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## **Multiple Modernities in Bulgaria: Social Strategies of Capitalist Entrepreneurs in the Agrarian Sector**

### **Abstract**

The article focuses on trust/mistrust relations, strategies of cooperation, and emerging conflicts in the period of establishing capitalist reforms in Bulgaria after 1989. In this frame, trust building, as a key challenge for a successful transformation process, is analysed as a premise for cooperation and social cohesion in the process of reforming governance, establishing local institutions, rebuilding civil society, and validating the acknowledged human and natural potential of a “failing” i.e. “fragile state” like Bulgaria. Of specific significance is the analysis of agency in which individuals possess mainly personalised types of trust and cooperation and are suspicious about systemic trust. The analysis of the empirical materials reveals that the agents involved in present capitalist agriculture do not follow the abstract model proposed by transition/consolidation theories but rather they confirm the validity of the *multiple modernities* approach proposed by S.N. Eisenstadt.

**Keywords:** Systemic and personalised Trust, Patronage, Corruption, Transition, Multiple modernities, Bulgaria.

### **Introduction**

#### **Capitalism in the Plural?**

The downfall of socialism in 1989 not only led to the collapse of the totalitarian regimes but also to the end of planned economy whose policies were notoriously controlled by the single-party State. During the so-called transition, previous institutions and economic structures were dissolved and

gradually replaced by new, capitalist-style ones from Western Europe. Yet, on the European continent, contrary to the expected outcome of the classic conceptualisations of transition often based on an occidental modernisation vision, a simple west-to-east institutional and organisational transfer did not occur. Instead, in Southeast Europe especially, specific forms of adaptation to the westernisation of economy and society emerged, which, in line with the theoretic paradigm proposed by S. N. Eisenstadt, may be regarded as illustrations of *multiple modernities* (Eisenstadt 2002). Through this approach, we intend to show that due to specific circumstances the *arendatori*, i.e. the current capitalist agricultural entrepreneurs of the Bulgarian Dobrudzha, have had to *invent* distinctive strategies not foreseen by the transition model. Under this aspect, the *arendatori* brought about a unique and unexpected socio-economic modernity in the above-mentioned region that has taken by surprise both the capital's new political class as well as many occidental observers. Through a long-term outlook (approximately twenty years), this article reconstructs the above process pointing out the importance of social networks:

- 1) consisting of transactional social relationships (Bailey 1969: 75 ff.) where the accepted norm is a reciprocal and asymmetrical exchange of services between single actors, and
- 2) based on highly personalised forms of trust.

### Socialist Collectivisation Policy in Bulgarian Agriculture

After 1946, the Bulgarian communist rulers gradually enacted a land reform immediately after World War II. They did not embark directly on collectivisation, but rather started by expropriating the greater landowners and distributing land on a private basis. At first, whoever owned more than 20 ha of land (30 ha in the Dobrudzha) was dispossessed without compensation. Through these measures, 300,000 ha were nationalised of which 130,000 were distributed among 135,000 families while the remaining 170,000 ha were handed over to the newly established state-owned enterprises.

The process of collectivisation in Bulgarian agriculture was relatively slow: in 1950, the newly established agricultural cooperative collectives controlled only 51% of the cultivated land, while the property law had not yet been touched. The peasants had *de facto* ceded their land to these production cooperatives, while remaining *de jure* proprietors.

Over the following years, in parallel with the forced industrialisation that the communist rulers regarded as the primary task of a *people's republic*, the collectivisation process forged ahead. Although the communists regarded the existence of these private small peasants as inappropriate, the process was finally brought to a close at the end of the 1950s. At this point collectivisation was practically complete, since only minute land plots, i.e., a few vegetable gardens which should in principle have yielded produce for family consumption, were left in private hands.

The starting point of a new phase in Bulgarian agriculture occurred in the 1970s. By creating gigantic agro-industrial complexes, the regime imposed an extensive centralisation that left a dire economic and socio-economic legacy. Decentralisation aiming to correct the mistaken development and at the same time to demonstrate the real potential of the *socialist planned economy* was introduced from the mid-1980s onwards. This hesitant *reform policy* was totally overwhelmed and swept away by the unexpected events of 1989.

Both the collectivisation of agriculture and forced industrialisation led to considerable migration waves from the countryside to the cities, thus leading to the demographic and socio-economic consequences that we will expand below.

