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Changing Mutuality

Building a House with Unpaid Labour in Bulgaria

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Introduction

In Bulgaria, using unpaid collective labour for the construction of private houses, provided by kin, neighbours, friends and work colleagues, was omnipresent under state socialism (1944–89). In this period, as the availability of professional construction workers for housebuilding was limited, it was common wisdom that one could not dispense with the unpaid labour of relatives and friends. One was expected to reciprocate if asked to do so. From being a widespread, standard way of building private houses under socialism, it has become rather unusual under the present-day neoliberal market economy, where paid professional labour is the dominant form. Rory Archer (2018) has noted a similar erosion of this practice in Serbia. In socialist Yugoslavia, many built their houses ‘by themselves’ with the help of kin and acquaintances; this was ‘the spirit of the time.’ Now, ‘[i]n suburban tracts of contemporary Serbian cities in the 2010s, the reciprocal exchange of cooperative labour is no longer salient as it had been in late socialism’ (Archer 2018: 154). Decline, however, does not mean disappearance. In contemporary Bulgaria, unpaid collective labour continues to be used to construct family houses, although labour gangs consisting of relatives and friends are now restricted to a small circle of close acquaintances and family members. This kind of work continues to be defined as physical labour bound up with a social relationship that is normally not mediated by cash but underpinned by a sense of mutual expectations and obligations to help secure the material substance of life and provide shelter for a family. Its varying prominence and symbolic importance throughout history

indicate that these mutual obligations are part of the economy, and they can shift along with encompassing political and economic circumstances. I approach this kind of cooperation as a compelling example of the historically shifting share of mutuality in the reproduction of the material basis for life. I see mutuality as a core component of the moral economy in the sense originally defined by E.P. Thompson (1971) and James Scott (1976). The kind of mutuality described in this chapter is expressed in the form of mutual obligations and expectations to provide free labour for house-building, which is widely considered good and legitimate, whereas a refusal to meet such obligations and expectations engenders a collective sense of disapproval and outrage. In analysing house construction, this case study of a village in Bulgaria demonstrates that the moral economy is deeply entangled with the material economy but also that their entanglement can be transformed over time to accommodate circumstances more broadly.

From Ancient Greece to contemporary globalized societies, the house, or *oikos*, has always connoted a degree of self-sufficiency both as an ideal and in reality (Hann and Hart 2011; Gudeman 2016). The post-socialist setting provides a good illustration of the endurance of the ideal and to some degree of the practices that enact it (Gudeman and Hann 2015). Ethnographic and historical data also indicate that the ideal of the self-sufficient house has always been imperfectly realized. Those wanting to build a house felt entitled to external support, which they saw as morally justified and which those offering their labour felt obliged to provide. Stephen Gudeman argues that this kind of labour is a form of mutuality rooted in connections and relationships stretching in some cases far beyond the closest relatives and friends of the members of a household (2016: 52–68). My case study describes how the practical implications of this expression of mutuality and its meanings and boundaries have shifted. The ethnography below shows that the deeper penetration of markets, in combination with changes in factors such as demography, international migration and rural decline, is correlated with the contemporary decline in the relative share of unpaid collective labour. Yet, as Gudeman suggests regarding the expansion of modern markets, '[s]uch connections may be fractioned and obscured in markets, but they are part of these economies as well. The relation between self-interest and such mutual connections, however, shifts as we move our lens from house to market economies' (Gudeman 2016: 53). This relationship between self-interested transactions and mutual connections changes also when we examine the house in historical perspective.

Mutuality so defined resonates with some recent theorizing about the notion of a moral economy. Rooting his approach in Polanyian substantivism, and drawing on the seminal works of Thompson (1971) and Scott (1976), James Carrier (2018) equates moral economy with mutual obliga-

tions and expectations that economic activities will be conducted in a certain way. For Carrier, a moral economy is one in which moral economic activity predominates, as opposed to a neoclassical economy, in which neoclassical activity in the form of self-interested market transactions predominates (2018: 30).¹ According to this distinction, the decline of unpaid collective labour for house construction in post-socialist Bulgaria evidences a shift from the socialist economy, which, in the sphere of housebuilding, was quite a moral economy, towards a predominantly neoclassical economy based on self-interested transactions. Carrier adds that his analysis of the moral economy can be seen as ‘an extended footnote’ to Gudeman’s concern with mutuality (ibid.: 32), thus underscoring the overlapping between theories of moral economy and models of the economy that stress the fundamental tension between mutuality and the market (see also Gudeman 2008).

