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I will first introduce the research context, methodology and the literature review guiding my study. Next, I will offer a critical assessment of the public discourse, which I call “official discourse”, on left behind children highlighting how, in Romania as in other parts of the world, there is a stigmatization of migrating parents, particularly of the mothers.

This will be followed with ethnographic evidence. Here I will present some case studies highlighting how the situations of children with one or both parents leaving abroad vary. Although the emotional struggle caused by the distance is not something which can be easily alleviated, the intensity of this affliction depends often on their family background.

Moreover, the role of children within transnational families is not passive but active, not static but dynamic, and children often experience different positions and roles within their families as well as in different spatial locations, at home and in host countries. Therefore, while observing the migrating flow of families I analysed, I conclude that we cannot always define these children as “left behind” and, in the case of Borşa, for example, it is perhaps more adequate to define such children as “transmigrant” and their childhood as a “transnational one.”

Nevertheless, the transnationalism of their lives, as well as their parents’ lives, is described here as a necessity rather than as an opportunity.



THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

The ethnographic research¹ was carried out in Romania, in two main areas: Romanian Moldavia, particularly the small villages of Buruineieşti and Liteni, with some case studies in Roman and Iaşi; and the Maramureş region, in the small town of Borşa. By means of ethnographic methodologies like in-depth interviews, participant observations and focus groups, I conducted ethnographic interviews, particularly with children and teenagers with a family experience of migration, and with their

caretakers. In order to properly contextualize materials collected in the various areas, I contacted some institutional officials like mayors of Buruineieşti and Borşa, some municipal clerks responsible for civil affairs and welfare, school principals, some teachers and psychologists, the employment centre in Iaşi and various civil society associations which support transnational families.

The two areas in Romania where I conducted my ethnographies, the Romanian Moldavia and the small town of Borşa in the Maramureş region, are two places characterized by strong migration flows and by very different historical, political and economic backgrounds. The choice of two areas with very different socio-economic backgrounds allowed me to highlight how the individual experiences of left behind children are strongly shaped by the family backgrounds and the socio-cultural contexts of belonging.

Indeed, the migration of parents has very different consequences for children's experiences in the two contexts. In Buruineieşti, left behind children experience greater distress and have more social behaviour problems, but often, the departure of their parents is only one of the causes of their distress. The majority of children interviewed in Buruineieşti came from families that were either mono parental, marked by parental alcoholism, or in which the mother or father had a relationship with one other partner even before migration. Additionally, these families were very poor.

Starting with this background, it is clear that the migration of parents cannot be seen as the sole cause of children's distress but it is rather one more factor inside the kaleidoscope of hardships which they unfortunately have to face. In Borşa the children interviewed were not as much affected by their parents' departure and said they relied on the solid network of their extended families.

Romanian Moldavia, located in the north-east part of the country, is a rural and disadvantaged area with a high percentage of migrating people. For people from this area, migration is not a new experience. During so-

1) This article is the outcome of a post-doctoral research project, sponsored by the CARITRO foundation and supported by the Balkan and Caucasus Observer.

cialism, many of them were forced to migrate from the countryside to other cities in the country due to the massive industrialization of the 1970s and 1980s. During the 1990s, most of the state factories closed down and, consequently, many Romanians came back to live in the countryside of Romanian Moldavia or began to migrate abroad. Social problems and the breakdown of families increased after the fall of the communist regime, but are rooted in the past.

Buruineiești is a small village in Romanian Moldavia with a very poor economy which was seriously affected by the floods in 2008. The family structure I observed there is weaker and more disorganized and, as a consequence, migration has led to a further weakening of family connections. In Buruineiești, alcoholism, youth delinquency and other social problems have a greater influence than in the other contexts analysed.

The town of Borșa, located in Maramureș region, has a very different story altogether. Here, too, people started migrating immediately after the fall of the past regime and the migration flow increased gradually after the closing of the town's mine, which was the main employment centre for the inhabitants. Even in communist times, this small town was fairly rich. The miners, albeit mere labourers, were actually a particularly well paid category of employees. During the communist regime, the Maramureș region managed to maintain relatively greater autonomy than other areas and avoided the socialization of private property. Here, the extended family plays a fundamental role in the adults' migration process. Even the type of migration is more circular in nature, with parents leaving and returning many times during the year. Those with stable residency abroad try to have their children rejoin them in the host society. There is a large number of children in town, the so-called re-migrants, who lived with their parents abroad for certain periods and then came back to Borșa to live with their grandparents, who have a fundamental role in the transnational family.



THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This work follows two specific fields of study, on the one hand, the literature on transnationalism and on the other, the literature on sociology and anthropology of childhood. The term 'transnationalism', which has brought about an important debate in the recent scientific literature on migrations, was first used by the anthropologists Glick Shiller, Bash and Blanc-Szanton (1992: 1) to indicate: "the process through which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement. Immigrants who build such social fields are designed 'transmigrants'".

In this process, the immigrants establish connections and social spaces which actually transcend national borders. The studies on migration which favour the transnationalist perspective, rather than being focused on more traditional topics regarding the country of origin and the adjustment of immigrants in the host country, emphasize instead the relations established between the origin and host countries, analysing how such bi-directional links and flows build social fields which transcend national borders.

It is not my intention to list here the considerable number of studies dealing with the theoretical analysis of the notion of transnationalism (Portes, Guarnizo e Landolt, 1999; Kivisto, 2001; Levitt, 2001, Portes, 2003; Levitt e Glick Schiller, 2004; Vertovec, 2004) nor to critically reinterpret such a notion (Waldinger and Fitzgerald, 2004).

The studies in this school of thought were not exclusively focused on analysing the transnational lives of migrants, but also the social phenomena in various aspects of their lives, like religious beliefs, economic and political connections, and affectionate and caring bonds, an aspect which was of particular interest to me as object of my research.

The studies on transnational families have been particularly focused on the analysis of relations between immigrant parents and the

offspring left behind and on the reconfiguration of gender roles inside the couple. Important contributions come from researchers concerned with the migration between United States and Mexico (Hondanegneu- Sotelo and Avila, 1997, Herrera Lima, 2001, Dreby, 2007, Boehm, 2008), Parreñas (2001, 2005) which analysed the Philippine case, and Michelle and Moran (2008) presenting the case of Guatemala.

A growing number of studies also deal with the migration from East European countries to Italy, with particular emphasis on the 'femminization' of such migration, on the internationalization of welfare and on the consequences of care drain in origin countries (Castagnone et al., 2007; Torre, 2008; Piperno, 2007; Ambrosini and Boccagni, 2007, Vlase, 2006).

Even though children are not generally the focus of migration research studies, they certainly are at the centre of transnational family life. The studies that focus on the condition of childhood within the migration process have tended to focus on second generations and, as such, on the process of assimilation in the host country, on learning of the language, and on school integration (e.g., Ogbu, 1989; Fernández and Schaffler, 1996; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; Gibson, 1997; Smith et al., 2003).

Studies on transnationalism, even those that focus on the transnational family and the effects of adults' migration on children (Dreby 2006; Gamburd 2000; Hondanegneu-Sotelo, 2007; Hondanegneu-Sotelo and Avila 2007; Parreñas 2005), have been conducted from an adult-centric perspective, considering only the adults' point of view. Instead, the body of literature which analyses the point of view and the agency of children within their parents' migrating process, while considering their point of view as social actors inside transnational families, is, indeed, very scarce (Boehm, 2008, Orellana et al, 2001; Meredith and Shandy, 2008, Dreby, 2007).

This final point relates to the second field of study approached by my work, i.e. that of studies on anthropology and the sociology of

childhood. This theoretical perspective revisits in a critical manner the content of the notion of childhood, considering it as a social construction and highlighting how children are competent social actors capable of acting on their own behalf at much earlier ages than is generally considered (James and Prout, 1997; Jenks, 1982; Qvortup, 1990; Panter-Brick and Smith, 2000; Hill and Tisdall, 1997; Hutchby and Moran-Ellis, 1998; Waksler, 1991). Let us now consider some seminal works in the canon of this theoretical approach in order to better understand the context of left behind children.

First of all, the critical revisiting of the notion of childhood emphasizes how this period of life is only partially characterized by biological factors and how it is instead, in many aspects, culturally determined. Furthermore, a critique of the modern Western model of childhood reveals how it takes the child as 'innocent, non-competent and dependent, and as separated from the adults' world rather than an independent social agent. Boyden (1977) emphasizes that this model and these images of childhood are far from universal, but rather a product of the history and culture of Europe and North America.