### **The Post-socialist Agricultural Reform in Bulgaria: A Return to the Future?**

The de-collectivisation of farm land was one of the foremost problems of all Eastern European post-socialist governments, from Estonia to Bulgaria. This process was slightly different in each of these countries. The new post-socialist governments in most of the Eastern European countries enacted the return of the land to the original owners as a necessary act of justice towards the people who had been illegally deprived of their property. The owners were viewed as victims of a brutal and cruel policy of illegitimate governments.

In many cases the entire process was based on the following two specific agro-political presumptions:

- Restore pre-socialism ownership relationships
- Establish family-operated farms on the basis of the post-socialist agricultural sector

The official intent of a necessary compensation for the suffering conceals the rather covert wish to reverse history. At first, the main idea was to recreate

that peasant society and village community, wiped out by 50 years of socialist collectivism, which were regarded as the cradle and guardians of true national values, virtues and traditions. Immediately after the breakdown of socialism, some politicians stood behind a *village ideology* based on the creation of a population consisting of small farmers. Consciously or unconsciously, a part of the political, bureaucratic and intellectual elite, with the support of well-meaning experts from the West, advocated a national-populist agricultural policy based on pre-World War II times. This form resulting in *paysannerie pensée* held hardly any similarities with the actual *paysannerie vécue* that surfaced after socialist times. But it was conceived at first as an abstraction that was to serve as a benchmark for the formulation of the land reform laws.

Bulgaria is an excellent example of how land reform laws and their application shortly after the Fall of the Berlin Wall intended to reinstate the pre-socialist past of the *small nation of smallest farmers*. The primordial *land ownership* of the Bulgarian nation, which famous writers and artists had praised and which was celebrated by the Bulgarian National Agriculture Union with its charismatic leader Alexander Stambolijski in the political arena, proved to be a myth which socialism could neither demolish nor outlive.

Thanks to these ideological instruments, the 1991 Land law and its amendments in 1992 and 1995 managed to provide the conditions to dissolve the agricultural collectives, which were the socio-economic basis of Bulgaria's entire socialist agricultural sector, and subsequently re-establish the precarious state of affairs of farmland existing in 1946. But this meant re-establishing those days' excessive fragmentation of land property.

This last paragraph spotlights the radical specificity of the post-socialist land reform in Bulgaria. In fact, the restitution within the so-called *real borders* of 1946, aside from a few exceptions in Romania, was not enacted in any other country of the former Soviet bloc where the land was handed back in accordance with far more pragmatic legislative instruments, though even these cases are not exempt from forms of *peasantism*.

The expectation was that new legal landowners, following the philosophy of the reformers, would take on the role of small farmers as in pre-socialist times.

This attempt to place the past in the present and even in the future through a reversion of history, and simultaneously revitalise the mythical figure of the traditional Bulgarian peasant in post-socialism, has proved to be highly problematic.

It should be mentioned that the total lack of land registers in many of the Bulgarian Dobrudzha villages and the poor organisation of land registry offices in other parts of Bulgaria made it extremely difficult to define the borders of the land parcels as they were in 1946. In several cases the local land commissions thought that asking the older members of the community to reconstruct the size and location of the individually owned land parcels would suffice. However, since human memory, as Maurice Halbwachs has already shown, tends to be selective, it is not surprising that the method chosen by state institutions, especially in a *society of public mistrust* such as the Bulgarian one, was considered arbitrary and dubious. The upshot was an astonishing number of protests, court proceedings, pleas and disputes not only between the state and the people involved, but also between former and at the same time new individual landowners. Contentious cases were handed over to the courts, but these were understaffed, did not enforce the new and constantly changing terms of the land reform laws and were therefore unable to solve the cases quickly. The land commissions were soon blamed for siding with different parties and for dishonesty (if not corruption) and for many citizens the bad repute of the state's courts was once again confirmed. The perception of the permanent and widespread judicial uncertainty increased especially among the population of the Bulgarian Dobrudzha since they already deeply mistrusted the official powers and especially the courts.

A second serious problem with the land reform was the fact that returning the land division to its 1946 state of affairs resulted in an extremely fragmented landscape, as we have already pointed out. This was also true in the Bulgarian Dobrudzha where the fragmentation was not as severe as in other parts of Bulgaria.