Carrier argues that ‘people’s interaction in their economic activities can generate obligations’ (2018: 24), in other words that mutuality can result from self-interested transactions. Furthermore, ‘the broader social and economic context makes moral economic activity more or less likely’ (ibid.: 31). Hence Carrier situates his analysis on the scale of individual life. While taking inspiration from his approach to moral economy, my analysis of unpaid collective labour as a ‘moral economic activity’ in the construction of houses adopts a longer historical perspective drawing on Chris Hann’s (2018) approach to the long-term transformation of work as a value in Hungary. Hann adopts a Weberian perspective in tracing the transformations and contemporary plural meanings of work as a value in order to highlight ‘the moral dimension’ of the economy, considering the concept of the moral economy as ‘clumpish’ (2018: 230, 231, 236, 249). I bring together these three authors to build an analytical framework that makes possible a focus on the historical transformations of mutuality. If the moral economy of housing in contemporary societies entails plural and complex relations of class and domination, intermingled with shared, yet often contradictory, values and social norms (Alexander, Hojer Bruun and Koch 2018), a focus on enduring but also changing mutuality, expressed as unpaid cooperative labour for housebuilding, can help shed light on processes of resilience and on the transformation of this moral economy. Mutual support for housebuilding in Eastern Europe belongs to a long-term pattern of (rural) solidarity. In the socialist period, it was interwoven with ubiquitous informal arrangements regarding the procuring of materials and access to official authorizations (Kenedi 1981; Sík 1988; Creed 1998: 200–2; Ledeneva 1998; Benovska-Sabkova 2001: 118–19; Dobрева 2003; Molnár 2010; Archer 2018; Mihuț 2019). However, informality has outlived state socialism (Henig and Makovicky 2017), and the distinction between urban and rural is no longer analytically sustainable (Kaneff 2014).

I suggest that unpaid collective labour is both a mutual obligation and an informal exchange of favours in housebuilding – under state socialism as in the neoliberal market economy that has replaced it. Thus, I approach unpaid collective labour for the construction of houses as a form of mutuality (Gudeman 2016) that has nevertheless been transformed in the history of changing political-economic regimes (Hann 2018), as well as in relation to wider institutional arrangements, both formal and informal. This approach helps us trace the expansion and contraction of mutuality, which is, following Carrier (2018), what makes an economy moral.

In the following sections, I analyse the changing importance of mutuality in people's economic activities, the kinds of social relations that are mobilised and changes in the degrees of relatedness of those involved. I first describe the case of a former villager who had recently completed the construction of his house. I then turn to the case of his parents, who had built their own house more than three decades earlier. I also refer to the narratives of other villagers, collected during interviews about the process of house construction in late socialist times. I mostly draw on my ethnographic fieldwork but also refer to published sources on occasion.

Background: The Locality

In 2009, I began ethnographic research in the area south of the town of Smolyan, a regional centre in the central part of the Rhodope mountains, in Bulgaria. I return there regularly, sometimes twice a year. Belan² is a village located in the southern part of the central Rhodopes, some thirty kilometres south of Smolyan. The area is mountainous and picturesque, and the village itself is around a thousand metres above sea level. Most of the houses are located along the main road. There are also several districts (*mahali*) scattered around the hills and in small valleys. The ongoing economic and demographic decline of the entire Rhodope region started in the early 1990s as a result of the dismantling of the social and economic structures of the state-socialist period. After the introduction of the market economy, private businesses emerged, none of which has proven robust enough to supply the local labour market with a sufficient number of jobs. Some parts, including the area south of Smolyan, have experienced the uneven yet locally cherished emergence of rural tourism. The beauty of the landscape, the rapid opening of guest houses and small hotels, and the high quality of the local food have proved to be major factors in its development.³ However, no one makes a living from accommodating tourists alone: additional income is always necessary. Belan has a small functioning wood-processing plant and a sewing workshop that employs around thirty

women and one man, but the salaries are ridiculously low, the villagers say.⁴ There is also one large-scale farmer who employs two to five workers depending on his seasonal needs. Almost every household produces some potatoes, beans, tomatoes and other vegetables and fruits. Since the beginning of my fieldwork in 2009, the number of animals (sheep, cows, calves) kept in stables next to the houses has significantly declined.

