View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk
brought to you by CORE
provided by Elsevier - Publisher Connector

Journal of Eurasian Studies 6 (2015) 17–23

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Eurasian Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/euras

Grey zones of welfare
Normative coping strategies in rural Lithuania

Ida Harboe Knudsen

University of Aarhus, Denmark

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 15 July 2014
Accepted 1 August 2014
Available online 15 November 2014

Keywords:
Welfare
Social insecurity
Grey zones
Rural studies

ABSTRACT

In this article I explore the 'grey zones of welfare' in rural Lithuania whereby I point to the inherent ambiguities that lies in a system where people to a high degree rely on networks and normative solutions to everyday shortcomings, rather than on the state. I argue that we in the period after socialism witness an increased degree of informal economies and social arrangements, as the formal sector of social security is perceived as unreliable. This results in a model where liberalism and individual ethics co-exist with a strong morality to support the poorest in society.

Copyright © 2014, Asia-Pacific Research Center, Hanyang University. Production and hosting by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

In this article I provide an ethnographic account of what I call 'the grey zones of welfare' in the Lithuanian countryside. I here point to the inherent ambiguities that exist within a system in which the state claims to be the sole or main provider of security, but which in reality sees people rely on normative orders and opt for their own solutions to get by in everyday life. Despite the introduction of liberal capitalism in Europe's formerly socialist states, we cannot automatically assume that this has led to more individualised lifestyles in these countries. As argued by Haukanes and Pine, we are 'witnessing a simultaneous development of individualism and associated lifestyles, on the one hand, and entrenchment of patterns of economic and emotional reliance on extended kin relations, on the other' (2005, 9). The period following the socialist collapse has been marked by households pursuing their own strategies of survival, which often are based on informal economic actions (Pine, in press). In this sense, trust, morality and extended sociality are playing vital roles in securing bearable lives for people after socialism. Social welfare has become an ever-changing and normatively loaded concept in which individual strategies, perceptions, moralities and social obligations are determining people's everyday social and economic security. In my approach the concept of welfare entails arrangements through which people obtain food, shelter, care, medical treatment and education. Of equal importance is coverage in case of workplace accidents, loss of employment and loss of one's home. In Lithuania these basic guarantees are all intertwined with the informal sector, as relying on the state alone does not guarantee people safety in their everyday lives. This likewise affects citizens' *sense* of social and economic security and predictability in everyday life, as people do not trust the state to provide them with welfare. As argued by F. and K. von Benda-Beckmann, this assessment by citizens of their everyday security embeds normative strategies that go beyond the scope of the state to provide emotional support and a general sense of safety (2000 [1994], 2007; see also Leutloff-Grandits, Peleikis, & Thelen, 2009; Thelen, Cartwright, & Sikor, 2005).

Using my research material on rural Lithuania, I will argue that current models of social welfare are dependent

E-mail address: ida.harboe@hotmail.com.
Peer review under responsibility of Asia-Pacific Research Center, Hanyang University.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2014.08.001
1879-3665/Copyright © 2014, Asia-Pacific Research Center, Hanyang University. Production and hosting by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

on normative solutions to everyday shortages, and that these local systems should be seen as something in and of themselves, not as a transitory state of being before a 'functional' capitalist model kicks in. As noted by anthropologists Morris and Polese (2013), Western international financial institutions engaged in an ideologically driven transition with the aim of finally doing away with the remnants of the socialist state, attempts which led to an increase in informal economic activities and relations throughout the 1990s. Although state services in Lithuania are free in principle, informal payments to doctors, connections with people in relevant positions and bribes paid to people working in the municipality are still the order of the day. Likewise, minimal salaries, a lack of attention to workers' rights, and minimal unemployment benefits and child support hollow people's perceptions of living in a welfare state (Kideckel, 2002).

My analysis is based on two extended case studies that examine the lives of people living on the margins of society, with a focus on the systems of normative welfare they rely on to get by in everyday life. The first case study focuses on the life and destiny of the local countryside *bomžas* (bum)[1] in the aftermath of the Soviet dissolution, and how he, despite his role as a local outcast in the village, still manages to make a daily living. He achieves this not through state support or any publicly provided benefits, but because of the villagers who, despite their contempt for him, still feel obliged to help him with getting daily work. The other case study examines the daily life of a young informal worker, who, caught between work in urban areas and obligations towards his parents, pursues a life of circular migration between his rural parental home and temporary employment in the city. By this means he tries to satisfy both his personal ambition of increased independence as well as his parents' expectations of continued support.