Until 1878, when it was granted autonomy that *de facto* put an end to Ottoman domination, Bulgaria had neither laws of Slavic origin nor an Ottoman legislation regulating the equal division of land between several heirs. All owned land, regardless of its lawful categorisation (*timar*, *tchiftlik*, *zadruga* or others), represented a whole that was passed on from generation to generation as such. After 1878, during the so-called *Europeanisation*, foreign law policies and practices from the western part of the Old Continent were imported. This process of restructuring the laws affected not only the entire public administration and government structures, but also private relationships. The new inheritance and land laws stated that the land was to be divided equally among all heirs, a circumstance which led to the progressive fragmentation

of land parcels. This alarming trend, which paved the way for some serious socio-economic consequences (Bell 1977: 13), was also clearly recognised by the Prime Minister Alexander Stambolijski. Before his assassination in 1923, he drafted a reform project for the consolidation of small landowners. The land fragmentation reached its peak in 1946 when over 92% of all farms were smaller than 10 hectares, about 7% of the land parcels were smaller than 20 hectares and only 1% of the landowners had more than 20 hectares (Minkov and Lazov 1979: 12). The requirement of the 1991 Land Reform to revert land distribution to its 1946 state of affairs also meant reintroducing the small-scale production of the past, while the fragmentation was made even worse because many of the owners of the small land parcels had died during socialism and their heirs were having to divide the land even further between themselves.

The third fundamental problem with the return of landownership to its 1946 state of affairs was linked to the fact that the land reform's beneficiaries were people who had little or no experience or knowledge when it came to agricultural work.

The forced industrialisation of the late 1940s caused a massive migration of the Bulgarian population to the cities. This caused the greatest population reduction in the agricultural sector within all Eastern European satellite states (Eberhardt 1993: 35). Massive urbanisation meant not only a radical job change but also a great change in social position, value system and lifestyle. Thus, the new migrants went to make up an urban middle-class with its own values, living standards, wishes, goals, etc. Members of this new social stratum with its distinct mental attitudes and social practices could hardly negotiate a life as a peasant or a return to the countryside. According to our direct observations, managers, technicians and often also the workers of the agricultural farms in the Bulgarian Dobrudzha lived in an urban social environment. They commuted daily between their town residence and the rural working place as if they were industrial employees. This was an entirely different daily routine from the *classical* peasant's one whose schedule was determined mainly by the seasons and the weather. In these unpopulated regions, characterised by a high level of mechanised wheat production as well as intensive stockbreeding, the land areas were almost entirely deserted. In the villages one could meet only old people and a few qualified agrarian workers.

### **Unexpected Consequences and Awkward Agents: The Role of the *Arendatori* in the Post-socialist Agricultural Sector in the Bulgarian Dobrudzha**

For the abovementioned reasons, the resurgence of family-run farms based on small land parcels never took place. Both the people directly involved in agriculture (managers, technical workers and employees of the former collectivised production farms) and the new landowners, most of whom lived in an urban environment, thought that the land reform law was absurd. Almost without exception the people involved described the new land law not so much as unjust, but rather as a mistake and a project created by the incompetent political elite in the capital. Some critical voices from the Bulgarian Dobrudzha declared that politicians in Sofia were acting in accordance with a plan that was not based on actual reality and consequently were unable to grasp the problems of the region's agricultural sector, not to mention solve them. First and foremost, turning large farms into thousands of small autonomous land parcels, given Dobrudzha's geographical location and practical circumstances, seemed utter nonsense and the prelude to a socio-economic catastrophe for the entire region. One must add that today this negative stance is shared even by those few who more than eighteen years ago endorsed the agrarian law. Nowadays, the agricultural reform is unanimously regarded as a complete fiasco that had catastrophic consequences on the development of agriculture in the Dobrudzha region.

In the framework of this widespread atmosphere of public mistrust, several actors who were already present in the agricultural sector under socialism took initiatives that later proved to be economically sound and financially successful for them and their co-workers. Loopholes in the agricultural reform laws allowed them in the early 1990s to develop economic strategies that they have maintained to this day.

The main players in this new scenario, which the lawmakers did not foresee in the Bulgarian Dobrudzha or in the other fertile regions of Bulgaria, are undoubtedly the so-called *arendatori*. These are entrepreneurs in the agricultural sector who rent land from the new owners whose land was returned through the reform laws but are unable or unwilling to farm it and rarely want to sell it. We ought to mention that most beneficiaries of the post-socialist agricultural reform are citizens who are barely familiar or utterly unfamiliar with market-oriented agriculture.



Several *arendatori* were members of the local political or agricultural elite during the socialist period. They were well-trained professional farmers who began their careers as functionaries on the TKZS production farms (TKZS – Labour Cooperative Agrarian Farms). Although these old agricultural unions were dissolved and all the employees of these huge institutions were laid off in the first half of the 1990s, the land reform did not manage to take their leaders' power away. The goal of eliminating all traces of communism in the country's agricultural and industrial branches was not reached because the local *nomenklatura* realised that after a short while of widespread confusion they could appropriate the best machines and equipment. At the same time they were able to mobilise their past *network of relationships* in order to rent the best land parcels from the new owners, i.e., the ones who got them back during the agricultural reform. The *arendatori* turned astonishingly quickly into remarkably capable capitalists.