This model of childhood is more a product of the history and culture of Europe and North America, developed during the industrial revolution, and which evolved with the growing number of schooled children and an increasing interest in the child (Boyden, 1977)². As Ariès (1962) notes in his book 'Centuries of Childhood', in the Europe of the Middle Ages, the concept of childhood was entirely different and, in fact, children, once weaned, were already persons receiving responsibilities and no different than adults. Therefore, there are different approaches to the care and protection of children and the current Western model of child development as a natural and universal stage of the life cycle and its definition in terms of chronological age is, thus, not the only one (James, 1998; James, Jenks and Prout, 1998). James and Prout (eds) (1990). Nevertheless, this model of 'ideal childhood' (Boyden, 1977:

2) For more details see: Boyden J. (1994), pp. 254-67.

202) has been exported to the South, particularly after the almost universal ratification of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, which determines a globalization of this particular concept of childhood. The Western model of childhood as James and Prout (1997) say, cannot be universal due to the fact that childhood is not a fixed notion determined by biological and psychological factors, but rather a 'social construction' which appears in a variety of forms in different spaces and times.

Following such a model, the child can fully develop his capabilities by the age of eighteen only if adults offer him care, protection, and happiness. The child is seen as an innocent being, needing protection, completely dependent on adults, which have towards him an economic and moral responsibility (Ennew, 1995; James, Jenks and Prout 1998; Qvortup, 1996). Therefore, there are different approaches to the children's care and protection and the current Western model of child development as a natural and universal stage of the life cycle and its definition in terms of chronological age is, thus, not the only one.

A second element I consider central to my work is the view that children should be seen as competent social agents and as beings able to act in their own right within their own social world. To consider the child as a competent social agent means to question the perspective on children and childhood propagated by developmental psychology and by socialization theory. Indeed, for the latter, the child is conceived of as an object in the social process by which an 'immature, irrational, incompetent, asocial, a-cultural' being becomes an adult, only then becoming 'mature, rational, competent, social and autonomous' (James and Prout, 1997: 13). This traditional notion of socialization is criticized, because it obscures some very significant aspects of the children's and adults' social behaviour (Wakler 1991: 20). As Berger (1991: 7) stated: "The child, even the very young infant, is not a passive victim of socialization. He resists it, participates in it, and collaborates with it to varying degrees. Socialization is a reciprocal

process in the sense that not only the socialized but the socializer are affected by it". From this we can draw that the child, through his or her own activity, in everyday life and through the construction of relationships, modifies the same notion of childhood, thus contributing to the challenges of the society in which he or she lives.

At last, a conspicuous number of studies are dedicated to the ways of conducting research involving children, invalidating the adult-centric point of view (Hutchby and Moran-Ellis, 1998). In fact, childhood studies have always been conducted from the adults' perspective without taking into consideration the point of view of the children themselves. These studies have an ethnocentric perspective and should be criticized because the child is incorporated as an unheard category and their voice remain unheard. Indeed, like the study of women, "the history of the study of childhood in the social sciences has been marked not by absence of interest in children, but by their silence" (James and Prout, 1997: 7). In order to challenge this fundamental ideology, the methodology of the studies undertaken in this area of research must be altered (James and Prout, 1997; Hutchby and Moran-Ellis, 1998; Mandell, 1991; Waksler, 1991). These authors stress the importance of analysing the children's world from the child's perspective, adopting ethnographic approaches such as participant observations, interviews and the analysis of the accounts the individual children give of their lives themselves (Hutchby and Moran-Ellis, 1998: 10)



THE "OFFICIAL DISCOURSE" ON LEFT BEHIND CHILDREN

"Left behind" children are those children who, due to the migration of one or both of their parents, are raised in their home countries by someone other than a parent, such as by a relative, a sibling, or even an acquaintance. According to a national study of Romania carried out by Unicef and the Association

Alternative Sociale (Toth et al., 2008) of Iași, there were 350 thousand Romanian children, 7% of the population between 0 and 18 years of age, with one or both parents living abroad. 126 thousand of them were under 10 years old and had both parents living abroad, and 400 thousand of them had one parent gone for a long period of time. In rural areas, the phenomenon was more intense, particularly in the depressed region of Romanian Moldova where there are 100 thousand left behind children, followed by Transylvania, Oltenia, and Muntenia.

Along with these statistics, I think it is interesting to remember that there are 105 thousand Romanian children enrolled in the Italian mandatory school system and that many of them have been reunited with their parents only after years of distance. Moreover, a recent international study conducted by the European Union (Valtolina G.G., 2013), focused on the rights of children who re-migrated to Romania from Spain and Italy. Many of the so called “left behind” children, in fact, have joined their parents once they have achieved a better situation in the host country. The study showed that between January 2008 and May 2011, 21,325 children returned from Spain and Italy and were registered again in the Romanian educational system.

