⁴

A generation later, at the end of the year 2000, the World Bank invited leaders of the alliance of 18 opposition parties, which had just ousted Milošević from power, for economic strategy talks. Unprepared for the task, the new leaders accepted the World Bank’s standard tool for boosting “development”: microcredits. Arguably, an almost fully industrialized country like Serbia might have wished for bigger credit lines or technological support in restructuring production.³⁵ Microcredits are less suited to the task and can be rather seen as part of an ersatz-developmental package on the premise of family entrepreneurship and micro-capitalism, according to which “borrowers are expected to improve their socio-economic conditions by using loans for business ventures which allow them to accumulate capital for reinvestment and loan repayment with interest”.³⁶ Microcredits are an ambiguous policy tool, whose effects on social security are debated.³⁷ In the Serbian case, it was clear that microcredits could not save the big plants of socialist Yugoslavia. In the

³¹ Höpken and Sundhaussen, *Jugoslawien*, 887.

³² Allcock, *Explaining Yugoslavia*, 137-40.

³³ OECD. 1981. *Die Agrarpolitik in Jugoslawien*. Münster-Hiltrup: Landwirtschaftsverlag.

³⁴ Orford, Anne. 2008. *Reading Humanitarian Intervention: Human Rights and the Use of Force in International Law*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 89.

³⁵ Personal communication with a member of the World Bank negotiation team (8. November 2013).

³⁶ Mader, Philip. 2011. Making the Poor Pay for Public Goods via Microfinance: Economic and Political Pitfalls in the case of Water and Sanitation. *MPIfG Discussion Paper* 11/14, 3.

³⁷ Indeed, microfinance can have adversary social effects. In September 2010 in Andhra Pradesh, India, a political crisis erupted “triggered by a wave of client suicides that exposed predatory lending practices, market oversaturation, dishonest interest rates, and coercive recovery methods. Under conditions of cutthroat competition in a nontransparent and crudely regulated microfinance marketplace, microfinance institutions (MFIs) had recklessly overextended credit, using the Indian government’s priority sector finance targets and international investors’ money to expand their lending and feed a spiral of client debt” (Mader, *Making the Poor Pay*, 6).

Municipality of River City,³⁸ 10,000s of workers were laid off. The unemployed faced the option of small entrepreneurship based on microcredits. Overnight, 1000 micro-producers mushroomed.

Since 2009, I do fieldwork in Lower Village, a small dispersed village in the hilly regions of Central Serbia. A paved road connects Lower Village to the urban and formerly heavily industrialized municipal center River City (ca. 70,000 inhabitants) some 12km to the southwest. The village had ca. 1000 inhabitants. Almost half of its approximately 300 households declared themselves agrarian households at the Serbian treasury (September 2009). Since 1948, a village cooperative had worked several dozen hectares of confiscated land in the village. After some permutations, this cooperative joined in 1975 the Agricultural Industrial Combine (PIK) River City, the municipal branch of a Belgrade based mixed food-production and distribution chain. The united cooperatives of several villages now collaborated with a conglomerate of urban firms including a modern milk plant, slaughter house, Rakija factory, and a food trading section. When, in the wake of post-socialist restitution processes and war-endowed economic problems, the component parts were set free in 1996, the cooperative Lower Village resumed working on an independent basis, led by a local agronomist. The cooperative declared bankruptcy in 2009, after pension funds had been secured for all former employees.³⁹

Today, in the village exist some 50 bigger objects for animal husbandry and milk production (for up to 100 pieces of cattle), and four larger glasshouses. Industry, commerce, education, and transport tend to be located in town. Multi-sectorial earning strategies are practiced by *polutani*, peasant-workers employed in the industries and services of the town who also practice agriculture as a secondary activity.⁴⁰ Official unemployment is high. The (renewed) importance of agriculture for Lower Village was attributed from the inside as well as from the outside. For instance, the director of the Center for Social Work (CSW) River City stated⁴¹ “this is a typical agricultural village. This is not New York, nothing special about it, only two or three social cases there”.⁴²

3. The economic story of the Todorović’s

In this part, I present the case study of a male agriculturalist and his domestic group, who are regarded as diligent (*uredni*) and also good (*dobri*) by the majority of villagers, because they help themselves and others. In the analysis of the case, I focus on several crucial aspects of the relations of production: domestic relations, access to land, family work, paid labor, and advice and help between neighbors. Furthermore, I discuss non-domestic relations, as reproducing village relations and solidarities has positive repercussions for the household. I also consider the understudied but important aspect of credit relations. Finally, I highlight the

³⁸ Toponyms and names are anonymized.