In the Bulgarian Dobrudzha, where the first *arendatori* appeared, some were able to get hold of up to 10,000 hectares. In addition, they recruited people from the agricultural collectives who belonged to their closer circle of acquaintances and had them working as hired employees in their post-socialist companies. At first, the *arendatori* engaged in highly speculative privatisation ventures in the agricultural sector. Their strategies in those times were similar to the ones Max Weber described as *pre-rational capitalism* (Weber 1956: Vol. 2, 834), of which short-term rent contracts (one to five years) are an example. The *arendatori* focused on intensive corn production with the use of pesticides, neglecting both the necessary improvement of the farmland and ecological balance.

After a glorious start, several *arendatori* soon went bankrupt. In the Bulgarian Dobrudzha, however, several of them were very successful and became the leading characters of the agricultural sector to this date.

In order to portray such socio-anthropologically representative and relevant careers we will analyse a case study, which can undoubtedly be considered almost ideal and was often used as a reference model by the people of Dobrudzha.

The person is N. M. whom we interviewed regularly between January 1992 and April 2008 in order to systematically reconstruct his social and economic development (Giordano and Kostova 2002: 127).

In January 1992 we were introduced to N. by an employee of the regional section of the agricultural trade union in Dobric, the capital of the Bulgarian Dobrudzha region. This was shortly before the agricultural reform laws came



into force. At that time the centre-right coalition's plans for agrarian reform had caused great excitement in the whole region, but had not yet come into effect. Public opinion feared that the whole socio-economic structure of the Dobrudzha region was endangered. In these regions with their almost legendary *red* traditions one was to expect great resistance, if not an open rebellion against putting the government's reform project into practice. In this general atmosphere of open discussion in which there was no lack of slogans and catchphrases against de-collectivisation and land restitution, we had our first talk with N. who was known for being a staunch advocate of the socialist agricultural collectives' system. We were in the village O., about fifteen kilometres from Dobric where the collective's central office was located. Here everything was still under N.'s control since this agricultural production collective had not yet been dissolved. In our first long conversation he delved into his socialist management policy. He was positive that the collective's economic success was to be explained solely thanks to his personal experience as an agronomist and his loyalty to the old party directives. Next, he noted the advantages of collectivisation for a region such as Dobrudzha and pointed out that the policy of privatisation and the restitution were a fatal mistake. At the end of the interview he mentioned in the presence of his employees:

*The members of this collective will never accept the de-collectivisation of agriculture. We will continue to do what we have been doing until now.*

About six months after the revised land reform law was put into effect, we met N. again. In the meantime he had been dismissed and his collective through judicial intervention had been placed under the power of a liquidation council consisting of a small group of people who were very close to the new centre-right government. This second conversation with N. took place in a cold, small room of the once proud headquarters of the agricultural union in the town of Dobric. This meeting had none of the collectivist pride that had been central in our first discussion; it was a shorter and more dramatic conversation. N. explained uneasily and not without bitter irony that now he was simply an unemployed person looking for a job, naturally in agriculture. He had various plans, as he stated, but none of them were as yet carefully thought through. We learned that after the new land law came into effect the situation in the entire Bulgarian Dobrudzha was so unclear that he could only live from one day to the next and any kind of long-term planning was impossible. When we pressed

on to learn more about the immediate consequences of de-collectivisation of Dobrudzha, N. broke down, shook his head and explained in between sobs:

*What a catastrophe... all is lost... They (the politicians in Sofia and the members of the liquidation committees) have destroyed everything we accomplished in years and years of hard work.*

At the end of the conversation, visibly defeated and not truly convinced, he formulated the following sentence:

*Probably the only prospect is to begin a market economy in years and years of work.*

Several years later, in May 1996, we were surprised by N. as he arranged our regular meeting in his old, and by now closed-down collective building. He greeted us in his old office and it was immediately obvious that he was in much better spirits than when we had last met. He was very lively and seemed more confident than ever. Immediately after we entered his office he started to tell us proudly of his success.