This allows us to observe the category within the largest migration context of the country, particularly characterized by a circular migration (Diminescu, 2003, Sandu, 2000, Serban and Grigoras, 2000, Lazaroiu, 2001). This observation also points us to consider the “left behind” category in a dynamic, rather than static, way and reinsert it in the general migration context to which it belongs. In a diachronic vision of the phenomenon, the children left home alone do not live in this dimension forever and, whenever possible, visit their parents abroad. Sometimes, the parents return to their country and, last but not least, the children themselves become “transmigrants”, living for certain periods abroad and returning afterwards to Romania.

Obviously, the separation of family cores

produces psychological pain to all individuals which experience it, both adults and children. As suggested by some literature on the subject, among the left behind children there are many cases of serious depression, worsening of school grades, and extreme cases of suicide. Nevertheless, there is no empirical evidence that can prove that this situation is strictly related to the parents' departure more than to other critical conditions (Castagnone et. al., 2007).

Therefore, the “official discourse” on the category of the “left behind”, tends to make the parents leaving their children home feel guilty and to represent the children in paternal tones, without, however, remarking on the structural factors behind the phenomenon.

As Orellana and colleagues (2001) note: “Sometimes families may temporarily neglect the needs or presumed needs of their children (or, in the eyes of some observers, appear to be neglectful) in order to open up possibilities for their futures. Some transnational moves involve deliberate, long-term strategies; others represent forced choices based on limited options. Families who are pressed for household survival do not have the luxury to foreground a child’s “developmental needs”. Families that are divided across national borders, operating with minimal economic resources, do, however, make great sacrifices — including, perhaps, the loss of a certain quality in their own love for their children, and their children’s love for them — in order to give their children opportunities, as parents told us, “to come out ahead” (587).

The official discourse that tends to stigmatize the mothers and portray such children as abandoned is based on an idea of the nuclear family derived from the traditional gender division. Some recent studies tend to question this concept of abandonment, highlighting how abandonment cannot exist when the extended family network is efficient. The anthropologists Panter Brick and Smith (2000) note that abandonment is a social construct, guided by a prescriptive and normative ideology about how childhood should be. The term “abandon-



ment" is becoming a moral discourse in which all children living separately from their own parents, although they live in very different contexts and conditions, are exclusively described as passive victims. If by abandonment we mean "the break of vital relations between child, parents and the society", then it is necessary to examine which relations are considered vital in a certain society and culture. In the same way in which there is a plurality of childhoods, the connections of responsibility between child, parents and society are not universally accepted.

Similarly, the model of the nuclear family is not a universal one, but it is rather culturally defined. It is not more fair than other models, but simply one of the possible models. As Orellana and colleagues (2001) note "Transnational families challenge mainstream constructions of "motherhood" and "households", as well as middle class assumptions that all the needs of children can and should be provided by parents in nuclear families based in one community" (587).

At the same time, even being presented as such in the public discourse, in Romania as in other contexts, children are not subjects who passively suffer from the decisions of adults, but individuals capable of social agency by which means they influence and alter family relations and the surrounding environment. While it is an indisputable fact that childhood is a period in life where there is a physiological dependence on adults, the way in which such dependence is lived and managed is culturally constructed. In particular, the phase of passing into the adult age does not necessarily coincide with the coming of age. The ethnographic data collected, as well as other studies on this phenomenon conducted in Romania (Castagnone and al., 2007) prove how, in this context, children become independent from the world of adults at a much tenderer age and are soon called to assume responsibilities within the family.

Transnational families, for which the solidarity of the extended family represents a strength, not only question the "presumed"

universality of the model of nuclear family, but, in my opinion, allow us to critically rethink the contents of our categories and of our social organization.

Within the transnational families considered, the elders and children, characterized in nuclear families by their vulnerability and dependence, assume instead an active role, bringing a fundamental contribution to the reorganization of tasks inside the family.

Also, notwithstanding the separation, there is a relational continuity between parents and children inside the transnational family, even exercised at a distance and with the related emotional challenges. Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila (1997), first introduced the concept of "transnational motherhood" and analyzed the different strategies used by women working abroad to keep the relationship with their children left at home. Afterwards there are been a certain number of research focusing on "transnational motherhood" which analyzed how affection, care and remittances cross the national border (Bryceson and Vourela, 2002; Decimo, 2006; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997; Erel, 2002; Parreñas, 2001; Raijman et al., 2003).