Currently, there are 229 houses in Belan, some of which are unoccupied. There are a couple of cases of bi-residential households – that is, households owning two houses in the village and using them simultaneously on a permanent basis or during the visits of children and grandchildren. In 2010, the village had 345 registered inhabitants according to figures provided by the mayor's office. By 2019, this had declined to 271. The permanent population is declining rapidly, since families with young children tend to move to the larger cities, such as Plovdiv and Sofia. Cyclical migration for work to Greece and Spain was also popular until the 2008 crisis. Since then, Britain and to a lesser extent Germany have become privileged destinations. Most of the young men and women who leave for Britain do so using connections with local people who have already become established there. Some work with official contracts, while others do undeclared work. In the past three or four summers, everyone has seen an increase in the number of relatively new, large, left-hand drive cars, indicating that some migrant workers have earned enough to afford high-quality second-hand vehicles in Britain. Besides cyclical and seasonal migration, some families have settled in Britain or Spain on a permanent basis but keep coming back for holidays to their native village, sometimes twice a year. Such migration means that individuals who are not registered in the village maintain a relationship with their usually elderly relatives still living in Belan, or simply come to refurbish their houses during the summer. Furthermore, there is a long-term practice of double residence in Belan and in the regional centre of Smolyan, further complicating the task of determining the exact number of people actually living in Belan. Depopulation is nonetheless an obvious ongoing process.

In Belan, as in some neighbouring villages, nuclear families pool their incomes. In practice, this means that the husband gives the larger part of his salary to his wife and keeps a small sum as pocket money, which is mostly spent on cigarettes and drinks. The wife adds to the family budget with her own more or less official income, which is usually lower than what her husband earns. Grown-up and working children who are still living with their parents eat with them while at home but tend to keep their earnings for themselves. They tend to contribute money occasionally when larger items are bought or when the household has to meet larger expenses. They also usually contribute with labour when the work is more intensive, such as with haymaking, potato harvesting and processing the meat of large

animals. Under late socialism, the past era my informants remember best, the most widespread model was the two-generation household. This pattern prevailed in the late Ottoman period and in the first decades of the twentieth century and was dominant among both Bulgarian Christians and Bulgarian Muslims, the latter known locally as Pomaks, representatives of these two groups having lived together in Belan for centuries (Brunnbauer 2002).⁵ The Muslims form the majority.

At present, as in the past, elderly and retired parents sometimes live in the house with the nuclear family of a son or daughter. In this case, the house usually belongs to them, being passed on to their son, in principle to the youngest one, and his wife after the deaths of the elderly parents. The older members also contribute to the household budget, usually by paying the bills (*smetkite*) for electricity, water and telephone. Households with an elderly member receiving a monthly old-age pension are considered privileged because this regular income allows the bills to be paid for the whole house. The occasional sale of domestic agricultural produce (typically, in this part of the mountains, potatoes, beans, milk, meat) and animals (sheep, calves, cows) usually provides additional income, with important seasonal variations. Savings are particularly rare. In 2010, I administered an extensive questionnaire. With the support of the mayor's office, I estimated the number of households – that is, of relatives who live together and pool at least some of their incomes – at two hundred. More than 10% responded to my questionnaire, distributed among the different neighbourhoods. Only one family declared it had some savings, and this was a family with a successful business in tourism (Tocheva 2015). Almost every household has experienced long-term money shortages roughly since the end of state socialism in 1989. The availability of housing is not an issue in Belan; the inhabitants' main problem is the lack of money. In daily life, the cash nexus seems totally irrelevant for a range of small services provided as mutual support: friends help with haymaking; neighbours look after a child or a sick person until a household member is back home; if the members of a family have to return home late in the evening, a neighbour milks the cow and feeds it. Considered in this broader context, unpaid construction work given as help stands out: it is hard, energy-demanding and time-consuming but also instrumental in carrying out a symbolically important task directly related to a family's future.

Yassen's House

Building a house was a frequent topic of discussion in my host family. First, their own house had been built in the late 1980s, when recourse to

the unpaid labour of kin, neighbours and acquaintances was the norm. My hosts still have clear memories of the challenging but also joyful time when their home was being constructed. Secondly, one of their sons built a house between 2018 and 2019, both events being cornerstones in the lives of both generations. Unpaid collective labour was of the utmost importance in both cases, but the way external help was mobilized differed significantly. The material aspects (including the location, the procuring of materials and the availability of skilled professional construction workers), the sense of obligation and the overall spirit of the event were also very different. Below, I describe how Yassen built his house. Later, I turn to the construction of private houses under late socialism and earlier to demonstrate how precisely the magnitude and meaning of mutuality as embodied in unpaid collective labour have changed.