The findings of my research are based on one-and-a-half years of participant observation conducted in two regions of rural Lithuania. My first stay was for half a year in 2004, during which I lived and worked together with people from a village in rural Lithuania, which I here call Straigiai. In Straigiai there were 290 households with a total of 685 inhabitants (information provided from the local municipal office, 2006). This was followed by one year of research from 2006 to 2007 in which I expanded my fieldwork by visiting an additional neighbouring village, here called Bilvytis. Bilvytis is located near the Polish border and has a scattered settlement pattern. There are about 100 households with approximately 260 inhabitants in the village and the surrounding area (information provided from local municipal office, 2007). In 2011, 2012 and 2013 I continued my research with several smaller periods of fieldwork in urban Lithuania, which collectively were of 6 months' duration. Although this latter fieldwork has not been directly incorporated into this article, my keeping up to date with the situation of welfare and social security in Lithuania (along with several trips to the two villages I visited for my previous pieces of research) has influenced this present piece of work. I have chosen to give in-depth descriptions of a limited number of informants, rather than building my analysis on a larger and more diverse sample. This comes down to two reasons. First, both case studies tell stories that go beyond their individual informants and exemplify a combination of increased liberalism and reinforced social obligations, just as they both adequately reflect the current unsettled situations and dilemmas in which insecurity in itself becomes a way of living. Second, this method gives me the liberty to develop ethnographic details and give more in-depth impressions of the people described.

1. Exploring the grey zones of welfare

In a retrospective essay about life in a concentration camp during World War II, Primo Levi (1988) introduces the concept of 'grey zones' as a way to describe situations of uncertainty and ambiguity. Levi describes how the initial expectations of newcomers to the camp were dashed as they discovered that there was no clear division between perpetrators and victims. Some fellow inmates operated as prisoner-functionaries who, in order to survive and improve their own living conditions, assisted the SS officers both in mundane and brutal ways; furthermore, they would act independently and kill fellows in the camp who were seen as a threat to their livelihood and extra privileges. Levi thus conceptualises the concentration camp as a grey zone, as black-and-white perceptions of 'us' and 'them' and 'good' and 'evil' were dissolved, leaving the world less accessible and understandable. Life is grey, Levi writes, although most of the time we struggle to make it appear in black and white and thus adhere to a certain order of things.

Drawing on Levi's idea, my colleague Martin Frederiksen and I have utilised the notion of grey zones to explore everyday lives and practices in Eastern Europe, with a focus on situations in which uncertainty and ambiguity have become ordinary (Frederiksen & Harboe Knudsen, in press). As Pine (in press) emphasises in her contribution to the debate, these are situations that create the conditions for social and economic practices that straddle the borders between legal and illegal, acceptable and corrupt. While situations may change over time, our people have been continuously subjected to everyday uncertainty and ambiguity. We therefore utilised grey zones as an analytical approach to conceptualise a given area or situation marked by ambiguity or porous boundaries which has a consistency through different time periods, all marked by their particular set-up of contradictions and uncertainties (Frederiksen & Harboe Knudsen, in press). The concept of grey zones in this approach thus encompasses Eastern Europe and the intriguing and confusing developments that have taken place in the region during the last two decades (e.g. thorough attempts to remake political and geopolitical relations, the insertion of new ideological and economic

[1] The term '*bomžas*' is not originally Lithuanian, but originates from the Russian word '*bomzh*' (*боМЖ*), which consists of the first letters of *bez opredelionnogo mesta zhitelstva* (*без о*Цределенного *Места Жительства*); in English this translates as 'without a permanent place to live'. The English 'bum' and the Russian '*bomzh*' sound quite similar, however the origins of the words differ: whereas '*bomzh*' is an abbreviation originating from the Soviet Militsiya, the English 'bum' is believed to originate from the German word '*Bummler*', which translates as 'loafer'.

systems, etc.). While parts of the Eastern European population have benefitted from these developments, other parts have instead experienced increased poverty, unemployment and social insecurity. Although not living in the regime of terror that Levi describes, our informants have likewise experienced disrupting and life-shattering experiences, as the social, economic and political set-up of their everyday lives has dramatically changed, subjecting them to uncertainty, ambiguity and turbidity. Indeed, as F. von Benda-Beckmann and K. von Benda-Beckmann (2007) remind us, ever-changing political and economic environments reinforce a feeling of everyday insecurity, which may be just as much a counterpoint to social order as open conflicts and disruption. Today we see that people in such vulnerable positions are often increasingly relying on normative coping and semiautonomous strategies in order to obtain the security and social guarantees they feel deprived of in their present-day societies.