As Parreñas notices in her study on the emotional aspects of Filipino mothers and left behind children, even acknowledging the pain felt by women and children in their physical and emotional separation, she observes how this is amplified by the traditional ideology of the nuclear patriarchal Filipino family. In the 1970s and 1980s, when the Filipino migration was still dominated by the male gender, the traditional structure of the patriarchal family was still observed, centered as it was on the traditional division of roles. This traditional structure started to be questioned by the feminization of migration, which saw many mothers leave to offer economic support to their family, abandoning their role of primary care-takers. Filipino transnational families have started being represented as "abnormal" or as "problematic" and, as a result, there appeared a discourse centred on the stigmatization of such women, not only by public opinion, but





also by the Filipino political class. According to the author, questioning the gender ideology inside a family and, therefore, granting fathers a more significant involvement in the education and care of their sons and daughters, would not diminish the sacrifices of children from transnational families, yet it would mitigate the pain of separation from their mothers (Parreñas, 2001).

As Keough (2006) notes, there are few studies concerned with the analysis of women's transnational labor migration in post-socialist countries and debating the gender issue. In her ethnography of a small village in Moldavia affected by a feminization of the migration flow to Turkey, Keough notices that women are also accused there of abandoning their children, ruining their families, and of causing a break in social order.

The author also notes how, in the panorama of post-socialist studies, only very few were concerned with highlighting the parallel between the situation in post-colonial and post-socialist countries. There is a rich literature analyzing the effects produced by the fall of socialist regimes on women and on the idea of gender, but only a handful of scientists have stressed the similarity between the condition of post-socialist women and that of women in other parts of the world. In the ethnographic case under scrutiny, the author notes that a parallel can, in fact, be drawn between the situation of Moldavian women which migrate to support their own family and that analyzed by other researchers, like, for instance, Parreñas (2001) and Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2004) in other parts of the world. The "transition" paradigm between socialism and post-socialism, notes the author, appears in this case ambiguous, as it seems obvious that the experiences of Moldavian women, just like those of other "global women" from other countries, actually follow the same model of neo-liberal oppression.

The inability of states to supply their own citizens with an adequate welfare system and to create life and labor conditions that would allow them to stay in their home countries

brings together post-socialist and non-post-socialist women. The public and political discourse which condemns mothers allows states to throw on the latter the guilt of not being able to draft adequate policies which would disincentivize citizens from migrating in the first place.

Keough (2006) concludes her reasoning, observing how the "neoliberal structures have influenced Moldovan state policies, prompting them to shift their policy priorities from providing jobs and social services to their population to supporting migration as a route to development (437)."

In the Romanian case, this phenomenon is again suggested by the stigmatization of mothers, the lack of critique for the absence of fathers and the removal of responsibility for the state. As Castagnone and others (2007) state in their research on migrant mothers from Romania and the Ukraine, in Romania institutions representatives and civil society actors referred frequently to "broken family" as a consequence of the mothers migrations.

An interesting analysis with regard to the Romanian context is also the study on transnational motherhood by Foamete-Ducu (2011), who highlighted the defamation of migrating Romanian women at the macro, meso and micro level, which are accused of abandonment of their children and portrayed with negative stereotypes. Indeed, these negative representations of Romanian migrating women originate from the contradiction between the new gender roles played by migrating women with the social norms of the traditional patriarchal family. By these models, the woman is supposed to perform as caretaker and the male as breadwinner. Nevertheless, as notes Ionella Vlase (2007) the feminization of the migratory flow has brought important challenges to the Romanian household organization and in the structure of gender relations. In fact, in the latest decades, women became economic migrants and their financial independence gave them power to negotiate their own position in family relationships.

When the "left behind" are in question, the suffering children experience due to physical and emotional distance, particularly from their mothers, is often described. On the one hand, this kind of discourse was used by civil society organizations to alert the public about the negative effects that migration has on children, while obtaining the positive effect of moving the Romanian political class to confront a phenomenon which affects the whole country and also promote the debate at a European level (Castagnone et al., 2007). On the other hand, however, the stereotyped discourses on the category of the "left behind" contribute to create what I call the "official discourse" which, using mostly moral and paternal tones, ends in a further stigmatization of the lives of children and their parents.