³⁹ Interview, agronomist, 18. November 2010.

⁴⁰ Lockwood, William. 1973. The Peasant-Worker in Yugoslavia. *Studies in European Society* 1(1), 91-110.

⁴¹ All translations of quotes are mine.

⁴² Interview, Director of CSW, 17. July 2009.

contradictions of agricultural production by characterizing its backbreaking quality even for its most “elastic” practitioners. I begin the case study with the condensed life story of the protagonist.

3.1. The life story of Goran Todorović⁴³

Goran Todorović was born in 1967. When he was a toddler, his parents migrated to West Berlin to work as industrial laborers, from where they returned in 1979. As they could not find a kindergarten place in Germany at the time, he was sent back to Serbia to be raised by his maternal aunt and uncle living in a neighboring village, whom he came to consider his real parents. In his youth, Goran enthusiastically trained football and was a very good pupil. However, he decided not to pursue higher education and became a skilled blue collar worker. In 1986 and 1987 he served in the Yugoslav National Army in Croatia. Since 1988, he was employed in a big machine tool factory in River City, which produced mechanical component parts for the world market. The work was well-paid and allowed him to play football and enjoy the nightlife. Around 1990, after a pub brawl, the pub owner reported him to the police for swearing at Tito, a delict considered to be high treason. However, Milošević’s legislative abolished the paragraph, so he was spared prison. At that time, when his firm faced problems and wages plummeted, he left and started laboring in tiny private firms, e.g. in yoghurt production and distribution in Creek Town. He did not want to “fight for the communist Milošević” in the Yugoslav secession wars and evaded the military police that was looking for him. As soon as it was safe, Goran resurfaced and worked in the football club’s pub in his aunt’s and uncle’s village. As player, pub tenant, and club official, he met “so many people that otherwise only bosses of big firms know” and met and married Vesna, a girl from southwestern Serbia who then resided with her aunt. With the growing needs of accommodation, they moved to the compound of Goran’s parents in Lower Village, where they crammed into the small house (ca. 30m²) built by his grandfather. In 1998, their daughter Marica was born, in 2000 son Mihajlo. In 1999, Goran participated in the war in Kosovo. In 2000, he began planting potatoes on their one-hectare family land to earn some money on River City’s green market. What began as a “back-breaking” (*ubitačka*) emergency production grew over time into a small, successful agricultural smallholder unit. Today, the Todorovići provide several near city markets with fresh produce (in 2009 lettuce, salad, spring onions, cabbage, tomatoes, potatoes, and peppers). Since 2006, Goran became active in the village football club, when his son became old enough to train. Goran was also elected a member of the village’s Local Council from 2009 to 2013.

3.2. Becoming an agriculturalist

For roughly two decades Goran had shown great geographical mobility and work ethos in order to sustain a careless working class youth life. But as a father of a baby girl, and with his wife pregnant again, Goran was stuck and could not resist being drafted for the Kosovo War. Jobless, with a disconcerting

⁴³ In fall 2009 I conducted a semi-structured interview with Goran Todorović at his farmstead, during part of which he sorted tomatoes for the green market. In 2012 we had a 7 hour narrative biographical interview on two consecutive days (16. and 17. May 2012).

war experience just behind him and a family to support, he had to start from scratch. The decision making process concerning where and what to work was confusing. With almost no capital, land, machinery, or knowledge, it took him two years to fully plunge into agriculture, as he told me in 2009. In May 2012, Goran presented the result as a strategic decision:

“I have one hectare agricultural land, and so we contemplated which production we should take up. It was least painful [najbezboljnije] to get into greenhouse production where you need much work, but less means. And then we started in 2000, as I said with the help of the bank, 1-2-3 nylon greenhouses. Now we broadened this protected space to 0.1-0.15 hectares, and since last year we have also 0.15 hectare under glass.”⁴⁴

By 2012, Goran still alluded to the deliberations as “painful”, but overall he performed a rather “entrepreneurial” discourse. His memory of worries and failures had not receded, rather it is morally rewarding to narrate one’s life as a success story in the neo-capitalist moral economy. The family’s fast progress in the agricultural business was attributed by Goran to several individual factors, like his strategic planning capacity, as he colloquially put it: “*imam kefalo*” or “*imam klike*”. Another factor he emphasized was that he “never shied from work”. Indeed, his work day often covers 16 hours, and afterwards he still caters to social obligations.⁴⁵ However, individual prowess does not nearly exhaust the reasons for Goran’s achievements.

