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David A. Kideckel. *Getting By in Postsocialist Romania: Labor, the Body, and Working-Class Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008. xii + 266 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34957-6; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-21940-4.

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During the last twenty years, Romanian mass media and most Romanian intellectuals have typically portrayed the miners of the Jiu Valley in Romania as aggressive, uneducated, and morally spoiled. Before 1989, they were considered the labor elites as were the railway workers and steelworkers. In contrast, after 1989, these miners gained a violent image due to the “*mine-riade*” (the Romanian term for the miners’ protests) in 1990, 1991, and 1999. Even Romanian scientists, such as Ruxandra Cesereanu, are not immune from considering the miners as having an “aggressive mentality” (*mental agresiv*).^[1] For this reason, David A. Kideckel’s book about life coping strategies of two distinct working-class groups in Romania, the miners of the Jiu Valley and the industrial workers of the Nitramonia factory in Făgăraș/Transylvania, sheds a different light on these people. As a professor of cultural anthropology at Central Connecticut State University, Kideckel shows empathy for the studied people throughout the book and much understanding of how Romanian people feel and think.^[2] Kideckel’s book gives a voice to the Romanian working class and lets them speak for themselves. It is a matter of course that this study is based on much fieldwork conducted during the years 1998 to 2000 with the help of numerous Romanian researchers. The Romanian support is also visible in the bibliography that includes work by well-known Romanian sociologists, such as Vintilă Mihăilescu; cultural anthropologists, such as the Hungarian-Romanian Enikő Magyari-Vincze (gender studies); political scientists, such as Vladimir Tismăneanu; and philosophers, such as Andrei Pleșu. Kideckel’s knowledge and understanding of Romanian everyday life also derives from his frequent fieldwork

conducted in Romania beginning in 1974, which resulted in his earlier book, *The Solitude of Collectivism: Romanian Villagers to the Revolution and Beyond* (1993), an account of villagers’ daily life in the Olt Land region of southern Transylvania.

Kideckel’s book about the Romanian working class leaves space for “the micro world of day-to-day life” and “the unintended consequences brought about locally by political and cultural contestation intertwined with economic struggles.”^[3] Throughout the book, the workers’ situation and their words are taken seriously. Whereas Kideckel writes empathetically about the miners, Romanian mass media and most Romanian intellectuals blame the miners for their hopeless situation because of their “aggressive activism” in the *mineriade*; this media perception of the miners has deteriorated their symbolic capital massively. In addition, when referring to the role of print and broadcast media, Kideckel speaks of their othering of industrial workers. For readers who are familiar with the Romanian discourse about miners’ matters, this shift of viewpoint is refreshing.

So what were the social and economic costs of the changes after 1989 for these two working-class groups? After reading Kideckel’s book, readers may easily end up with the impression that negative effects prevail. Health, living standards, and consumption possibilities have deteriorated. The miners of Jiu Valley and most industrial workers seem to be the losers at the end of the socialist era in Romania. But, as Cătălin Zamfir (*O analiză critică a tranziției: Ce va fi “după”* [2004]) puts it, the transition has imposed unexpectedly high social and economic costs and caused strong negative processes for the

whole Romanian society. Finally, the Romanian working class is part of neoliberal capitalism and is experiencing the typical “drift” of this kind of system, namely, continuous insecurity, elasticity, and short-term nature. As Richard Sennett (*The Corrosion of Character* [1998]) has argued, neoliberal capitalism produces a corrosion of character of winners and losers demanding a flexible person ready to adjust to never-ending new tasks and changes. Consequently, long-term friendship, development, and reliability—the needs of human character—are no longer possible. Consequently, one could say that the Romanian miners and industrial workers described by Kideckel are drifting and have lost their sense of belonging. Fear, alienation, and meaninglessness are depriving “them of what little influence they might have on the deluge of policy and practice transforming the postsocialist lands” (p. 210). In Kideckel’s opinion, postsocialist pressures on labor and bodies produce what he calls “frustrated agency” (p. x). Both men and women find it increasingly difficult to fulfill the responsibilities of their gender roles. Furthermore, male and female workers question their capabilities and express confusion about changing sexual essences. Their masculine and feminine identities are under question because of more and more stress, anomie, and social problems (for further details, see chapter 6, pp. 153-182). The interviewees express deterioration of the working-class life situation in dualistic and stereotypical stories about life before and after 1989. Before 1989, the workers were privileged, earned high salaries, and received good healthcare and subsidies. In the coal mines, mainly men worked whereas women stayed at home and took care of their children against the demand of the socialist politics to force women to labor outside of the home. These “bourgeois working-class families” wanted large families, a desire that coincided with Ceaușescuite pronatalism (p. 43). With the switch to a market economy, labor has lost its extraordinary worth and consumption has become the main aim. Therefore, working people have a constant feeling of having failed to live up to the new cultural expectations, not to mention the new demands of children heavily exposed to consumer culture. In the end, the negative perception of their current lives reduces the workers’ agency. Kideckel explains the failure of workers’ agency by their selective perception of the past and their present feeling of alienation from society at large. Workers ignore the shortcomings of the socialist past and remember, for example, the resources provided, social collectivity, shared commitment at work, mobility, and security of one’s job and physical life. By this selective perception, the workers create a feeling of frustration that hinders effective

agency. Keeping this in mind, the perceptions of fear and distance are pronounced in narratives about the changing world of the workers and in complaints (*plângere*) they share with others, but are internalized and displayed in changing physical life.