The three grown-up sons of my hosts no longer live in the large family house in Belan. The eldest son, in his early forties, lives in Smolyan with his wife and their two daughters. The youngest son, in his early thirties, has worked in Britain intermittently for four years, spending half of the year in Bulgaria and the other half in Britain. However, in 2018 he got married and settled in the city of Plovdiv, where he rented an apartment. Yassen, the middle son, in his mid-thirties, has the longest work experience, first from construction work in Bulgaria and later as a salaried worker on an official contract in Britain, which he held for almost five years. Yassen's wife, also originally from Belan, accompanied him to Britain and was employed there too. The young family could have stayed there permanently: their employer tried hard to persuade Yassen to do so on a stable contract with a higher salary, but the young family refused. They wanted their daughter, who had been born in the meantime, to grow up in Bulgaria and decided to return there permanently.

The plan was for their savings to be used to build a house in Plovdiv, Bulgaria's second largest city. Yassen's and his wife's decision to buy a plot of land in Plovdiv, situated around a three-hour drive from Belan, and settle there is not surprising. The couple were convinced that the economic and demographic decline of the Smolyan region would continue. As land in the new locality is highly valued by the upper middle classes and the new rich,⁶ Yassen paid a high price by local standards. The initial plan was for a house of 170 m², surrounded by a garden. The construction began in 2018, the roof going on in summer 2019. Yassen and his wife, with the help of Yassen's father, brothers, friends and cousins from Belan, participated actively in building the house, only using a construction company to put in the foundations. Yassen bought a van to transport some of the materials, and in the summer of 2018 his elder brother used the truck he drives at work to help Yassen transport additional materials. During the summers of

2018 and 2019, Yassen's brothers and three young men from Belan, two of whom are cousins, came to help. His father came too, but only after Yassen insisted.

Yassen's parents found the whole initiative problematic. They were uncertain about his chances of building the house 'by himself' – that is, without hiring a company to do most of the work. Certainly the circumstances differed considerably from when they had built their own house 'by themselves.' For one thing, Yassen was preparing to settle quite far from Belan. Distance reduced the chances that a large number of kin and friends could provide help on the construction site, and Yassen had to make special arrangements for them (see below). His parents' house had been built with the help of kin, neighbours and work colleagues who all lived in Belan or nearby, making it possible to mobilize community bonds of mutuality and obligation, which were necessarily rooted in a single locality and its surroundings. Yassen's parents were also concerned about him falling into debt. Yassen had bought some high-quality materials and paid a particular company for a specific task. His parents thought he had taken out a bank loan in secret. Even though many other villagers had taken out a bank loan in the 1980s, my hosts think that times have changed and that a bank loan now represents a serious risk for the debtor.

In Yassen's eyes, things looked quite different. Far from being sceptical, he considered that he was overcoming the difficulties of distance and coping with the loan. Belan, where his parents, cousins and friends live, and Smolyan, where his elder brother lives, are indeed distant enough from Plovdiv to prevent helpers coming to the construction site on a daily basis. Therefore, once a small number of workers had promised to come to Plovdiv, Yassen arranged for them to stay overnight with acquaintances in the city. He turned to fewer than ten young men, and to his father, who seemed to have done the job with great efficacy. Yassen's wife was also part of this solidarity group. 'She worked on an equal footing with the young men,' Yassen's father reported to me, with a note of praise in his voice. Overcoming dislocation and offering one's hard physical labour for free in an era when this is not as common as it used to be seems to have added a new layer to the workers' sense of relatedness.

Yassen was not very talkative regarding the money loan, perhaps because he wanted to avoid village gossip. Villagers tend to consider indebtedness as being unnecessarily risky and undesirable (Tocheva 2018). In Bulgaria, as elsewhere in the contemporary world, a debt that is hard to pay back has come to be regarded as a personal failure on the part of the debtor (Graeber 2011), but Yassen had solid reasons for feeling confident. First, he had worked on large construction sites in Bulgaria prior to his departure for Britain, specializing in some highly skilled work. Moreover, speaking

occasionally about money, he said he had received regular job offers from solid construction companies and that his daily earnings sometimes exceeded the monthly salary of most Bulgarians. Thanks to the plethora of job offers he was constantly receiving, he was able to get his younger brother involved in such a way that the latter can now benefit from these job offers and their high wages too. In explaining to me why he felt confident, he was not boasting; he simply meant that he was earning enough money to build his house. Yet, except for the foundations, Yassen refused to put the construction of his house in the hands of a company because, he said, it meant wasting money and being virtually certain that the work would not be carried out correctly. In contrast, for him, workers who are closely related are far more trustworthy. For Yassen, thrift and trustworthiness are entangled.