N. gave the impression that he had finally re-conquered *his* old co-op. He told us he had started renting land parcels from the new owners who lived in the cities and barely had any interest in agriculture and that this way he had managed to gather enough land to have a profitable agricultural enterprise. He explained:

*In Dobrudzha agriculture can only work on the basis of big plots of land, but those in Sofia don't understand that. So, we have to do things our way.*

As in the past, he complained about the “new politicians in the capital”. What could one expect from people who “*have never seen the countryside*”? According to him this inappropriate behaviour of the national political elite also explained why obtaining financial resources was so difficult, i.e., affordable bank loans to buy seeds and machinery and to pay wages. Despite those difficulties he had managed to buy equipment that used to belong to the co-op as the newly founded co-op did not have the resources to buy that machinery from the old collective. He had also managed to select the best workers from the wide range of qualified and unqualified ones who used to work in the collective while he was still running it.

At the end of the interview he insisted on inviting us to lunch at the private inn that had recently opened in the village O. There the owner and regular customers greeted him with deference. From this observation we concluded that N. brought us to this little restaurant to show us that he had won back the prestige he had enjoyed at our first meeting. Here he could display the centrality of his role and his strategic position in the framework of his relationship network.

In 1998 we met N. again. He was several hours late for our meeting so we had enough time to look around his establishment. From the huge increase in number of employees we concluded that his enterprise was developing successfully. When he finally arrived he announced he was currently farming 3,500 hectares. The business was running quite well, but he had to be on the lookout for corn speculators (the notorious *akuli*, i.e. sharks) from the big cities, mainly Sofia, who tried to keep the prices low. We asked whether he wanted to buy the rented land sometime in the future. With a cunning smile he replied:

*The situation is still too uncertain; but this is a future goal.*

Then he suggested we take a look at what he had recently created in order to relieve the pressure from the *akuli*. He proudly took us over to the granary of the closed-down collective, which he had renovated and equipped with brand new metal silos. We congratulated him, so he responded:

*...one needs good storage capacity in order not to feel the pressure from the speculators, just as many of the arendatori and especially the new co-ops are.*

In the end he asked if we could invite him to Switzerland (of course he would pay for himself as he emphasised) because, from what he knew, there he could learn how to improve efficiency in the agricultural sector from a capitalist standpoint. At this point it was clear to us that from being a member of the old local *nomenklatura* N. had turned into a post-socialist capitalist.

Further long conversations with N. took place in September 2006 and 2007 and April 2008. He always welcomed us in a brand new three-storey building in central Dobric. He told us he had left the old collective's run-down office to move to these much more pleasant premises of his enterprise. The interview took place in his personal office where on a small, but clearly visible

shelf next to an icon of Jesus stood a carefully arranged display of trophies (cups and diplomas) that N. had received in recognition of his outstanding, and for the time being nationally renowned, career as an *Agro businessman*, i.e. an independent agricultural entrepreneur. With some pride he announced that he was already cultivating 7,500 hectares, which according to him was the ideal size of a profitable enterprise in the Bulgarian Dobrudzha. He added that the land market was becoming a bit more flexible as the old/new owners were ready to sell because of higher land prices. He also noted that buying such extremely small land parcels was not always easy since among the many heirs who had got the land back following the land reform there were often conflicting opinions and expectations, which led to troublesome conflicts and disputes. Despite these difficulties and the resulting very long negotiations, he had managed to buy 3,500 hectares to date. Given the current situation in the Dobrudzha region, N. views his property as sufficient. The future would tell if additional land was needed.

After the conversation in September 2006, he suggested taking us to his country house on his estate. Along the way he showed us a great number of new silos under construction and again explained the key role of storage. After a short ride along the rather flat landscape, we saw his country house; a pseudo-traditional, neo-rustic building which according to N.'s concept had a true rural feel. An over two-metre high fence surrounded the house. From above the walls one could make out a large, well-tended garden as well as a chapel, which N. insisted we visit. He was especially proud of the small fresco on the altar, which, in the tradition of Orthodox iconography, depicted the twelve apostles rather realistically. In the garden he had installed a huge granite water basin, which he had bought and brought to Bulgaria from Romania and that had belonged to the Rotary Club in Dobrudzha before World War II. Finally, we visited the house and spent most of our time in a large hall that N. had set up as a meeting place for his co-workers. The hall also contained a very conspicuous portrait of Che Guevara. We also saw a small but significant display of official photographs from the communist era depicting the striking activities of the old agricultural collective, by now dissolved over 16 years ago. One could recognise the *festive* opening ceremony, the subsequent *festive* process of collectivisation as well as the *glorious* phase of mechanisation. This unexpected exhibition of socialist memorabilia also included a reproduction of the 1943 founding act of the co-op signed by N.'s father. This proved what we had already surmised, i.e. that N.'s father shortly after the communist

regime's advent was among the most important and influential leaders of the *red* collective movement in the Dobrudzha region.