Introducing grey zones as an analytical concept in Eastern Europe is likewise a way to overcome the idea that unsettled situations such as those described above are but a phase in a larger transition from a Soviet socialist past to a presumed capitalist society. As anthropological criticism has pointed out, the idea of a transition is severely flawed: not only does it rest on a neoevolutionist premise, it also overlooks the local-level uncertainties that have accompanied the everyday management of the changing social and economic landscapes following the Soviet breakdown (e.g. Burawoy & Verdery, 1999; Creed, 1995; Humphrey, 2002a; Kaneff, 2002; Pine, 2002; Ries, 2002; Verdery, 2003; see also Buyandelgeriyn, 2008). Furthermore, there is an inherent ethnocentric element in the transition theories, as the terminology and models used to describe the development emerged from a Western European model of textbook capitalism and were adapted to the situation in the formerly socialist countries without taking the influence of the previous system into close consideration (Hann, 1994; Humphrey, 2002b; Pine, 1993, 1996). For many citizens 'transition' in reality meant decreased living standards and job losses, while reforms for privatisation were introduced overnight, giving way to economic shock therapy and escalating inflation (Smith, Pabriks, Purs, & Lane, 2002). As postsocialist scholars have documented, for many the break-up of the Soviet Union was not accompanied by success and greater wealth (Anderson & Pine, 1995; Bridger & Pine, 1998; Hann, 1994, 2002, 2003; Humphrey, 1995, 2001 [1998]; Kideckel, 2002; Verdery, 2003). On the contrary, increasing gaps between the rich and poor led to a spiral of downward mobility for previously privileged workers, who were more or less left to their own coping devices (Kideckel, 2002; Schröder, 2008). What was experienced throughout the 1990s (and has likewise been experienced often since then, right up to the present day) is what the Frances Pine (in press) has accurately framed as 'cowboy capitalism'. Its hallmarks included: the privatisation of collective property, mainly secured for people in better positions (Harboe Knudsen, 2012); experimental and risky business strategies; public health services that were intertwined with informal payments; and a general ignoring of workers' rights (cf. Kideckel, 2002). By exploring this so-called transition we can see that changes came so fast and were so plentiful that they in themselves became a permanent state of being, with no end point in sight (see also Kideckel, 2002). Transition became its own end, and thereby the idea of transition lost its entire meaning along the way.

In the following sections I will provide detailed ethnographic accounts from post-Soviet Lithuania, illustrating life in a grey zone where uncertainty and ambiguity have become the order of the day. These accounts illustrate how rapid changes, paired with flawed public support, have resulted in a normative system of welfare that goes beyond the scope of the state. Both of the key persons in the featured accounts live more or less from day to day and hand to mouth, relying on village goodwill or family ties to keep going. These situations are not to be seen as transitory, but as general states of being straddling socialist and liberalist ideas, not fitting into any proposed category for transition.

2. The story of Stasys

The first self-declared *bomžas* I met during my time in Lithuania was Stasys.[2] We became acquainted during my fieldwork in the Lithuanian countryside in 2004. Stasys was in his mid-40s and had previously been working as a tractor driver on a collective farm. Now he was dressed in old scruffy clothes. His face was red and swollen from heavy alcohol abuse and his beard was long, and he had a cap pressed down over his long matted hair. Stasys would walk the streets in search of work and I in search of informants, and thus occupied we often met and had conversations. Stasys thought that it was a sign of connectedness that both of us were born in October on the same day. He would show me around the village and tell me how things used to be *prie rusų* (during the Russians) – where he had lived, where he had worked and how life had been 'back then in the times when I could still call myself a man', as he framed it. When we passed his previous house together, now inhabited by a different family, his eyes would fill with tears. 'It used to be mine,' he would say. People in the village found our friendship a bit odd and liked to tease me about it. In this way an elderly woman showed me a photograph from an excursion with the collective farm to what was previously Leningrad. It was a group shot. She pointed at a strong and handsome young man in the picture. The man was squatting and had pushed his sunglasses up on his forehead while looking confidently into the camera. 'Look at him!' she exclaimed, almost with excitement. 'Yes, yes. This is your Stasys!' The photograph was about 19 years old at the time.

