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Wolfgang Schneider, Beate Kegler, and Daniela Koß (Eds.) *Vital Village: Development of Rural Areas as a Challenge for Cultural Policy*. Bielefeld (Germany): Transcript, 2017.

Vital Village is a renewed and urgent call for reenergizing villages and village communities in Europe by widening opportunities for regeneration of rural culture. It is a collection of bilingual (English and German) essays on how to pivot cultural policy to the revitalization of the village in Europe. In undertaking this gigantic enterprise, the editors and contributors to the volume are not striving to bring metropolitan culture to the countryside, or the countryside to metropolitan cosmopolitanism. Instead, their ambition, on the surface, is very modest but potentially of profound impact in shaping rural cultural policy in Europe. They each want to revitalize village-based culture and thereby the village itself. One wonders why the volume editors and contributors think the village merits to be lavished with scholarly attention and re-embedded in cultural policy, and why now. As Schneider et al., explain in the introduction of the volume, Europe is trying to come to grips with the insurgent wave of populism that draws heavily upon rural culture, customs, traditions, and norms to build its base, and expand it into metropolitan and semi-metropolitan geographies and spaces.

Populism finds the village as fertile ground to breed in profusion. Villages are the repository of rural arts and crafts, and agricultural heritage spanning centuries, even millennia. Their isolation breeds conformity and shields villages from the sunshine of new ideas and ideologies, such as pluralism and new ways of thinking, feeling and acting. Populism, as a movement intolerant of difference, reinforces this conformity by generating a nostalgia for the “good old days” that have gone by, and promising the preservation of the past and reproducing its glory. Populism sets up tensions between rural conservatism and urban cosmopolitanism. The latter is perceived and presented as a mortal threat to the former. The rural folks are thought to be clod-hoppers, know-nothing, stuck-in-the-mud rednecks and country bumpkins. The urban citizenry, on the other hand, is viewed as city-slickers, and rootless carpet-baggers. Populists further fuel these preexisting tensions and harvest the fruit of their exertions in returning their societies to an imagined past. In particular, their emphasis on puritanism extends to deciding who is entitled to be German, French, British or Hungarian, and who is condemned to count out.

Besides, populism weaponizes the deteriorating rural conditions and the imperiling material security to sharpen its appeal to rural communities. As Schneider reports, the villages in Europe have grown into sites of despair. Rural life in Europe is marked by massive unemployment that is above national and regional average. The same is the case with rural working women, whose unemployment rate is higher than the national and regional average. Falling education levels in rural communities is an additional concern, which has been triggered by the flight of the educated youth from village life to the brighter and shinier urban life. Haunted by these trends, the editors of the volume make a case for the revitalization of the village in Europe, which is ready to be preyed on by “increasing populist trends and the growing disenchantment with Europe in rural areas” (p. 20). Here, the “disenchantment with Europe” refers to the continent-wide effort to forge Europe into a single political community, such as the European Union (EU).

To blunt the populists’ appeal to Europe’s rural populations, the editors and contributors want cultural policy to be recrafted, placing the village at its center. Their respective analyses show that populists’ inroads into rural spaces have a lot to do with the continent-wide neglect of the village in European cultural policy. To make up for the past neglect, they argue for reorientation of Europe’s cultural policy to the village and village-based communities. Wolfgang Schneider,

an editor and a contributor, persuasively and empirically, highlights this neglect, especially an imbalance of resource allocation between rural and urban spaces, which tilts towards cities. This urban bias, he argues, is responsible for steering overwhelming financial and institutional resources to urban centers. “In Germany,” he writes, “90% of public funding for culture continues to flow into the cities, with 90% of it going to arts” (p. 31). He questions the urban bias in allocation of resources in German cultural policy, and contrasts it with the stark reality that 70% of Germans live in small towns, and 75% of all of its municipalities have less than 5,000 residents. How misplaced and underutilized these resources are can be judged by the fact that less than 10% of urban residents even bother to make regular visits to public cultural sites, such as museums, theaters, and concert halls. “It is high time for attention to be given to the culture of rural life” (p. 31), Schneider argues.

Each contributor presents a treasure trove of information on rural arts and crafts, food and faith, heritage and music, and rural cultural institutions, such as country fairs that serve as a showcase of rural culture. Most of the contributors are German, and their case studies are based on German villages. Yet there is sufficient representation of non-German spaces to make the collection a representative study into Europe-wide cultural scholarship. The contributors’ collective emphasis is on giving grassroots culture its due place by reviving and revitalizing it. They list hunting associations, local history museums, amateur theaters and trombone ensembles as cultural formations that are flourishing and thriving in rural spaces, and that underscore a social phenomenon that has gone unnoticed by policymakers, especially cultural policymaking. Schneider notes that the vitality of grassroots culture is not just limited to Germany but extends to the entire continent. He goes so far as to claim that “culture primarily exists in rural areas, in associations and societies, in religious community houses and community cultural centers on a voluntary basis” (p. 31).

The editors, however, argue that the revival of grassroots culture needs investment in its infrastructural development. In further elaborating on grassroots culture (a term that editors and contributors use to refer to village-based rural culture), Schneider states, it is about “songs and stories, May day celebrations in the village communities, music at home with the family, amateur theater on the open stage, social evenings at the local heritage association, nativity scenes in the church and the ‘Pajatz’ elections at the hunting associations” (p. 31). The Minister of Science and Culture for Lower Saxony, Germany’s second largest state, sums up the editors’ concern to make grassroots culture and high-brow culture mutually reinforcing. “I want high culture and grassroots culture to complement each other” (p. 31).

The third part of the anthology consists of case studies from around Europe that reveal heterogeneous approaches being adopted to revitalize the village and grassroots culture. The geographical origin of each case study encompasses countries stretching from Cyprus to Latvia and Ireland to Austria. In all, the volume consists of more than 50 short essays, written in English and German. On average, each essay is five pages long. While rich in description of village-based stories from across Europe, the essays seldom cohere into any conceptual or theoretical framework. The crowding of descriptive contributions to the volume thus fill its pages with numerous aesthetically pleasing trees but no forest to be seen. From the analytical standpoint, even the introduction of the volume is more of a glossary of widely-used concepts such as culture, grassroots culture, cultural policy and so on and so forth. The editors of the volume did not explain the rationale behind writing a bilingual volume. Yet, despite these minor issues, the core concern of the editors is spot on: how to blunt the gathering appeal of right-wing populism on the European continent. Their emphasis on culture in this regard cannot be

overstated. The editors' diagnosis of the issue is the story of villages on every continent, in every country, and around every community. There is therefore much to learn from the *Vital Village*, and its empathetic account of rural sites of grassroots culture.

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