Regarding the construction of houses, trustworthiness is commonly attributed to the voluntary labour of kin and friends. Furthermore, tasks demanding skilled work and payment should be entrusted to acquaintances, money should be spent wisely, and the construction of the house should be placed under the control of the house owners, no matter how long it takes and how demanding it might be. In Belan, there are a couple of recent examples of construction work where the house owners had no personal relationship with the construction company. Once it became clear that the work was of poor quality, the villagers unanimously commented that unrelated workers are prone to cheat on their clients. A preoccupation with trustworthiness in the context of house construction is not a specifically local phenomenon. In neighbouring Romania, the kind of personal ties that help reduce prices and allow for delays in payment are a guarantee that the work will be of high quality. Such personal ties have been largely instrumental in the consolidation of small construction businesses in the neoliberal era (Umbres 2014).

Even though Yassen's close relatives found it difficult to travel to Plovdiv, they did not refuse to do so and did the job with great devotion. Nevertheless, such positive support has become somewhat uncommon in contemporary Bulgaria. Building a house with the unpaid help of kin and friends has become rather unusual, with construction companies now being the main actors in this sector, as has happened elsewhere in the post-socialist world. But even with the expanded marketization of house construction, occasional help, reciprocated or not, is commonly viewed as normal. A certain sense of mutual obligation and expectation, or 'moral economic activity', continues to be part of the overall economy. When people pay for other people's labour, they try to establish a social relationship in addition to the cash-for-labour nexus (Umbres 2014). This may be seen as ensuring trustworthiness or quality, or as a moral premise for further market transactions. It means that the construction of private houses has remained at

least partly rooted in the realm of sociality and morality. Nevertheless, the way of mobilizing mutual obligations on the construction site, the degree of relatedness of those involved and the meaning of unpaid collective labour have all changed. Such differences become evident when we compare the use, magnitude and meaning of such labour under the planned economy of state socialism.

A Long-Term Perspective on Unpaid Labour

During the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, the Rhodope mountains were known for being backward in terms of housing, education, transport and agriculture. The construction of family houses, which met the highest standards of comfort and modernity under late socialism, was also viewed by the local inhabitants as a decisive break with the stereotype of backwardness. If the state encouraged the construction of private family houses in a variety of ways, as outlined below, everywhere it was household members, with the help of kin, friends and work colleagues, who did so.

Unpaid labour as a form of mutuality belongs to the long-term history of the economy in the central Rhodope. Labour ‘circulated’ among villagers according to a principle of more or less balanced reciprocity, including with regard to housebuilding. Christian and Muslim households did not differ in this respect, although they occupied different economic spheres under Ottoman rule – that is, until 1912 in the south-central Rhodope. Ottoman legal provisions meant that Muslims tended to have more land and thus needed help for agricultural tasks. Christians had smaller plots and mainly needed help on their land when the men were absent from home for work (Brunnbauer 2002). Even though people had access to the monetized economy (mainly the Christians, thanks to the men’s occupational activities as craftsmen and wage-earning shepherds), collective labour was provided in order to help a co-villager or an acquaintance, and it ‘did not have to be paid’ (ibid.: 334). There was a social expectation that young men, who were usually strongly supported by their parents, would build a house before getting married with the help of the members of the professional guilds to which they belonged (ibid.: 335–38).⁷

Ethnographic literature from the pre-socialist and socialist periods underscores the existence of the word *mezho*, a term specific to the Rhodope vernacular. *Mezho* refers to collective unpaid labour offered by the village community to households who need help in accomplishing a particular task, such as building a house. My interlocutors brought this term to my attention on several occasions when I asked explicitly about local traditions of labour exchange. However, I have never heard them use it

in their conversations. Instead, they refer to ‘help’, in phrases such as: ‘We come together in number and we go to help’ (*saberem se mnogo i idem da pomognem*).