As I argued elsewhere analysing the situations of street children in Romania (Bezzi, 2007a, 2007b, 2012) and of the Romanian unaccompanied minors in Italy (Bezzi, 2010), the emphasis that the mass media, EU and international organization place on Romanian children's issues, risks becoming a political and "official discourse", as I believe, in which "pity towards children" obscures other important factors that impact the children's situation. Possibly by refocusing the attention and allocation of public funds on broader investments in social protection in Romania, including funds from the Romanian government as well as from European institutions, funding could actually address the core causes of the problem rather than merely addressing its symptoms.

In the very definition of the category "left behind", it is not hard to discover two elements embedded in the actual term. The first one is the fact that children are left by their parents, and thus they are represented as passive subjects. Many times in the journalistic, but also scientific, literature, they are represented as depressed children at a risk of joining a bad group, children abandoned to themselves. During my fieldwork periods in Romania, I had the opportunity to collect the perceptions of the people about this phenomenon. I interviewed people and analysed newspapers and

television. In September of 2011, one girl from Arad took her own life, letting herself die of hunger. All national newspapers reported the news, sometimes accompanying it with an unfortunate photo of the deceased girl on a small hospital bed without blurring her face, as should be done when dealing with children whose privacy must be protected. The cause of this suicide was reported as being suffering experienced by the girl due to the separation from her mother, who had left to work in Italy years before. The news caused an uproar and Romanian politicians immediately started again to be concerned by the phenomenon of the left behind. One Romanian daily newspaper, which quotes the words of a woman who assisted the girl in hospital in the days prior to her death, described the event in the following way:

*"Can you imagine a life with no one close to you and with no one who could hug you lovingly? How would you react if you were refused by all your dear ones or if the person that gave birth to you were to abandon you forever? Would you still smile? I have known the soul of a little angel the night before. A guiltless girl, or perhaps guilty of having been born in this harsh and immoral world. Sentenced to solitude because she made the error of being born."*³

The emotive tone portrayed by this kind of articles contributed to a negative portrayal of migrating parents, especially mothers. As argued also from Foamete-Ducu (2011), the Romanian press has had a very important role in the creation of a negative public opinion toward the migrating mothers which are often accused of abandoning their children. In the villages where she conducted ethnography she noted as the media opinion toward migrating mother were assimilated from the local people, which described the migrating women of the villages as unnatural mothers and their children as troubled children at risk of deviant behaviours.

However, when the researcher was asked to address some examples of left behind children with social or psychological problems,

3) Popa M. A. (2011). Lipsa dragostei: Cazul fetitei care a murit de drul mamei, in <http://www.einformatii.ro/stire/actualitate/6/33556/lipsa-dragostei--cazul-fetitei-care-a-murit-de-dorul-mamei/0/> (21/05/2013).

they were not able to identify anybody within the community.

Also in Borșa, people have a negative perception of the migrating mother in their community, yet when I asked the Municipal Civil Affairs official to address some problematic cases, I received the answer that “in Borșa there are not situations like those described in television, because children here are secure and happy with their grandparents”. Therefore, I argue that the role played by the media is very important in the creation of the official discourse toward left behind children and adversely affects the point of view of the people towards migrating mothers, even when they cannot indicate any problematic situation inside their community.

The second element inferred from the term “left behind”, is that someone (the child) is left, and someone (the parent) leaves. The migration of parents is frequently a necessary and functional condition for the support of a family, but more often than not, instead of having their sacrifice recognized, the latter are made guilty and accused of leaving their own children alone. For example, here are the words of a famous Romanian author, Mircea Cartarescu, from an interview with the Romanian daily newspaper Gandul:

“Violence does not necessarily mean a belt or a club. I think that violence against the mind of children means everything that stops that mind from developing. I believe that parents who leave their children home and go abroad, to Spain or Italy, to work, apply as such much more violence to their children, who remain alone – or, as people say, without guidance, than if every day they beat or used physical coercion with their children”⁴.

Usually, the adults leave in order to guarantee better prospects for their children, while in the past, under socialism the State ensured health, labour, education for all. Now the families must provide all of these things. Frequently, mothers and fathers leave because the average salary in Romania is not enough to cover the expenses of a family or to allow their

children to continue their studies, or, many times, even to afford the otherwise unaffordable costs associated with medical services. The public health system is actually very corrupt and, in practice, it works like a private health system. It is very expensive and accessible only to those who can pay.