3.3. The complex relations that make an agriculturalist

Since 1996, Goran and his wife lived close to his parents, from whom he was emotionally distanced since his childhood. However, they established a tolerant *modus vivendi*. Goran and Vesna also struck friendships with several young neighboring families like the Bobanovići, who were invested in agriculture. Uroš Bobanović, a milk technician by training, was married since 1990 and had two children. Together with his wife and parents he worked a diversified agricultural cycle. In the early 2000s, they even acquired a glasshouse for *gerbera* production (see below). Uroš’s family advised the young couple to start with potato production, which was relatively easy to begin with and if it did not sell in the market could be consumed privately. Vesna, who had grown up in a village, supported this idea. In 2000, the Todorovići accomplished their first successful production with the help of their neighbors on their tiny parcel of land. Their once established cooperation continues to this day.

Soon, the Todorovići started to establish reliable trading channels through long-lasting interactions with medium scale green market traders of several surrounding cities. The initial financial means to start production had come from Goran’s and Vesna’s parents, and now Goran’s paternal aunt contributed another half a hectare plot for 100€ rent annually, where Goran drilled a waterhole for subsurface irrigation. He also leases half a hectare land from a neighbor. The increasing professionalization of production was funded through

⁴⁴ Interview with Goran Todorović, 16. May 2012.

⁴⁵ On both days of the narrative-biographical interview, Goran Todorović had worked from 4 am till 8 pm.

bank loans,⁴⁶ which were relatively easy to come by, for reasons explained above. However, while many villagers used credits for consumption, Goran invested into nylon covers, poles, pipes, a multi-fuel stove, fertilizer, and foreign seeds, and he invented a heating system for a plastic greenhouse. Goran's relatively cheap spatial fix⁴⁷ could produce high-prized early vegetables at low cost. To heat this greenhouse system, Goran needs to get up every three hours, from January through to March. The Todorovići thus established a work-intensive position in a market segment with comparatively little competition. Husband and wife often work side by side and seem content with their situation.⁴⁸ The microcredits, however, heavily drain actualized turnovers. Goran and Vesna engage with revolving vertical bank credits that have to be taken in Dinars but serviced in €-equivalents. The steady inflation (2012 at 7 per cent annually) minimizes their returns.

As a response, the course of production has to be increasingly diversified, oriented upon both catching premiums for selling early vegetables and allowing for a year round inflow of "living money" (*živa para*) to manage the monthly running costs of 700€. Goran reckons that for each credit of 4000€ he paid 1500€ more servicing it. So far, he "earned ca. 4000€ for the banks",⁴⁹ that is he realized ca. 12,000€ credit via three microcredits.

3.4. Shifting spatial fixes

How did the Todorovići diversify their few resources? I cannot go into the details of year-round intensive production but concentrate here on the main, micro-spatial fixing strategies. A couple of years ago, Goran expanded raspberry production on Vesna's parents' land to 0.5 hectares, and in 2009 he planted a fruit orchard (sweet cherries and apricots) on one hectare around his family house. Raspberries are produced in the mountainous regions of southwestern Serbia around clusters of post-socialist macro-spatial fixes. Oligopolies of refrigerated warehouse owners control the supply chains of productive factors like fertilizer and pesticides to the small producers, and buy up, transport, and market the produce on international markets.

While Goran periodically travels to his parents-in-law to support different stages of the raspberry cultivation process, his wife and children pick the fruits in July and August together with two laborers. During these months, Goran needs to run the vegetable production in Lower Village with two urban

⁴⁶ One credit was used to "begin solving the housing problem".

⁴⁷ Second hand glasshouses are directly imported from the Netherlands. One square meter of building envelope costs 15€. Nylon covers can be bought in Serbia and cost ten times less.