From this visit at his agricultural empire's core we were able to conclude that his present position is a sort of dialectic *bricolage* consisting of socialist nostalgia, neo-orthodox reinvention of the past and capitalist orientation for the future. N. is clearly the embodiment of a specific version of the current capitalist entrepreneur who is definitely not entirely in line with the western model, which makes the ideas of Samuel Eisenstadt (2002) about multiple modernities seem very plausible and legitimate.

### **Networking Know-how: The Pivotal Role of the *Arendatori* and the Social Production of Personalised Trust**

N. should not solely be viewed as a representative example of the new, rich and wealth-producing agricultural entrepreneur in the Dobrudzha region. He is also an admired, envied and probably even hated protagonist of the post-socialist era. Therefore, not only local *arendatori* but also those in other markedly agricultural regions in Bulgaria view him as a paradigm and try to emulate him. Almost without exception they perceive him as the touchstone of their own economic achievements. N.'s achievements are a recurring topic in conversations with the *arendatori* in the Dobrudzha region. These people are always wondering whether they will be able to reach N.'s success and social position.

From a sociological and anthropological point of view, how should we interpret the brilliant career of this agricultural entrepreneur?

Shortly after the fall of socialism, in general, but especially among the new political elite in Bulgaria's capital, the *arendatori* were actually viewed as negative social figures. They were regarded as staunch accomplices of the old system and a hostile, dangerous remnant of the local communist *nomenklatura* that ought to be fought back with all legal means in order to curb if not annihilate it socially and politically.

Nowadays this negative attitude towards the *arendatori* has somewhat changed. Although some political circles still find them objectionable, in general the *arendatori* are accepted because they have proved to be useful and even necessary actors in the agricultural sector, able to create workplaces, produce and accumulate social wealth. This is proved by the changes in legal regulations by which the land's *arendator* has a right of first refusal if the

landowner wishes to sell his property. Thus, the land can be sold to another person provided that the *arendator* has refused it in writing.

Bearing in mind the above-mentioned difficulties at the beginning of the establishment of the new system, in line with the theory of rational choice or based on the reductionist view of the *homo economicus* acting solely according to the logic of what Max Weber described as rationality versus scope, one could assume that the success of some *arendatori* is simply the outcome of purely individual qualities and acquired capabilities held to be universal, such as willpower and persistence, rational planning, ability to make economic calculations, a good education, etc.

Notwithstanding the great importance of these crucial qualities, we also want to stress the exceptional significance of the *network of personal relationships* created in part during socialist times. Only the *arendatori* who had carefully maintained such relationships and had also had the chance to be at the centre of these networks could survive in their workplace during the first post-socialist years and later reach economic and social success.

To illustrate this point we will once again refer to the paradigmatic example of N. His entire enterprise is based on a close-knit network of highly personalised relationships with him and his closest family at its core. N. as the person in charge, together with his wife and daughters who manage administrative and financial matters, as well as his sons-in-law who as an agronomist and an engineer direct the agricultural and construction employees, represent the network's core. Without this structure of relatives, mobilised daily, running the business would have been impossible. For work in the fields N. relies on a trusted team of workers and tractor drivers who used to work at the old socialist agricultural collective and even then had a high-trust relationship with N. who was their director under the past regime. Of course some of the old employees have retired in the meantime. However, N. gave their jobs to their children or other close relatives.

Moreover, a successful *arendator* cannot help but have *necessary relationships* of a personal nature with politicians and high-level administrators in the capital. These are absolutely indispensable when it comes to getting subsidies from the state or the EU (e.g. money from the SAPARD-Fund, Regional funds, Agricultural funds, etc.). In return for these important benefits, the *arendatori*, as N. and several of his colleagues confirmed, had to leave 10% to 20% of the received sum to the brokers. With the politicians the *arendator* also acts as a client who secures them votes from the people in his network. The reciprocal

exchange of corrupt monetary transactions or classic patronage services are typical of these personal relationships.

In addition, the network of relations is reinforced in clubs such as the Rotary that provide the essential trustworthy and organisational environment for meetings aimed at winning over key contacts.

An *arendator's* extended network also includes personal relationships with the individual owners of the land parcels he rents. Maintaining such relationships, as N. stresses, should guarantee the cultivated lands' unity through the continuation of the lease. Only this way could one make significant long-term plans for profitable agricultural activities.

Finally, the personal relationship network, which according to our observations is crucial to the success of the *arendatori* and the prosperity of the members of their networks, may also be represented as concentric areas with different levels of intimacy (Boissevain 1974: 47). The diagram illustrates the decreasing level of intimacy with the increasing distance from the network's core.