A woman working in Italy as a domestic nurse explained to me that the first time she left to go abroad, it was in order to be able to pay for a medical surgery for her eight-year-old son. The boy had a testicle retention problem and in the public health system, free of charge in theory, the cost for such an intervention was 500 Euros. As the woman remarked, this intervention was not even particularly expensive, as the amount of tips given to doctors varies with the seriousness of the condition. A heart problem may on day cost as much as 2,000 Euros.

Making parents feel guilty for leaving behind their own children, which is similar to accusing them of abandonment, allows discourse to shift away from the root cause of this problem. Actually, it is not the children who are left behind by their parents, rather the national and international society leaves children and their parents behind, and the families are abandoned to themselves and must react with different strategies to inconvenient and difficult situations.



ETNOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE FROM ROMANIA

As previously stated, the experiences and perspectives of children inside transnational family varies also in relation to their cultural and family backgrounds. The suffering caused by the separation from their own parents may be solved only by eliminating the distance, but it nevertheless can be diminished with significant affectionate relations within the extended family able to functionally reorganize the traditional roles taken on by some of its members. In this section, I will give voice to the children and highlight that the parents' de-

4) Marcu D. (2013), “Plecarea părinților în străinătate, o violență împotriva copiilor (lăsați singuri acasă)” in <http://www.gandul.info/interviurile-gandul/mircea-cartarescu-despre-noua-romania-mitocanul-se-reproduce-el-produce-mitocani-in-generatia-urmatoare-gandul-live-10788267> (25/05/2013).

parture sometimes severely affects the life of children and others, even when children are asked to take active role inside extended families, they are coping with their parents' departure with strong support from their relatives which make them to feel less suffering.

Experience and perspective of children from Buruineiești

When we discuss disorganized families, the suffering of the child seems not to always be derived from the distance of parents, because sometimes, even when the latter are physically close, they are not always able to satisfy the affective and material needs of their children. Indeed, it cannot be empirically proven that the anxiety of the children is caused by the departure of the parents or if it originated from the conflict inside the family even before the departure.

Aurel⁵, for example, has been living with his grandparents since he was four years old, when his mother left Buruineiești. With the money that the mother sends home, the father is building a new home for the family. Although the father lives not far away from the house of his grandparents, Aurel does not want to live with him. The grandparents explained to me that the man has alcohol problems and that Aurel hides when he sees him because he is afraid of him. The grandfather, who has a locomotive disability, helps Aurel with his homework. The grandmother does the rest. Aurel communicates with his mother through the PC, they frequently talk to each other, and they can even see each other using the camera.

The grandmother considers that this is enough to keep an intimate relationship with the son and wonders why he recently developed an aggressive attitude. She feels guilty, thinking that she didn't manage to offer him what he lacked. The educator of the kindergarten attended by Aurel explained to me that the child suffers profoundly because of the distance from his mother and he is frequently looking for hugs from the educators. Aurel said to me that his mother will be back immediately

after the new house is finished, but the educator explained that the mother has no intention to return to living with her husband and that she doesn't think she will return to the village so easily. Nevertheless, Aurel's anxiety is not caused only by the mother's distance, but by different factors, including his father's alcoholism and conflict between his parents seem to play a very important role.

In many cases, children became subjects actively involved in care-taking and household activities previously assumed by parents until their departure. It is not rare for big brothers to look after the little ones and, at a certain age, it can happen that they are asked to take care of their grandparents or other family members. The family, having to react to consequences derived from the gap created by weak social policies, develops strategies aimed at improving the situation of the family's global welfare.

Inside a transnational family, all members, even children, are called to actively participate and support such strategies. The situations that children have to confront are very different depending on the stability of the pre-existing family network at the parents' departure. In the case of a disorganized family, children are believed to contribute in a very significant manner with an active role inside the family, while within a family with a strong solidarity between the members, the engagement of children is very different.

Antonio, for example, is 12 years old and looks after his 5-year-old little brother in the village of Buruineiești. His mother left for Spain when Antonio was very young. His father lives in Spain, but he is separated from his mother. The little brother was born in Spain, where he lived for some time, but then he returned to Romania to live with him. For a period they lived in another village with their grandparents, and then, after they died, they moved with an aunt who couldn't take care of them any longer after getting married. Now they live around the house of their uncle, who is out for work all day long, so Antonio has to take care of everything. He likes going to school very much and the educator who knows

5) All the names of children mentioned in the article have been changed for reason of privacy.

and follows him explained to me that he is very good. She also said that his mother has not been answering telephone calls for seven months and that the little brother has to enrol in the first grade at school but, without the signature of his mother this is not possible.

c. Who cooks the meals for you?