⁴⁸ Their shared positive outlook on agriculture has much to do with their joint decision-making process and subsequent close collaboration. In another successful agricultural couple, where the wife had been forced by her family to decline work offers outside agriculture, opinions were clearly divided. While the husband was content, his wife bitterly told me: "If it were now like once, it would not be bad, but today? Agriculture? [...] I would not propose it to anyone at all" (Interview, female agriculturalist, 20 May 2012). In both cases, the rather invisible female self-exploitation contributes to making the farm viable. For a comparable Spanish case study, see Narotzky, Susana. 1988. The Ideological Squeeze: 'Casa', 'Family' and 'Co-operation' in the Processes of Transition. *Social Science Information* 27(4), 559-81.

⁴⁹ Interview with Goran Todorović, 16. May 2012.

laborers.⁵⁰ Raspberries are much more expensive fruits than summer vegetables (2012: 1€-1.20€/kg for raspberries at the wholesale market compared to ø 22 Cent/kg for tomatoes at retail green market prices). Goran slowly phases out labor-intensive open field vegetable production and switches to more machinable fruit tree plantation because the raspberry-attempt at marketing up created labor bottlenecks and the labor costs diminish earnings.

His fruit tree investment is expected to have a first turnover in 2014. Goran plans to stay in intensive greenhouse production of early varieties in winter and spring, pursue mid and upper market production in summer (tree fruits and raspberries), and gain a free autumn. For years, Goran and Vesna had no holidays or time for sick leave, which they hope to rectify. Building up micro-spatial fixes at home (greenhouse, orchard) and tapping into outside large-scale spatiotemporal fixes of vertically integrated marketing chains (through raspberry farming), Goran successfully navigates the uneven capitalist development. His spatiotemporal fixes increase agricultural viability at the cost of excessively binding his forces and relations of production. Under capitalism, macro- as well as micro-spatial fixings are crisis-prone, as one spatial fixing bears the next problem and crisis is shifted around from fix to fix.

3.5. “Breaking” or “bending” under economic pressure

A gift for cultivating relations, dedication to hard work, and creative micro-spatial fixings are no guarantee that the agricultural cycle is successfully run - even for bigger players than Goran. A case in point are the glasshouse owners in the village who try to recuperate their large investments through flower production, sometimes combined with import and retail business strategies. At the onset of my fieldwork, these businesses were proudly presented to outsiders as the epitome of the village’s modern, intensive, and profitable agriculture. However, all but one of them had failed by 2013. This was due to heightened competition by Balkan-Holland, a native of River City and former *gastarbajter* (work migrant), who had lived for 20 years in the Netherlands. Balkan-Holland has no family ties in Lower Village, but formerly cooperated as a truck driver with the Pantić family business, the longest established flower glasshouse owners in the village. The Pantići business, presently run by the Pantić couple, their unmarried sons in their twenties, and a couple of laborers, had started their production/import firm in the early 1990s. In the past years, they had advised other interested villagers like Uroš Bobanović to establish similar businesses.

In 2008, Balkan-Holland built the biggest glasshouse of the village widely visible in its very center, on land adjacent to the dissolving village cooperative. Like the Pantići, he specialized in rose production, and he delivered his imported and self-produced flowers to the same retailers all over Central and Western Serbia - whose addresses he had snatched from the Pantići previously.⁵¹ Balkan-Holland’s activities were the nail to the coffin of Uroš Bobanović’s fledgling *gerbera* production, who later completely reoriented his business (see below).

⁵⁰ On top of self-exploitative, at this moment the Todorović’s farming becomes petty capitalist.

⁵¹ Balkan-Holland innovated with the import of vegetables and seeds, and subcontracted onion production (from Dutch seeds) to villagers.

Another producer, owner of the formerly biggest glasshouse, went financially bankrupt, and according to gossip also socially. My research assistant, who visited that family, told me “*on je totalno pukao*”, literally: “he totally burst [to pieces]”. This “bursting” not only signified the widely visible cracking of his glasshouse. I find the metaphor of an osier stake bending appropriate: of flexible substance and considerable elasticity, a fresh osier stake gradually splinters into ever more seams when it is pressured, torn and worn by spatial and temporal dynamics. The “total cracking” of such an elastic body/material, however, implies sustained, severe use of force. “*Pući*” (to crack) is thus a relational folk concept standing for becoming mentally ill or economically ruined. It blends today with the capitalist valuation of people in which a life’s achievement is sidelined by fluctuating success.⁵²