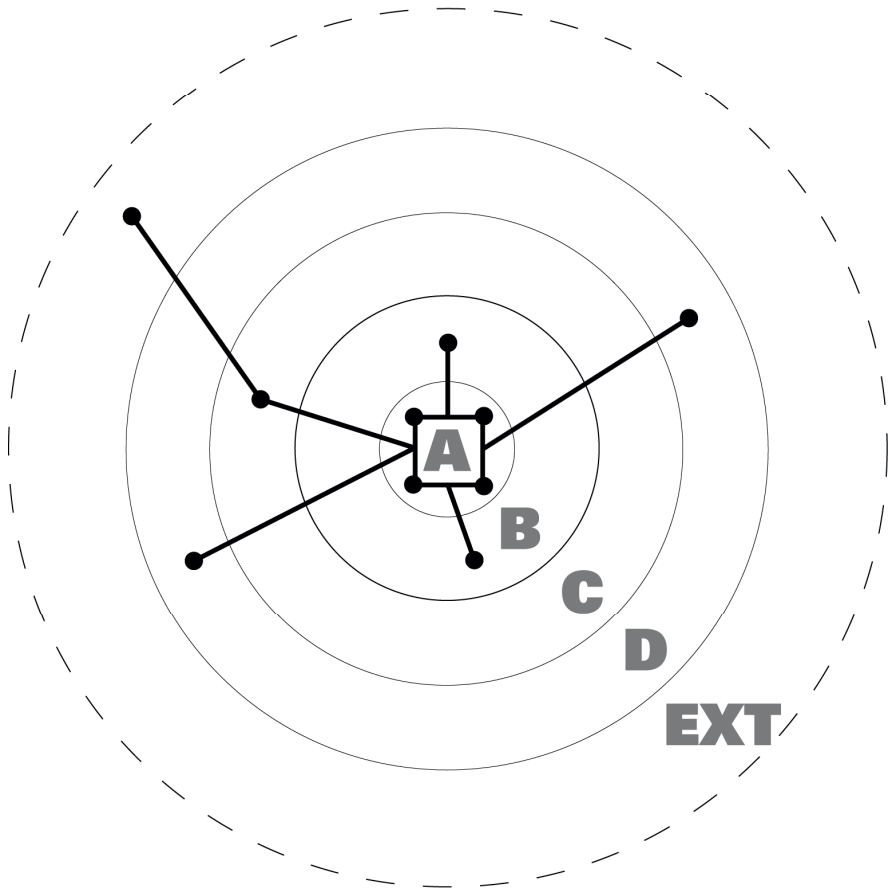
Up to the end of World War II, Bulgaria had been a markedly agricultural country weighed down by three major socio-economic problems, i.e., the excessive fragmentation of land property, the non-absorption of peasant overpopulation by an industrial sector still in the planning stage and the consequent high rates of underemployment and unemployment in the countryside. As mentioned before, in the years after World War II socialism tried to remedy this thorny situation by launching a forced march industrialisation process which included agriculture.

In this economic sector industrialisation mainly affected the country's more fertile and flat areas by encouraging a massive urbanisation that significantly decreased the rural population especially in regions like Dobrudzha. This situation was the legacy of the socialist economic system following its sudden, unexpected and ruinous collapse in 1989.

Clearly, therefore, those who embarked on capitalist activities in the so-called transition agricultural economy, such as the *arendatori*, have had to reckon with these socio-structural specificities resulting from the previous system. In fact, these skilful entrepreneurs of the post-socialist rural economy have taken on a major role and have become crucial in linking city and countryside. In Dobrudzha, as N.'s exemplary case illustrates, practically all transactions concerning the agricultural market economy and involving city and countryside will nearly inevitably go through section A of the typical network represented in the diagram. For any dealings between people in section



### Scheme 1: Personalised Network Structure



**A** Intimacy zone 1:  
The Family Core

**B** Intimacy zone 2:  
The co-workers

**C** Intimacy zone 3:  
The politicians and the bureaucrats

**D** Intimacy zone 4:  
The land owners

**EXT** External zone:  
The social space for  
the public mistrust

B and those in sections C, D or EXT, applying to the *arendator* himself or someone within his closer family proves useful if not indeed necessary. In fact, the diagram shows that there are practically no links between section B, which mainly consists of the *arendator*'s rural associates, and sections C, D and EXT. Accordingly, capitalist economic relations would be virtually impracticable without the presence of the *arendator* assisted by some of his family members. Yet, we need to add that the *arendator* cannot avoid acting as broker if he wants his economic activities to thrive. Therefore, taking on this role, which also contributes to his prestige and power, is definitely in his best interest. We can reasonably assume that an *arendator* who lacks the ability to act as a mediator will soon become a bankrupt entrepreneur.