There were many stories about Stasys from back then. He had been 'snobbish' people said. He would 'only drink the finest vodka' and he 'climbed into his tractor dressed in a white shirt and polished shoes'. After Lithuania declared independence Stasys had, like other people at the collective farm, lost his job. He did not start farming the land plot he got during privatisation, his marriage fell apart and his wife

[2] Stasys told me that if I should ever write about him, I should use his real name. All other names in this article are pseudonyms.

moved with the two children to the neighbouring village, where she found a new man. By now Stasys was drinking heavily, and no longer the finest vodka. He got into debt and lost his house and property. He began walking the streets as a day labourer. Whoever needed snow to be shovelled, a lawn to be mowed or winter-wood to be cut could count on Stasys. Even before I had met Stasys I knew about his life and destiny, as his derailment after independence was one of the most favoured subjects in the village. He had moved from being integrated in (Soviet) society as a citizen with work, an income, a place to live and a family, to being what Lithuanians popularly refer to as a *bomžas* (bum) and a *pijokas* (drunkard), without stable work, residence or family, and an irregular income based on the different tasks he completed as a day labourer. Stasys was mainly supported by what we could call the village's ‘middle class’: people who made a decent living, not being poor but not being rich either. Stasys himself explained to me that the rich villagers would always send him away, while the poor villagers could not afford to spare a single litas.

Stasys's downfall was interpreted in two ways in people's narratives. First, he was referred to as an example of bad human attributes, as his previous manners now were interpreted in light of the knowledge people had later gained. Thus, the ‘snobbishness’ of his youth was seen a direct cause of his later destiny, as hubris leads to nemesis. The other, second interpretation of his plight concerned the introduction of capitalism and privatisation. In the Soviet era Stasys had been a part of the collective farm, and there had been work for all and a certain level of security and predictability in people's everyday lives. After Lithuanian independence nothing was certain anymore. Stasys was thought of as being caught in a grey zone, a victim of irresponsibility for his own welfare and structural causes of destitution far beyond his control, affecting to a lesser or greater extent many others in the village. The collective farm had fallen apart, privatisation was random and secured the better land for people with connections, and people now struggled to survive as private farmers in a disrupted market. In this environment of uncertainty one could ‘fall outside’ the system and become like Stasys. That his downward social and economic mobility was considered to be related to changes in the system became clear to me in the weeks before EU accession. People's concerns about the consequences of the membership were often summarised as, ‘Now there will be more people like Stasys.’

3. Obtaining minimum welfare

Stasys served as a constant reminder of the Soviet past, a past that he willingly or unwillingly embodied through his personal tragedy. He was inevitably a ‘Soviet’ being who had not proven himself fit to cope with capitalistic conditions. This was not because he had been unable to change after independence, as he probably had been transformed more than anybody else in the village. Rather, he served as a reminder because he had changed in utterly the wrong way, and was deemed incapable of adjusting to the new situation. In a difficult climate of continuous transformations Stasys was a rewarding reflection, as everybody could claim that they had done better, that they lived better and had been more capable than him. As one farmer exclaimed (following my expression of sympathy for Stasys): ‘It was not any worse for him than for the rest of us!’ Indeed, whenever I made a positive or sympathetic comment about Stasys, I was always reminded that he, at the end of the day, was a *pijokas*, and had brought his current destiny upon himself.

Stasys maintained his life ‘outside’ the system. He did not receive any support from the state in terms of money or housing; instead he kept himself alive on the daily work that people in the village offered him. What was intriguing was that despite their harsh opinions about Stasys, many villagers made sure he had work every day. Simply giving him a few coins instead of setting him to work would be against the village morality: everybody had to work to make a living. In the village I noticed a general tendency to hold in disregard those who did not work, did not work hard enough or lived off state unemployment compensation. Work and money were tied together in an inseparable relationship. Michal Buchowski has reflected upon similar tendencies in a Polish village, and concludes that hard work is a way for people to express identity. He writes, ‘Real farmers […] never pay by credit in the shops and are opposed to the generous policies from the state towards “lousy people”. Farmers rely on their own hard work and believe that everything they have they owe to their own sweat’ (2003, 16). Thus, what Laura Assmuth (2001) coined in the case of a group of Estonian islanders as ‘the ethics of individualism’ has also proven to be a strong factor among Lithuanian farmers when opting for survival strategies. Living ‘off the state’ or any other institution was not regarded as something to be proud of; rather, it revealed a person to be a ‘lazybones’ (*tinginys*), irresponsible (*neatsakingas*) or a drunkard (*pijokas*). This idea was revealed in different ways during my fieldwork. For example, there was a small institution in the village where the children of poor people could go to get a free meal every day. Once I paid the institution a visit, but when I told my hosts about my experience, a heated discussion took place. While I was positive towards the idea of supporting poor children, my hosts, a hard-working farming family, disapproved of it. As the father explained to me: ‘When you give the children a free meal, you reward the parents for drinking and for being lazy.’ Another incident took place when I visited an elderly widow in the village, who ran her own farm. As she dragged out a bottle of wine she said, ‘Let us have a glass.’ She jokingly continued: ‘If we drink, we can always go to the state and ask for social benefits afterwards.’ Yet despite the general attitude towards lazybones and drunkards and the disregard for the possibility of being provided for by the state, certain moral obligations prevailed. No matter how much people disapproved of Stasys's behaviour, there was still the common idea that he should be provided with a minimum amount of money and food every day, just as a farmer let him sleep in his stables every night so that he could keep warm. Thus, while ideas of liberalism and individualism dictated the order of the day, there was still a moral obligation to look after the poorest in the village.