The book contains eight chapters starting with the introductory first chapter entitled “Getting By in Postsocialism: Labor, Bodies, Voices.” This chapter begins with personal accounts of two workers: a former coal miner from the Jiu Valley who left the mine in the late 1990s, when so many other miners left with buyouts (*disponibilizare*); and a lathe operator at the UPRUC factory (Uzine pentru Utilaj Chimic, or Factory for Chemical Industry Fittings and Tools) in Făgăraș. In the bits of interviews presented, both workers are concerned about the insecurities of labor, the cost of living, and their physical and emotional toll—the main topics that the author treats in the following chapters in more detail (labor and unemployment in chapter 3, housing and living standards in chapter 5, gender and sexuality in chapter 6, and health and stress in chapter 7). Kideckel quotes the workers at length and lets them speak for themselves. The reader feels touched by their vivid words and gets a clear understanding of their (short-term) survival strategies and living situations. Consequently, Kideckel interprets the workers’ words as typical preoccupations of workers confronted with the “effects of the forced diet of neoliberalism” (p. 8), such as changing and uncertain status of property due to privatization, inequalities, instrumentalization, commodification of basic social relations by the market democracy, weak state structures that allow the existence of mafia and corruption, the misuse of funds and foreign assistance, the decline in agricultural markets, the return to subsistence farming, and emigration. Kideckel connects the effects of neoliberalism to his critics’ notion of “transition” as an academic representation of triumphalist politics. In his much more critical essay, “The dissolution of the east and central-east European working class,” Kideckel states that the major problem of east and southeast Europe is not an overly hesitant movement toward capitalism as the notion “transition” suggests, but an overly fast movement. He thinks that the problem is not too little capitalism, but too much. And more sharply, he argues that this is not postsocialism but neocapitalism—a system that reinterprets the main principles of capitalism in a new way and that promotes social injustice much more than does the Western model from which it derives.[4] Though Kideckel in the book under review does not refer explicitly to Michael Burawoy and Katherine Verdery, it is clear in my opinion that he con-

curs with their arguments: “we challenge those analyses that account for the confusions and shortcomings of the transition process as ‘socialist legacies’ or ‘culture.’ Repeatedly, we find that what may appear as ‘restorations’ of patterns familiar from socialism are something quite different: direct *responses* to the new market initiatives, produced *by* them, rather than remnants of an older mentality.”[5]

Most east and southeast European scholars tend to avoid labor and workers in postsocialist science, a topic that Kideckel embraces (see, for example, Klaus Roth, *Arbeit im Sozialismus–Arbeit im Postsozialismus: Erkundungen zum Arbeitsleben im östlichen Europa* [2004]). In conclusion, Kideckel points out the scholarly and political indifference toward the workers’ lives, their physical states, and embodied perceptions, and he states that workers are only visible when they appear threatening and protest. Kideckel’s contribution pays particular attention to workers’ words and thoughts about themselves, their work, their families, their societies, their fears, and their dreams, and highlights the diverse legal and illegal practices of “getting by” (*a se descurca*) in this changing world after 1989. Kideckel states in a pointed manner that the meaning of “getting by” has shifted from “manipulating the system in one’s interest” to “managing basic survival” in every sphere of life (p. 16). Another outcome of Kideckel’s project was a film about the Jiu Valley miners called *Days of the Miners: Life and Death of a Working Class Culture* (2003).

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Notes

[1]. Ruxandra Cesereanu, *Imaginarul Violent al Românilor* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2003), 397.

[2]. For a similar Romanian account of these miners, see Magdalena Crăciun, Maria Grecu, and Răzvan Stan, *Lumea Văii: Unitatela Minei, Diversitatea Minerilor* (Bucharest: Paideia, 2002); for an account of the positive role of miners in Russia, see Sarah Ashwin, “Redefining the Collective: Russian Mineworkers in Transition,” in *Uncertain Transition: Ethnographies of Change in the Postsocialist World*, ed. Michael Burawoy and Katherine Verdery (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 245-271; and for Poland, see Tomasz Rakowski, “The Voices of Collapse: Destructive and Self-Destructive Expressions among the Former Miners in Walbrzych (Southwest Poland),” in *Cosmologies of Suffering: Post-Communist Transformation, Sacral Communication, and Healing*, ed. Agita Luse and Imre Lazar (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2007), 182-205.

[3]. Burawoy and Verdery, eds., introduction to *Uncertain Transition*, 1.

[4]. David A. Kideckel, “Die Auflösung der ost- und mitteleuropäischen Arbeiterklasse,” in *Postsozialismus: Transformationsprozesse in Europa und Asien aus ethnologischer Perspektive*, ed. Chris Hann (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2002), 175-200, esp. 176-177.

[5]. Burawoy and Verdery, eds., introduction to *Uncertain Transition*, 1-2.