In the socialist period, therefore, using relatives and friends’ unpaid labour was the standard way of building a house. Providing such support was a common type of mutual obligation. As Mihuț’s informants from rural Romania put it, ‘[A]t that time, under Ceaușescu’s regime, people helped each other’ (Mihuț 2019: 45), or: ‘So it was in Ceaușescu’s time: now you come to help me, next time I’ll come to help you!’ (ibid.: 46). In fact, there were almost no alternatives to unpaid collective labour for the construction of private houses. The shortage of professional masons and other construction workers was a stable feature of the socialist economy in Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and Yugoslavia (Kenedi 1981; Sík 1988; Archer 2018; Mihuț 2019). In Belan, the first wave of building and renovating houses under socialism started in the 1960s. This was the time of the first massive implementation in the Rhodope of state policies introducing electricity, running water and paved roads. Bricks (instead of stone) also started to be used. The second wave came in the 1980s, by which time the use of bricks had become general as a marker of modernity and comfort.

This second wave of construction was to a large extent the outcome of state incentives. In 1982, the government issued a decree (Decree 22, known as the Strandzha-Sakar decree) whereby young families settling in depopulated and under-industrialized areas east of the Rhodope received 2000 leva, an impressively large amount of money at that time, when the monthly salary of a teacher was less than 300 leva. Electricity and water were supplied for free, and a small amount of extra money was given every month as compensation for settling in a border region (known as ‘border money’, *granichni*). Some parts of the Rhodope benefited from this decree, including Belan. According to an informant, around 1982, Belan had between seven and eight hundred residents. When the decree came into force, the village received eighty new inhabitants, meaning a 10% increase in population. These were mostly young families from different parts of the country who were guaranteed a job in the area in addition to the benefits just mentioned. The Decree also made it possible to use land owned by the municipality in order to build a house. Local people too were allowed to apply for such municipal land. In addition to twenty-three new houses built by local people, the construction of which was supported by the state, other houses were also erected in the village. A subsequent decree gave access to monetary support once a house had been erected and roofed.

In order to succeed in building a house, one had to overcome three major obstacles: the limits on the size of the house set by the authorities, access to

construction materials and shortages of money. It is significant that none of my informants mentioned difficulties in finding workers. According to the villagers, to begin with obtaining permission to build a three-storey house instead of a two-storey one was difficult, requiring cunning and bribes in order to get round this restriction. For them, the ideal new house had a ground floor, which was registered as a garage and storage space in order not to attract the attention of the authorities, who might have suspected that it was in fact a living space. Then two more levels were added for use by the two children (having two children was the standard by then) when they grow up and marry. The same official restrictions and local desires applied to houses built in the 1980s by young families who did not apply for state support, possibly because they did not qualify for it. All these houses were erected according to the same plan of a large two- or three-storey family house authorized by the state, like so-called ‘types of projects’ in Romania (Mihuț 2019: 33).

The shortage of building materials posed another major challenge. Again, in this respect, the Bulgarian economy of housebuilding belongs to a wider socialist pattern (Kenedi 1981; Sík 1988; Molnár 2010; Archer 2018; Mihuț 2019). Men who were employed as drivers by the consumers’ cooperative, supplying commodities for the local stores, had privileged access to information and to building materials. They knew when building materials were due to be released for this or that locality and could use their vehicle to provision their own houses. Before the materials arrived, those who needed them had to register on a list, called a ‘waiting list’ in Romania (Mihuț 2019: 39). The drivers would put their own names at the top of the list and would deliver the materials they needed to the construction site for their own house. A neighbour from Belan told me proudly how he himself used the informal advantages of his job as a truck driver while his house was under construction in the 1980s. Others were less fortunate, as was the case for my host family. They expected bricks to be brought to their house when their name eventually reached the top of the village list. In order to make sure that the materials would be delivered to their construction site, my host, who was in his early thirties at the beginning of the 1980s, went to the town from which the materials for the Smolyan region were released. He spent ten days near the warehouse waiting for the truck to be loaded. When the truck for Belan was ready to leave, he talked to the driver and accompanied him on the trip to the village. Unexpectedly, however, the driver went to the house of another local family, whose grandmother worked in a shop. Knowing in advance about everything that had to be delivered to Belan, she had arranged for the truck to go to her own house, although her name was not on the list. As a result, my hosts did not receive the quantity they expected, so they complained to the mayor’s office, and the driver was

given an official warning. My hosts were still expressing strong resentment regarding this incident when telling me the story almost three decades later.