While Stasys thus figured both as the village's example of bad moral standards and as a charity case, he himself

strove to uphold the image of being a *worker*, not a drunkard. He thus faithfully walked around the village every day, visiting the houses that gave him work on a regular basis. One summer evening I met him as he was sitting outside a house on the stairs (he was never allowed inside houses). He had been cutting wood for some hours and was now enjoying a good meal with potatoes, juicy sauce and meat provided by the farmer's wife. We exchanged our hellos, but as he was occupied with eating we did not engage in conversation. A few hours later, as I was returning home to my host family, I met Stasys in the street. He was clearly upset and was shouting and cursing. I enquired about what had happened, and he explained: ‘You know I was working at Razaitis's place for hours. And I got nothing for it!’ Remembering his large plate of food, I asked if he had not received a good meal, but he just snorted at me: ‘I am a decent worker, I work hard, and I work for money. Who would pay a good worker with meat and potatoes?’ Stasys lit a cigarette and narrated that Razaitis had been very upset when he asked for money and had ordered him not to come back for two days. ‘And I need money before that!’ Stasys complained. As I often had before, I gave him a few litas. This was a little secret we had, a secret Stasys often reminded me never should be told to the other villagers.

On a daily basis Stasys was fighting for survival by means of low-paid jobs, having been through a steady disintegration from society that had cost him his family, his house and his job. His unstable situation subjected him to continuous insecurity, as he was subject to the villagers' goodwill. The village had become his grey zone of survival and his only space of navigation – a place where he, through various normative strategies, was capable of upholding an existence on the margins of society.

4. The story of Donatas

Donatas was 29 years old when I met him in 2007. He was a short man, with strong, always-dirty hands. His face bore witness to several fights; his nose had been broken several times – ‘I have lost count’ he said with a wry smile. Donatas came from the village of Bilvytis close to the Polish border. He worked informally at a construction site outside Marijampolė – the closest big city to Bilvytis. When Donatas got this job he was asked by his employer whether or not he wanted a contract. He chose to work without a contract, as he did not want to reduce his salary by paying taxes. His employer too saved money, as they negotiated a salary that was lower than the usual gross payment yet higher than the net payment Donatas would receive from this after tax. Some of his colleagues worked with a contract, others had likewise chosen to work informally. Donatas had finished elementary school in the countryside and had continued his education by training as a carpenter. However, he had seldom used his professional training as he had mainly been employed on construction sites. For the last ten years he had had different jobs, some of them legal yet most of them informal, as he preferred not to pay tax. Although Donatas would peruse the newspaper pages with job announcements once in a while, the low salaries paid to legal workers discouraged him from applying. An additional reason was that through various incidents of drunk driving without a driver's licence, disturbance of public order and attempted violence against the police, he had collected a large debt to the state, of around 7000–8000 litas (2027–2317 euros).[3] These debts entrenched his already marginal position in relation to the state – he did not want to register any employment, as this would cause the state to enforce the payment of his debts.

Nancy Ries (2002), in her analysis of post-socialist Russia, emphasises the idea that cynicism and quick money determine people's minds and actions, turning highly complex daily realities and changes into simple narratives about corrupt officials and betrayed hopes. Donatas, whose entire working experience dates from the period after the Soviet break-up, came of age in this environment, and kept fantasising about amassing great wealth through various more or less concretely formulated business plans. This atmosphere had influenced his work choices deeply: despite having been cheated out of his salary more than once, he never regarded such losses in the same way as paying tax to an unreliable system. While Donatas was pursuing a rather liberal lifestyle cut off from all state involvement, such as paying tax, receiving healthcare and being enrolled in a pension scheme, and although he mainly was interested in providing himself with a living, he was still subject to strong kin obligations in the rural areas where he came from.