The cracking point of small agriculturalists is related to many interconnected, oscillating factors, including bodily robustness (fitness, health, skills), accessible and reliable social relations, financial and material support, and so forth. The Pantići proved extremely elastic. Not only did they withstand the competition, but they “rebound”. They reminded retailers of their long cooperation in mutual trust and credit relations and berated Balkan-Holland for copying their practice and their contacts. By using moral economic arguments, reinvigorating social ties, which went along with reduced prices, they drove Balkan-Holland out of operation within three years. For his failed investment, the latter had taken loans of over 200,000€. ⁵³

The already mentioned third glasshouse owner and now failed *gerbera* producer, Goran’s neighbor and agricultural mentor Uroš Bobanović, had been barely able to service the considerable debt he had incurred for his glasshouse even before the “flower wars”.⁵⁴ In 2010 Bobanović made a “clean cut” after the mourning period over his deceased father ended and started anew with a technically and hygienically up-to-date mini-cheese production. In order to be independent of middlemen, by 2012 his wife sold their branded cheese in Belgrade’s green market, where she stayed 6 days a week. Uroš meanwhile runs almost single-handedly the full agricultural production cycle (grains and vegetables, cow milk, cheese and beef production) with some help from his elderly mother and neighbors.⁵⁵ Stoically, he carries his lot.

In 2011, Goran started sharecropping Uroš’s glasshouse, raising salad and early potatoes, working on increasing its soil fertility. This is a perfect case of moral appreciation. The intermittently abandoned production facility was revalued by Goran and Boban, who installed a new irrigation system and reused it for new purposes. I have proposed in the introduction the concept “moral appreciation” to understand instances in which people are engaged in reproducing and transforming their social space. To recap, moral appreciation is the social revaluing of morally depreciated machines or objects (constant capital) and people (variable capital). Moral appreciation always happens in a triple sense: economically, morally, and socially. Economically, reusing the glasshouse reinforced agricultural market production and helped to contribute to the social

⁵² Varul, *Reciprocity*, 65.

⁵³ Interview with Balkan-Holland, 14. November 2010.

⁵⁴ According to gossip, Uroš Bobanović had borrowed 70,000 €.

⁵⁵ Interview with Uroš Bobanović, 18. May 2012.

security of both families. Morally, villagers shun the “breakage” of local spatiotemporal fixes and approve of their reinvigoration. Socially, the neighbors held together despite changing fortunes and supported each other to overcome pressure.

3.6. Agricultural economy

Goran himself has been forced to bend in the face of uneven development and capitalist oligopoly formation for three times: 1989, 1999, and 2011. The last economic twist was agricultural. When I visited Goran in 2009, he produced tomatoes in bulk, which he grew from Israeli, Dutch, and German seeds. However, wholesale tomato imports by the transnational supermarket chain Maxxi, an oligopolist in Serbia’s retail market, started undercutting prices. In 2012, Goran had dropped tomato production completely. Like most villagers, Goran connects the recurring slump in prizes of agricultural goods partly to the Agricultural Ministry of Serbia and big economic players: “The state and certain tycoons work against the villager”.⁵⁶ Goran portrays “the state” as uninterested in helping small producers, and implicated “it” in cutting shady deals with importers to the detriment of local agriculture. This unfavorable view on Serbia’s agricultural economy is shared by an array of scientific, political, and journalistic sources. The rural sociologists Bogdanov and Božić identify, for instance, in Serbian agricultural policy

*“a discriminatory attitude towards certain groups of users [small farmers] to the benefit of others [licensed agribusiness] [...]. The stability of measures is not provided [...]. Financial resources are not specified for several years in advance, and they change depending on the annual budget [...]”*⁵⁷

The economic specialist of an International Development Cooperation (IDC) corroborated such views. He stated that the Ministry of Agriculture was run “short-termist”, by a “totally uninterested minister”, while the restitution policy was “a minefield” in which “tycoons were able to influence the legal process”.⁵⁸ This shortsighted agricultural policy leads to the endless deferral of reforms. For instance, in order to support the fledgling cooperative sector, a new Law on Cooperatives is publicly discussed since 2010,⁵⁹ without having been ratified so far. Furthermore, EU-accession negotiations are accompanied by decreasing tariffs for agricultural imports, with the effect of increased inland competition, while it is questionable whether Serbian farmers “will use the opportunities offered [on EU markets, which] depends on their competitiveness in terms of price and quality”.⁶⁰ In sum, agricultural policy favors large producers in line with the moral economy of capitalism. Meanwhile ineffective state regulation of the expansion of inequality inbuilt into the capitalist process of value production engenders monopoly formation. The situation is decidedly disadvantageous for the small, indebted producers, who were, as shown above, sometimes just created by an ersatz-developmental state policy a decade earlier.