Some were privileged in that they were given the opportunity to buy materials through their connections or favoured positions (Creed 1998: 206), in some cases at a lower price or even for free (Dobrova 2003). The response of those who lacked this opportunity was resentment and continuing attempts to make do. Within the economy of shortage, rules such as the waiting list were formally established in order to ensure access to scarce resources. There was a widespread expectation that all the participants should conform to the rules. Moral economy, in the sense of mutual obligations and expectations that are commonly viewed as good and legitimate, was formally enforced in order to allow people to cope with the shortages and thus preserve some sense of justice. My hosts were more upset about not being properly treated than they were about the shortages as such, which they considered deeply irritating but accepted this as an aspect of how the system worked. Rather than the economy of shortage, it was the breaking of the rules that was the source of moral outrage. However, my hosts recovered their sense of justice when the mayor's office sent an official warning to the truck driver.

Finally, these narratives show that money was another key resource in building a house during late socialism. Younger and middle-aged villagers, men and women, used their individual savings and/or received money from their parents, usually but not always from the bridegroom's father. It was quite unusual to buy somebody else's house. Individual deposits were made on savings accounts hosted by a specific bank (State Savings Bank, Darzhavna Spestovna Kassa) under the direct control of the state. Specific policies from the 1950s onwards encouraged Bulgarians to save money (Avramov 2008: 96–102). The most significant accounts were 'housing deposits' (ibid.: 99). Inhabitants of the Rhodopes also made savings. Roughly from the beginning of the 1960s, payments in kind ceased totally, being replaced by monthly salaries paid in cash in dedicated envelopes. This practice continued until 1989 and even outlived the regime slightly. The socialist state offered bank loans at low rates of interest to encourage house construction and acquisition, sold state plots of land for the purpose of building individual houses and allowed the formation of housing cooperatives, the members of which built small apartment blocks for their own housing needs (Avramov 2008; Parusheva and Marcheva 2010). Nonetheless, the socialist state never succeeded in supplying enough housing units (Parusheva and Marcheva 2010).

In this context of a scarcity of housing, when villagers glimpsed the possibility of building their own modern house, many decided to rise to

the challenge. However, none of them had enough money to build a house. Some took out loans with the bank, but others, including my hosts, managed without a loan. In addition to the couple's small savings, my host father's father gave them a large amount of money. They also sold one or two calves and some potatoes in the process of building. Most of their money was used to buy materials. They managed by hiring only a couple of craftsmen for specific tasks. Thrift was not the young family's main motivation. At that moment in the area there were only three craftsmen able to understand a plan drawn up by an architect, and even they were self-trained. My hosts did not need to decide whether or not to hire craftsmen: they hired two of the three available masters for specific works. However, the shortage of skilled craftsmen required these men to move to the next construction site quickly, leaving instructions with the unpaid team about how to continue further. This is why most of the work was carried out through the unpaid labour of colleagues and friends, including my host mother's father and brother, the latter a professional truck driver who used his truck to help transport the materials. The composition of the team varied from day to day depending on the men's availability.⁸

Undertaking to build a private house in the 1980s in Belan was never a simple endeavour. Nonetheless, these moments of collective work are remembered in the language of joy and effervescence. In the narratives I collected, the villagers emphasized the enthusiasm and enjoyment of those who had come to help at the stages when more intensive effort was needed. My hosts, like all those who were building houses in the 1980s, celebrated the laying of every concrete slab used to construct the foundations and upper floors with a party, a major element of which was roast lamb, a highly appreciated local dish. Some informants estimated that sixty to seventy workers would gather to build a concrete slab. The cement had to be used during the day, which required the participation of many workers (Benovska-Sabkova 2001: 118–19). However, these estimates seem to be an exaggeration. Richard Wilk notes that '[e]very task has a labour restriction as well, a point at which adding more workers will no longer improve efficiency' (1997: 181). However, giving impressively high figures was meant to provide an image of mass participation and effervescence. Usually the owners of houses erected during that period did not provide me with any figures for the number of participants, simply saying that workers came in large numbers. In pointing to mass participation, what people were emphasizing was that the use of relations of mutual obligation was far greater under socialism, extending far beyond close kin. In Belan, as elsewhere in the country (Benovska-Sabkova 2001: 119), it was common for acquaintances and neighbours who were not explicitly asked for help to show up at the construction site and offer their labour. Typically on such occasions, close

ties of kinship and friendship were not a precondition for feeling morally obliged to offer help.