Donatas came from a family of seven children. Two of them tragically died young. Now the two older sisters lived with their husbands and children in other parts of Lithuania. The oldest brother lived in Kaunas with his wife. He was a truck driver and she worked in the local kindergarten. One younger brother lived just across the street from the parents' place with his teenage wife and their baby son. He worked in a bakery in a bigger town close to the village while his wife was at home with their child. Donatas' mother had retired at the age of 50. She had chosen to take the so-called ‘many-children pension’ (*daugiavaikės motinos pensija*) that was offered to all women with more than three children. This meant that she had been able to retire early. His father received state support for disabled persons (*invalidumas*) due to his poor health. His mother supplemented her pension by selling the little extra milk she had and by preparing food for weddings and funerals. A combination of farming and pensions constituted their living. The natural resources on the farm were only potential resources: if no one worked the land, it provided no crops; if no one planted potatoes or cultivated vegetables, they would not grow; if no one took care of the animals, milked the cow or slaughtered the pigs, no milk or meat would be provided. To keep even a small farm required hard labour.

Donatas, contrary to his siblings, had no family of his own, which meant that his familial obligations were to his mother only. The problem was that he no longer lived in the village. He was engaged in informal work both as a carpenter and a construction worker. His insecure employment conditions meant that he was often moving to new

[3] Numbers from 2007 – the time of the fieldwork.

jobs in different cities in Lithuania, depending on where the next job was. To be an urban migrant with elderly parents in the countryside put Donatas in an uncanny situation. After five days of hard work in the city he would go back to his parents' house on Friday evening. The weekend was spent in labour on the farm, and he spent his evenings with his friends in the village who had returned home on the weekend for the same reason. They would hang out in front of the local store with beers and cigarettes, or would go down to the lake in the company of girls. When Monday arrived, Donatas left early in the morning in order to get back to the city. Once I asked Donatas whether he would not prefer to simply live and work in the countryside instead of constantly moving back and forth. His quick reply was: ‘Are you kidding, or what?’ Clearly, a life in the countryside alone was not preferable. And, as he elaborated, a life in the city alone was difficult since he always moved from city to city and job to job, which meant that he needed a stable ‘home base’ he could return to, where he could get his clothes washed, get some proper food and recede to for free in times of unemployment.

Donatas's story points to the unsettled situation that many young people in present-day Lithuania find themselves in, caught between parental obligations and a desire for greater independence and urban living. The solution is found in an intermediate strategy of circular migration, in which social security is established via the bond between children and parents. Donatas's mother could keep farming because of his ability to work double shifts, while Donatas was kept secure by his mother in times of unemployment, just as he could rely on her help and support when he was in need of money – a frequent occurrence during my fieldwork. Donatas was far from the only young man who pursued a life of circular migration between urban and rural areas. The bus that arrived on Friday afternoon and departed early on Monday morning was as a rule crowded with young men whose situations were similar to his. Due to the meagre prospects of small-scale farming, most of the young men had found unofficial employment in the larger cities. The majority solely worked informally in ‘the shadows’, but others combined legal work in the daytime with unregistered work in the evenings. Being caught in-between the demand to make a living and the obligation to help out one's parents forced many a young man into patterns of circular migration between urban and rural areas. Unlike Stasys, who was ‘pushed out’ into a grey zone of normative survival strategies, Donatas had made a conscious choice not to be subject to state regulations by completing informal work and paying no tax. While he on the one hand thus pursued a very liberalistic way of living, he did, one the other hand, become more dependent on familial and kinship ties to support him during times of unemployment.

