

TOMÁŠ WINKLER:

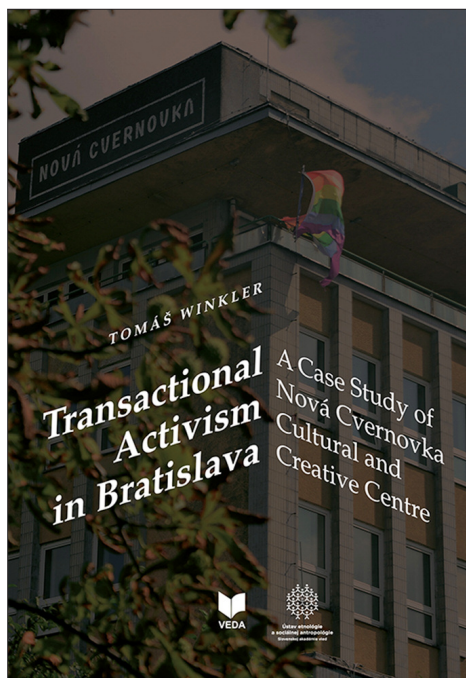
Transactional Activism in Bratislava: A Case Study
of Nová Cvernovka Cultural and Creative Centre
Bratislava: VEDA, Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology,
Slovak Academy of Sciences, 2021, 135 p.

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Tomáš Winkler in his book *Transactional Activism in Bratislava: A Case Study of Nová Cvernovka Cultural and Creative Centre* works with the topics of civic society, engagement and civic participation in Slovakia, framing it within the Central and Eastern European region. The cultural and creative centre Nová Cvernovka serves as an example, an “ecosystem” of the creative human potential and is characterised by cooperation between individuals, art studios, and civic associations (p. 8), where the author observes its networks, collaborations, and civic and cultural activities in the realm of civil society. In his analysis, he focused on the Cvernovka Foundation, as the organisation that manages this cultural and creative centre and established initiative within civil society in Slovakia.

The main objective of the book is to find out, using the theoretical concept of transactional activism, why are the manifestations of cooperation in the sphere of civic participation inherent to activities of this organisation (p. 8). The book is divided into six main chapters. In the first chapter *Civic activism*, the author defines how he sees the concept of civic activism within the specific region of Central and Eastern Europe, especially in the urban environment. In the text, he refers not only to collective, organised, and formal activities, but also to minor initiatives and manifestations of participation, often related to the daily lives of people who are not necessarily considered civic activists (p. 17). He pays special attention to the development of the civic activism in Slovakia and he develops this topic further in the second chapter *Social movements and the theoretical concept of transactional activism*. Tomáš Winkler refers to Slovakia in the context of its socialist past within Central and Eastern Europe, but he does not mention the main anthropological literature and its perspective in this context (e.g. Hann, 2014; Humphrey, 2002; Verdery, 1996) and his analysis is mostly based on the sociological sources and reasoning. In this chapter he defines transactional activism as the main theoretical tool, as the shaping of permanent or temporary links within civic activism between different actors – predominantly within organised non-state entities (e.g. civic associations), but also among these entities, holders of power, and other institutions (Petrova, Tarrow, 2007: 79). He comes to an interesting conclusion that the important role of transactional activism in the Central and Eastern European region stems from the tendency of the civil society actors to pursue their objectives through direct contact with politicians and public authorities instead of relying on mass mobilisations and protests (p. 33). Tomáš Winkler develops his thinking clearly and further operationalizes the term in the context of his fieldwork, describes how he uses the concept and opens his reasoning to the reader. The precise and structured thinking is present in the whole book and I appreciated it as a reader (and reviewer).

In the third chapter *Cultural and creative centres in Slovakia*, the author explains why he has chosen the given equivalents and what he understands by them at the empirical level in the Slovak environment. Tomáš Winkler also describes the interest of public policies in Slovakia in the concept of creative cities, based on the ideas of creativity and the so-called creative industry. Chapter four *The story and the present of Nová Cvernovka*, is dedicated to the description of the



development of one of the biggest cultural and creative centres in Slovakia – Nová Cvernovka. It describes its many activities, engagements, initiatives, programmes, co-operation and networks. The fifth chapter *Types of civic activism in the story of Cvernovka* expands the author's findings from his long-term qualitative fieldwork. He describes the wide-ranging activities of Nová Cvernovka Foundation in the field of civic activism and classifies them into five basic categories: 1. public mobilisation, 2. cooperation with other entities in the raising of awareness about the functioning of cultural and creative centres: 'Trust-building', 3. reflecting on current social and political events, 4. public education and awareness-raising, 5. raising of and reflecting on new topics and concepts.

In the final sixth chapter *Analysis of transactional activism of the Cvernovka Foundation* Tomáš Winkler replies to the question of why he thinks the transactional activism is typical of Nová Cvernovka's

activities. The author's findings show *a considerable presence of cooperation and links of the Cvernovka Foundation with other actors – the non-governmental sector, regional and local authorities, educational institutions, the media, and the public* (p. 107).

Even though I truly enjoyed reading the book, I missed more ethnographic and anthropological insights. The author conducted long-term qualitative fieldwork for two years at the site of the cultural and creative centre of Nová Cvernovka. He realised many interviews with nineteen respondents, especially with four key respondents – gate-keepers; and he used the method of participative observation and according to his words was present in everyday life at the cultural centre. Even though he used anthropological research methods, the book is written very technically, it misses the stories, the "juicy" ethnographic data, the description of the relationships, the everyday culture and negotiations, discussions, and debates. As a reader I couldn't grasp the everyday culture of Nová Cvernovka, and how the membership, participation and deeper engagement are built. The author is content with a strict analysis of his research with several quotations from interviews with his respondents, but we do not hear his voice in his text. I missed the engaged voice of the author, which would bring an even more reflexive perspective into the analysis and add value to the book.

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RADU UMBRES:

Living with Distrust. Morality and Cooperation in a Romanian Village

New York: Oxford University Press, 2022, 228 p.

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“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.

¹ APC – agricultural production cooperative.