Belan residents still have positive memories of joyful work parties after the collective endeavour had ended. Men relaxed, while the women served them food and drink. None of my informants, neither those who provided the food and drink nor those who consumed it, ever valued the labour provided in monetary terms, nor did anybody calculate the monetary value of the food and drink they consumed subsequently on the spot. Food and drink were not perceived as payment in kind: rather, enjoying food and drinks together with the other workers was experienced as a deserved, joyful reward for their efforts. The party was also the celebration of a collective achievement, an occasion to confirm sociality and mutuality. These elements from narratives of work parties held during housebuilding directly resonate with Gudeman's analysis of similar events he studied in Panama and Colombia. As he writes, '[t]he festal work also gives the host a degree of communal prestige for being able to put on a house building, organize a gathering, and display a reservoir of strength at his command' (Gudeman 2016: 45). Another reason for such collective effervescence was that the material improvement of one household's living conditions was conceived as a sign of material betterment for the entire village. Throughout the 1980s, such collective contributions continued on the basis of delayed and generalized reciprocity. If the sense of community associated with a collective physical effort strongly resonated with the socialist cultural code, it also meant that participants shared knowledge of the obstacles that were inherent in the socialist system. All participants were well aware that the state had created provisions in order to encourage house construction while simultaneously practically fettering many aspects of it.

Conclusion

The current economic decline of the central Rhodope and the ever-shrinking prospects of decently paid jobs have led to migration and dislocation. The development of rural tourism is not powerful enough to thwart these trends. The massive erection of new houses in the area belongs to the past, and when nonetheless a house is built, nothing resembling the general effervescence around the collective work and work parties of the 1980s can be noticed. Most young villagers now project their lives in other places, and some even succeed in building a new home there. The example of Yassen's house showed that he was successful in benefiting from the labour of his brothers, cousins and friends, who came to work on his construction site

in the city. But collective physical labour has now lost its meaning as a village event, as an undertaking that used to strengthen local ties stretching far beyond the closest kin and friends and that created a sense of material betterment for the entire community. The magnitude and meaning of unpaid collective labour for housebuilding have changed. The historical shift from a late-socialist economy to a market economy means that this kind of labour as a moral economic activity, defined in terms of mutual obligations and expectations, has declined, while paid-for labour, or neoclassical economic activity, defined as self-interested market transactions, has expanded. Nonetheless, expressions of mutuality continue to exist in different forms in housebuilding, thus helping shape areas of the contemporary economy of housing as a moral economic domain.

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Notes

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1. This obviously circular definition usefully underlines the fact that anthropological and sociological definitions of the economy necessarily draw on empirical evidence about how people think and act.
2. I use a pseudonym in order to protect the privacy of the inhabitants.
3. The village has a dozen guest houses, one of which has been particularly successful since the late 1990s, and two larger hotels with around fifty beds each. Some guest houses are extended private houses in which the owners live. Three guest houses belong to people from the village but who now live elsewhere.

4. Most of the women employed in the garment factory earn the minimum monthly salary, which in 2019 was around 300 Euros.
5. Only Muslim households were recorded in the available archival documents from the mid-nineteenth century (Brunnbauer 2002). Contemporary Bulgaria was part of the Ottoman Empire from the second half of the fourteenth to the second part of the nineteenth century. Bulgarian Muslims, also called Pomaks, most of whom live in the Rhodope, are the descendants of Orthodox Christians who converted to Islam under Ottoman rule, apparently especially massively in the sixteenth century. They are therefore different from Bulgarian Turks, who are also Muslims.
6. The houses built in the last decade in what are becoming the bourgeois neighbourhoods of Plovdiv, located outside the city centre, can be contrasted with the bleak-looking, almost empty houses situated in the formerly prestigious old town (Frederiksen 2019).
7. From the archival sources that Ulf Brunnbauer (2002) uses, it is not clear whether Muslims and Christians helped each other in housebuilding.
8. Doroteya Dobрева documented a case in which, in a village located in the Rila mountains in the early 1960s, women from the collective farm regularly came to help a family build their house during their working day. The lack of money prevented this family from hiring craftsmen (2003: 66). It does not seem that women doing construction work was entirely exceptional. Some women from Belan also reported having done heavy physical labour to construct their houses along with the men.

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