N's case indicates that the *arendatori* are "urbanites" whose economic interests are totally or to some extent focused on the agricultural sector, thus on the countryside. However, to ensure their work's continuity and possibly an expansion of activities, as well as the jobs and pays of their employees the *arendatori* must prove to be accomplished and patient negotiators with the landowners. One of the most important strategies calls for the ability to convince them to agree to long-term leases on their mostly microscopic land parcels, which are often located rather far apart from each other. The *arendatori* will be able to obtain an undivided stretch of farmland only through these often enervating negotiations, which become particularly difficult when there is more than one heir to a single land parcel. In this case, moreover rather common, each person entitled to a part of the property needs to be won over. If an owner, out of spite or other, should decide not to rent his plot to the *arendator*, the latter would have to cope with outsiders right in the middle of his farmland with all the previously mentioned negative consequences on the efficiency of agricultural activities. Since these difficulties are notoriously quite common, *vox populi* has it that more likely than not the *arendatori* will resort to rather brusque methods, Mafia-style so to speak, to reach a solution in their own favour. Finally, the other actors with whom the *arendatori* must show to be good negotiators are those in control of the allocation of agricultural subsidies, especially in the capital. We can also add that without a skilled *arendator* or a cooperative's president acting exactly like an *arendator*, these funds administered in the city would never reach the countryside. The *arendatori*'s success, beyond their activity as middlemen and negotiators between actors belonging to more segments of society, also lies in being able to play highly mobile and hybrid roles.

### **Conclusions: Multiple Modernities as the Outcome of the Dialectic between Local Continuities and External Innovations**

This article shows how the reactions of actors involved in the process of land reform and re-privatisation of agriculture in Dobrudzha after the collapse of the socialist system prevented if not annulled the actions promoted by legislators and central authority. Through the sophisticated reactions and adjustments of the region's population, unexpected roles, practices, rules and strategies emerged that were definitely not in complete opposition to the ones present under different socio-economic conditions during socialism. Along with the unavoidable discontinuities related to switching to a new socio-economic system, one can still trace a number of continuities.

In socialist times, part of Bulgarian society, especially several of its individual agents operating in the economic and agricultural sectors, had not accepted the system passively and had kept it at bay, if not indeed weakened it, through active adaptation strategies such as personalised networks, which, thanks to their flexibility, also turned out to be useful in post-socialist times.

At present, the social category of the *arendatori* has undeniably shown to be future-oriented and highly innovative in the agricultural sector. However, from their experiences during a political and economic past that in theory has been shelved, they managed to effectively fine-tune and reuse their networks based on forms of trust handed down from the past in the so-called transition. Paradoxically, the success and resulting wealth of these unique capitalist entrepreneurs and their wide entourage would have been impossible in a post-socialist society and economy without the persistence of types of social knowledge and social capital grounded in socialist times.

This proves once again that in the matter of structures of socio-cultural dynamics those theories based on the universality and uniqueness of western modernity as well as its worldwide exportability *tout court*, have an extremely limited explanatory potential. Yet, it can hardly be denied that the most *classic* interpretations of post-socialism turned precisely to these theoretical assumptions by which only one road leads to economic development, i.e. the one dictated by the strict universalism handed down by the Enlightenment's conception of mankind and society. In Eastern Europe, however, the modalities of socio-economic and political change proved to be far more complex and contradicting. Therefore, they can be more suitably analysed only via a less

monistic and more dialectic (Tocqueville 1856; Simmel 1983; Balandier 1971), or rather, relational view (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) than the one we used in this article by means of the concept of *multiple modernities*. This perspective gave us the opportunity to consider the permanent interaction of social facts that reductionist and essentialist approaches usually conceptualise as phenomena governed by unchangeable laws linked to the unitarity of mankind. Thanks to the analytical method we selected, we believe we employed a more accurate view, precisely because it is a more pluralistic one. Accordingly, we were able to interpret the interplay of persistence and change more convincingly, as well as the nature of the rationale underlying the associated strategy actions. Thus, we were able to move beyond explanatory models based on the concept of transition and on its apparently mandatory relevance, i.e. its alleged universality: models that are governed by an epistemological oversimplification inherent in the current neoliberal conception of man and society.

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