5. The grey zone of social security

In this article I have explored the normative coping strategies that people from my field sites used in order to get by in insecure living situations. Rather than relying on any form of state-provided security, both informants pursued a life ‘outside’ the official system through informal work and network relations. What I have framed as *the grey zone of welfare* refers to normative systems of support and survival strategies that do not involve the state at all. This grey zone is further reflected in the intriguing mixture between an outspoken liberal mindset, as expressed in Donatas's informal work and desire for money, and the negative view in Stasys's village of the state supporting ‘lousy people’. Yet despite, or maybe because of, these individuals' pursuits outside of the influence of the state, family responsibilities and general moral obligations towards the poor were strengthened, since the state was not expected to play an active role in supporting them. As has been argued by Polese, Morris, Kovács, and Harboe Knudsen (2014), areas covered by state-provided welfare are often renegotiated at the local level and instead come to be covered by a form of mutual-aid welfare that is anything but systematic. Such unsettled instances of informal random work are not steps on the way to something else or something better, but permanent features that define their participants' existences. It is at this particular crossroads of what was and what is supposed to be that unstable situations start forming a way of living in itself. In accordance with my argumentation, this should not be seen as ‘capitalism gone wrong’ or a ‘restoration’ of socialist patterns; rather, these practices should be seen in themselves as direct *responses* to the new neoliberal environment.

While I have approached the mundane forms of social security as a grey zone of welfare – using this analytical approach to understand normative orders for security – this analysis could be taken even further in a Levi-ian sense by considering the further destiny of Stasys. In January 2005, not long after I had completed my first fieldwork, I received news from one of the village families that Stasys had been found in a ditch, frozen to death. During my following visit to the village I enquired about the events that had led to his tragic end. The story was as follows. Stasys's wife was still living in the neighbouring village with his two children. One day his teenage son, together with his friends, decided to find his father and give him a beating. Whether his friends pressured him to do so, whether he was angry at Stasys for having abandoned the family, or whether he felt the need to distance himself from his alcoholic father in front of his friends, I do not know. What I do know is that the boys found Stasys, beat him, kicked him, set his beard on fire and left him. He was found in a ditch the following morning; left weakened, he had frozen to death during the cold January night. While people unrelated to him made sure to keep him alive with a daily meal, work and a few coins, his degrading position in society led to a revenge attack from a young man who should have been close to him – at least in an ideal black-and-white world. But as Levi (1988) warns us, it is far too tempting to render the world in clear and separate black and white, when grey in reality is the dominant colour, with all its different shades and nuances.

References

Anderson, D. G., & Pine, F. (Eds.). (1995). *Surviving the transition: Development concerns in the post-socialist world*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge, Department of Anthropology.

Assmuth, L. (2001). A case study of a fishing village on Saaremaa island. In L. Assmuth, & A. Kelam (Eds.), *The Baltic Sea Islands of Estonia: A periphery in transition* (pp. 103–141). Tallinn: Estonian Academy Publishers.

Benda-Beckmann, F. von, & Benda-Beckmann, K. von (2000 [1994]). Coping with insecurity. In F. von Benda-Beckmann, K. von Benda-Beckmann, & H. Marks (Eds.), *Coping with insecurity: An 'underall' perspective on social security in the third world* (2nd ed.). (pp. 7–34). Yogyakarta, Indonesia: Pustaka Pelajar.

Benda-Beckmann, F. von, & Benda-Beckmann, K. von (2007). *Social security between past and future: Ambonese networks of care and supply*. Münster: LIT Verlag.

Bridger, S., & Pine, F. (1998). Introduction: transition to post-socialism and cultures of survival. In S. Bridger, & F. Pine (Eds.), *Surviving post-socialism: Local strategies and regional responses in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union* (pp. 1–15). London: Routledge.

Buchowski, M. (2003). *Redefining social relations through work in a rural community in Poland*. Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology working paper no. 58.

Burawoy, M., & Verdery, K. (Eds.). (1999). *Uncertain transition: Ethnographies of change in the postsocialist world*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

Buyandelgeriyn, M. (2008). Post–post-transition theories: walking on multiple paths. *Annual Review of Anthropology, 37*, 235–250.

Creed, G. (1995). An old song with a new voice: decollectivization in Bulgaria. In D. Kideckel (Ed.), *East European communities: The struggle for balance in turbulent times*. Boulder: Westview.

Frederiksen, M. D., & Harboe Knudsen, I. (2014). Introduction: what is a grey zone and why is Eastern Europe one? In I. Harboe Knudsen, & M. D. Frederiksen (Eds.), *Exploring the grey zones: Borders, relations and invisibilities in Eastern Europe* London: Anthem Press (in press).

Hann, C. (1994). After communism: reflections on East European anthropology and the 'transition'. *Social Anthropology, 2*(3), 229–249.

Hann, C. (2002). Farewell to the socialist other. In C. Hann (Ed.), *Post-socialism: Ideals, ideologies and practices in Eurasia* (pp. 1–11). London: Routledge.

Hann, C. (2003). Introduction: decollectivization and the moral economy. In C. Hann (Ed.), *The postsocialist agrarian question: Property relations and the rural condition* (pp. 1–47). Münster: LIT Verlag.