⁵⁶ Interview with Goran Todorović, 16. May 2012.

⁵⁷ Bogdanov and Božić, *Review of Agriculture*, 216.

⁵⁸ Interview, IDC, 22. October 2009.

⁵⁹ Berkum and Bogdanov, *Serbia on the Road*, 62.

⁶⁰ Berkum and Bogdanov, *Serbia on the Road*, 159.

3.7. Working for the future

Blaming the state for idleness and corruption translates in Goran's case into the "hope for" a better, more responsive state,⁶¹ and motivated him to actively take part in village life by running the local football club since 2006. Socially, this football club mediates the "attrition of human capital", an aspect noted by supporters and participants who greeted the physical activity and male bonding of the village footballers - kids, adults, and veterans - as reinvigorating. When this "gridding" of social life proved successful, Goran and his club colleagues expanded activities by volunteering in the local government of the Local Council (*Mesna Zajednica*). As his main motivation, Goran states "helping the village". For his children he wants to overcome the lack of a road and streetlights so they could go safely to school. While reproducing the discourse of the irresponsible state, Goran attempts to practice a more responsive (albeit discursively concealed) state relation.⁶²

Casually Goran remarked that "they want us to associate now".⁶³ He is a declared former anti-communist who employs an entrepreneurial discourse, so it is a step for him to contemplate the governmental plans to rehabilitate cooperatives. On the other hand, in his economic, social, and political practices, Goran already evinces a collaborative style, shares access to resources and distributes responsibilities. Formalizing these activities offers the legal construction of limited accountability, which means another elasticity option in the wake of recurring failures. However, the implied concentration of production on few crops appeared to Goran too risky under conditions of fluctuating markets, and he ultimately preferred his small, diversified approach towards social security production. The amplifying risks in this endeavor also explain why Todorovići do not want their children to continue in agriculture and hope for their success in the urban economy:

*"At the moment the children are excellent pupils. They have their plans, which will develop in the future. Marica is in the 7th, next year in the 8th grade, and we will see how [she selects her professional specialization in secondary school]. What concerns me, I am willing to provide their faculty expenses, off course. If they will not have a university degree and a certificate, then they will be nobody in this state. And I told them, if they do not want to learn I will secure them here [at the farm] that they have something to work [laughs]."*⁶⁴

Goran is clear about the odds against rural children to succeed in professional advancement. He told me in 2009 that his children have to be better than average in their educational success and better in networking than those more favorably placed by birth. For the latter reason, Goran wants his son to become a full person through football. Football for kids, he told me in 2012, should not mean "the pipe dream" of a superstar earning millions of hard currency; rather it means a process of acquiring social competencies and friendships, which can be valuable in life.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Jansen, Stef. 2013. Hope For/Against the State: Gridding in a Besieged Sarajevo Suburb. *Ethnos* 79(2), 238-60.

⁶² For an in-depth analysis of such contradictions, see Thelen, Tatjana, Andre Thiemann, and Duška Roth. 2014. State Kinning and Kinning the State: Elder Care in Serbia. *Social Analysis* 58(3) (forthcoming).

⁶³ Interview with Goran Todorović, 16. May 2012.

⁶⁴ Interview, 16. May 2012.

⁶⁵ Interview, 16. May 2012.

Conclusion

Launched as a heterodox economical account, modernist historians like Sundhaussen and Palairret have suggested categories like “slack”, “underemployment”, and “attrition of human capital” to explain the underdevelopment of the Serbian economy in the past and present. Both accounts remained as unconvincingly structuralist as those Marxist-inspired approaches they criticized. Palairret’s valuable empirical studies remained wedded to a liberal economic account, which, for what it is worth, resembles Verdery’s analysis of socialism. Meanwhile Sundhaussen employed Weber’s idealist thesis of the “protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism” as if it was a structurally explanatory factor, overlooking that it is an ideal type, which by definition is not “inevitable”. As an alternative, I suggested a more flexible Lefebvrian approach to combine questions of the production of social relations with the (moral) economy of post-socialism. Through analyzing a successful case, I have shown how hard imaginative work accords to Serbian social norms, which in turn do not fully conform to the capitalist moral economy. Individual achievement is valued as much as the moral appreciation of social space and social relations.

