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RADU UMBREŞ:
Living with Distrust. Morality and Cooperation in a Romanian Village
*New York: Oxford University Press, 2022, 228 p.*

"One morning, two dozen villagers arrived armed with pickaxes and shovels with the same purpose in mind. They marked in chalk 2-meter-long sections inside the buildings (of the APC)[1] and began to clinically dismantle the structures" (Umbreş, 2022: XIV).

"Two years of ethnographic fieldwork in Săteni made me understand why the apparently senseless division was the most likely if not the only possible outcome" (ibid.: XV).

The book opens with a seeming paradox to its author concerning post-socialist public goods and their ultimate faith as a tragedy of the commons (Hardin, 1968). The introductory example cited above describes the disassembling of the village's APC buildings right after the fall of the communist regime in Romania. As indicated by the subsequent paragraph and the book's title, the author sees distrust as the main factor responsible for these abrupt developments, thus reflecting the ongoing atomization and social dismantling of the Romanian village and society.

Nevertheless, the book offers much more beyond such a simple conclusion. To start with, as an ethnographer myself and as a tutor and teacher of field methods, I must appreciate the author's outward honesty in admitting that he could not meet his original research goals and plans due to various external and personal factors and acknowledging that his flexibility and willingness to adapt and shift focus saved his project. Fieldwork is messy and rarely goes as planned – this should be emphasized to all who wish to pursue such a career. This book is a good testament to it and an excellent example of handling it – hence, I recommend referencing its (introductory) chapters in methods classes.

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1   APC – agricultural production cooperative.

LIVING

WITH

DISTRUST

MORALITY *and* COOPERATION
in a ROMANIAN VILLAGE

RADU UMBRES
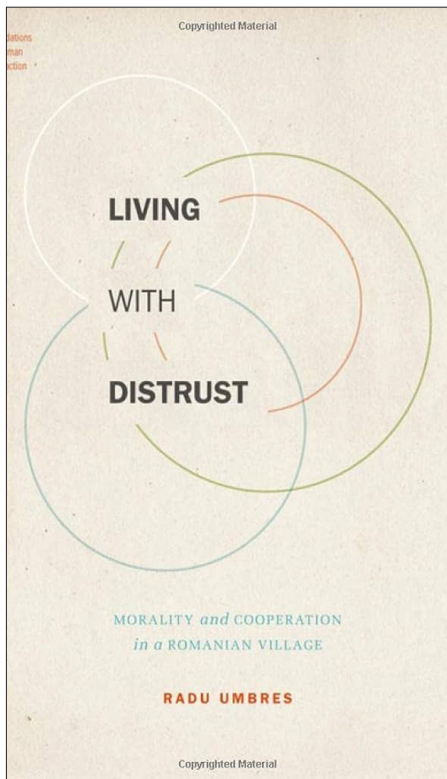
Still, the actual scientific goal of the book is quite ambitious – to understand the falling apart of the socialist collective in a Romanian village (though it was never truly functional in the first place), with implications for the whole state. Umbreș' approach to addressing this question is the book's most formidable attribute. On the one hand, his approach is traditional and old-school, which is not a downside. Quite the contrary – he lets the field help him formulate a proper research question and follows the leads and daily business around him to understand the context and find some answers. It is classic long-term ethnography at its best that lets him map the boundaries of (dis)trust across various domains of village life – such as family life, rites of passage, or local politics. In this manner, it follows the example of the anthropological founding fathers who showed that prolonged fieldwork is one of the best ways to understand culture and social phenomena (Evans-Pritchard, 1940; Malinowski, 1922).

On the other hand, Umbreș does not hesitate to include an explanatory framework in the interpretations of his observations. Referring to scientific theories and testing hypotheses is not something inherent to the work of social anthropologists, yet Umbreș demonstrates how it can benefit the whole endeavour. Trained and inspired by cognitive anthropologists of the French school (Bloch, 2018; Sperber, 1996), his choice of the theory of mutualism (Baumard, 2016) and economic game theories makes perfect sense, and his knowledge of the ethnographic field arms it with great explanatory power. Specifically, Umbreș views the boundaries of trust as a reflection of the underlying mutualistic relationships of his informants, which are cognitively processed in moralistic terms and concepts such as loyalty, kinship, or friendship. In effect, the trust essential for social interactions and any functional society is determined by the moralistic implications of mutualistic relationships.

It would be very appropriate at this point to refer to other works and surveys that researched trust in other post-socialist countries or even beyond. Even though Umbreș does a great job in extrapolating from the local to the broader regional or state level (and is rightfully very careful in doing so), he misses the opportunity to reach even further. There are many researchers and surveys he could compare his findings with (Brubaker et al., 2006; Podoba, 1996) for the implications seem to be vital for the social, economic, and political situation in post-socialist Europe in particular – and for the state of its democracies. I take it that the volume of the book did not allow the author to expand his work into this territory. However, some space could have been saved elsewhere – though the book has a great many examples and observations that are masterfully versed and delivered, it could perhaps do with less. It does feel like a long read (which is fine if you have the time).

On a similar note, the culture of distrust is explained mainly in the context of socialism and post-socialism, with some references to earlier historical periods (especially at the end of the book). However, I think that a little more space could have been devoted to those earlier periods, for some works show that in the neighbouring central European region, the practices of wide-reaching bureaucracy, corruption, and distrust were firmly established already during the Austro-Hungarian empire, which included parts of Romania itself (Šoltés, Vörös et al. 2015). Indeed, the author himself acknowledges it in the last chapter. Of course, every scientific work has its explanatory and physical limits – let us hope the author will eventually venture further beyond them – maybe in another volume?

In conclusion, *Living with Distrust* is a vital contribution to the studies of post-socialist societies, to research on trust and mutualistic morality, and to those approaches that combine (cognitive) theory and ethnographic field methods. I thus encourage the curious reader to dive into the witty yet insightful writing style of the author, backed up by excellent ethnographic research.

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