Harboe Knudsen, I. (2012). *New Lithuania in old hands: Effects and outcomes of EUropeanization in rural Lithuania*. London: Anthem Press.

Haukanes, H., & Pine, F. (2005). Introduction. In H. Haukanes, & F. Pine (Eds.), *Generations, kinship, care: Gendered provisions of social security in Central Eastern Europe* (pp. 1–22). Bergen: University of Bergen.

Humphrey, C. (1995). Introduction [Special issue]D. G. Anderson, & F. Pine (Eds.), Surviving the transition: Development concerns in the post-socialist world. *Cambridge Anthropology, 18*(2), 1–12.

Humphrey, C. (2001 [1998]). *Marx went away – But Karl stayed behind*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press (Updated edition of *Karl Marx collective: economy, society and religion in a Siberian collective farm*, pub. 1983.).

Humphrey, C. (2002a). *The unmaking Soviet life: Everyday economies after socialism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Humphrey, C. (2002b). Does the category 'postsocialist' still make sense? In C. Hann (Ed.), *Postsocialism: Ideals, ideologies and practices in Eurasia* (pp. 12–14) London: Routledge.

Kaneff, D. (2002). The shame and pride of market activity: morality, identity and trading in postsocialist rural Bulgaria. In R. Mandel, & C. Humphrey (Eds.), *Markets and moralities: Ethnographies of post-socialism* (pp. 33–52). Berg: Oxford.

Kideckel, D. (2002). The unmaking of an East-Central European working class. In C. Hann (Ed.), *Postsocialism: Ideals, ideologies and practices in Eurasia*. London: Routledge.

Leutloff-Grandits, C., Peleikis, A., & Thelen, T. (2009). An introduction. In C. Leutloff-Grandits, A. Peleikis, & T. Thelen (Eds.), *Social security in religious networks: Anthropological perspectives on new risks and ambivalence* (pp. 1–22). New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books.

Levi, P. (1988). *The drowned and the saved*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Morris, J., & Polese, A. (2013). Introduction: informality – enduring practices, entwined livelihoods. In J. Morris, & A. Polese (Eds.), *The informal post-socialist economy: Embedded practices and livelihoods* (pp. 1–18). London: Routledge.

Pine, F. (1993). The cows and pigs are his, the eggs are mine: women's domestic economy and entrepreneurial activity in rural Poland. In C. Hann (Ed.), *Socialism: Ideals, ideologies and local practices* (pp. 227–242). London: Routledge.

Pine, F. (1996). Redefining women's work in rural Poland. In R. Abrahams (Ed.), *After socialism: Land reform and social change in Eastern Europe* (pp. 133–156). New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books.

Pine, F. (2002). From production to consumption in post-socialism? In R. Mandel, & C. Humphrey (Eds.), *Markets and moralities: Ethnographies of postsocialism* (pp. 209–224) Oxford: Berg.

Pine, F. (2014). Living in the grey zones: when ambiguity and uncertainty are the ordinary. In I. Harboe Knudsen, & M. D. Frederiksen (Eds.), *Exploring the grey zones: Borders, relations and invisibilities in Eastern Europe*. London: Anthem Press (in press).

Polese, A., Morris, J., Kovács, B., & Harboe Knudsen, I. (2014). Welfare states and social policies in Eastern Europe and the former USSR: where informality fits in? *Journal of Contemporary European Studies, 22*(2), 184–198.

Ries, N. (2002). 'Honest bandits' and 'warped people': Russian narratives about money, corruption and moral decay. In C. Greenhouse, E. Metz, & K. B. Warren (Eds.), *Ethnography in unstable places: Everyday lives in contexts of dramatic political change* (pp. 276–316). Durham: Duke University Press.

Schröder, I. W. (2008). The classes of '89: anthropological approaches to capitalism and class in Eastern Europe. In I. W. Schröder, & A. Vonderau (Eds.), *Changing economies and changing identities in postsocialist Eastern Europe* (pp. 3–27). Münster: LIT Verlag.

Smith, D. J., Pabriks, A., Purs, A., & Lane, T. (2002). *The Baltic states: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania*. London: Routledge.

Thelen, T., Cartwright, A., & Sikor, T. (2005). *Local state and social security in rural communities: A new research agenda and the example of postsocialist Europe*. Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology working paper no. 105.

Verdery, K. (2003). *The vanishing hectare: Property and value in post-socialist Transylvania*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.