The protagonist of my case study produces social security and reconfigures material-social relations on the basis of agricultural production. He socially co-produces (or buys), arranges, orders, names, and fixes fields, firms, green- and glasshouses, homes, and orchards in space and time. These assemblages constitute a renewed social space, which constrains, and enables the relations that produce it. An important subjective driving force behind these practices is the creation of an intimate and secure place for the family. Goran strives to produce “a normal life”,⁶⁶ entailing the values of building a home, maintaining an emotionally close family, enabling a better future for the children, and working mercilessly hard to accommodate to the circumstances. He also manages to maintain his machine tool production skills, inventing a greenhouse heating system and producing a novel spatial fix. Still, Goran and his wife plan for their children to exit agriculture in their own interest of “having a normal life”.

Goran, like many of his neighbors, went into heavy debt to go into agriculture. His returns are spatially fixed through acquiring productive assets, and used for servicing credits. He bought machines to be less dependent on machine services by neighbors, but he also invigorates capital and work swaps within several solidary groups. Morally appreciating the devalued collaborative work, he reproduces and transforms the social landscape.

As a small agriculturalist, Goran represents the fruitful side of agricultural production as it generates wealth for society. With his *bricolage* of capitalist and non-capitalist elements in spacing and placing, he has established a work intensive place of social security under adverse conditions, and is bound for years to intensive market production. Like his mentor Uroš Bobanović and others, Goran encourages co-villagers to adapt successful working models and elicits cooperation in value production. Goran is beaming with an optimism that

⁶⁶ Greenberg, Jessica. 2011. On the Road to Normal: Negotiating Agency and State Sovereignty in Postsocialist Serbia. *American Anthropologist* 113(1), 88-100.

is sustained by his ongoing ability to provide social security for “less productive” significant others. In the face of macroeconomic insecurity, production of social security was a daunting process, which not all neighbors were able to achieve.

Goran himself repeatedly bent under the impact of capitalism’s tendency to create monopolies and eliminate competition. Therefore, the generalized critique of state corruption and shady businesses is appropriated by him. It is no wonder that socially productive qualities as evinced in this case study ultimately wear out. The most resourceful, flexible, elastic actors may successfully manage the capitalist context of market production for a while, produce social security for their significant others and gain prestige among their peers. Yet, there are great dangers of over-investment. Hard work and intelligent management are no guarantee that the business and the family may not “burst” under multiple pressures. People “crack” not from socialist or “traditional” slack but from extensive capitalist competition, self-exploitation, and financial indebtedness. To counter the tendencies to burst and crack, actors constantly need to “reglue” and “rejuvenate”, that is morally appreciate, themselves and their social relations. Social relations are partly built on sociality, play, and passions, which Goran morally appreciated when reinvigorating local football, the social field in which he had found his ontological security in the 1980s, and had earned income and overall social security during the mid-1990s. Partly, social relations are imbricated in the moral economy of collaboratively producing food and enhancing infrastructures, with the effect of alleviating living standards. This was the approach Goran pursued in interactions with his close neighbors and in the Local Council. The apparent contradiction between his altruistic “reinvigorating of social relations” and his individualist micro-spatial fixing is bridged by the relational concept of moral appreciation. When morally appreciating people and production, social actors also morally appreciate themselves. This finding is in line with the observation that humans desire their mutual recognition because they are always already the product of social relations.⁶⁷

With such hybrid moral economic activities, Goran and his social relations insist on an alternative world, an “otherwise” as interpreted by Elizabeth Povinelli:

“The social projects [...] may not have the force to act in the sense of making anything like a definitive event occur in the world (becoming a counterpublic is an achievement), but they exist, nevertheless, in the Spinozan sense of persisting in their being. And insofar as they do, these alternative worlds maintain the otherwise that stares back at us without perhaps being able to speak to us [...].”⁶⁸

This case study, embedded within the Serbian transition from market socialism to neo-capitalism by way of primitive accumulation, suggests a critique of the contradictory moral economy of capitalism, which is straining the wishes, hopes, and needs even of the most productive people, and is outright adverse for the majority. The problem people formulate is that it has become “painful” to produce social security. Out of passion they perform multiple moves between industry,

⁶⁷ Graeber, David. 2011. Consumption. *Current Anthropology* 52(4), 494, 502.

⁶⁸ Povinelli, Elizabeth. 2011. *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 10.

services, and agriculture to morally appreciate the intimacy of their social space.

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