The lunch myself and my uncle the dinner.

c. And what does your brother say when you cook?

But this is not important because more than anything...eating is important...so he eats and that's it.

c. And what do you cook?

I make French fries, some other times mashed potatoes with something grilled or with pickles. In the morning I prepare some milk with biscuits.

c. And do you enjoy looking after him?

Only when he listens, if he doesn't, I leave him here alone, get out and return afterwards.

c. And how is your mother doing there in Spain?

Well, it is nice there, she is accustomed, people are more polite, they don't throw curses one after another like here, and then all the time you see cars on the streets which come and go. I think she likes it there and she got used to living there, I think.

(Antonio, male, 12 years old, interviewed in Buruineiești in his backyard)

This is an extreme case among the situations I encountered, because Antonio must substantially provide for himself and his little brother, relying only in the evening on the figure of his uncle, with whom he doesn't, however, talk to much, as he explained to me.

It is interesting that the educator who introduced me to Antonio, depicted his mother as an irresponsible woman but never questioned the figure of the father, who at the same time took no responsibility for his children. In fact, during the conversation with Antonio, in the presence of the educator, I had the impression that the child was trying to present himself as not so much affected by his

mother's departure, and he also often answered in an elusive way to some pointed questions from the educator toward his mother, with the aim of defending her reputation.

Another situation which shows how children are taking part in an active manner inside the family is the history of Alina. Her family is fortunately very united but still experiences a tough economic situation. As a consequence Alina, a 14-year-old, had to leave school to look after her mother.

Alina's parents left for Italy when she was eleven and her little sister was five. From then on, their parents have been living in Benvento and their mother comes back every year during the Christmas and summer holidays. However, their father returns less frequently, the family cannot afford spending money for two round-trip tickets, because all savings must be invested in building the new home. The two sisters live with their grandmother, aged 71 when we interviewed her, who has been looking after her granddaughters for all these years. The smaller daughter has even stayed for a period with her parents in Italy, but eventually she returned to live in Buruineiești with her grandmother because the parents, who were both working, could not look after her. Alina has always remained with her grandmother because she had to finish her eighth grade and didn't want to leave. She would like to continue her studies but now that she is 14, she is the one who needs to look after her little sister and the grandmother who has become sicker and sicker over the years. I ask Alina whether the reason for not attending school is because her parents don't manage to help her financially to pay for the shuttle service from Buruineiești to Roman (the nearest city).

But it is not only the money, it is because we still have debts to repay for the house, and also because ...who would do all the chores around the house?

But maybe sometime in the future, if my uncle comes back to Buruineiești and will look after my ill grandmother, I will be able

then to continue my school, we'll see. I like school a lot and I would like in the future to attend the school of tourism in Roman.

(Alina, female, 14 years old, interviewed in Buruinești by her grandmother house)

In other cases, the children are required to assume obligations with regard to their younger siblings but this is part of a context in which other members of the enlarged family put a responsibility role on them. This is the case of two sisters, from a village close to Buruinești aged 12 and 13 who live all week in a structure administered by catholic nuns in Roman, where they study. Their mother has been working for some months each year in Italy, since the girls were 2 and 3 years old, leaving them to the care of grandparents and their father. At the time of the interview the mother just left again to work in Italy, even though she had to leave at home her third daughter who was only a few months old. Therefore, the sisters must go back home to take care of the house and the little baby on the weekends.

c. What do you remember since you were young and your mother left?

But it was not difficult back then because, you know, it is one thing if your mother leaves when you are adolescent, instead we were accustomed since we were little kids with the fact that she is leaving.

Then mother tried to make us unaware of the burden of distance. When she returned, we would spend a lot of time talking in the park and she wouldn't get too angry if we did something wrong (laughs).

Now it is more difficult because we have the school and every Friday we have to get back home to our sister and we cannot participate, for example, in the events organized by the parish...like the other colleagues.

For instance, we have to cook, to clean, but not only this... it is different than when mother is here, I don't know how to say this....

Nevertheless, the girls understand their mother's sacrifice and are concerned with the

pain she must experience because she is forced to stay away, especially from the little sister who is a few months old. As they state, despite the distance they have a very good relationship with their mother and they are used to speaking a lot and openly through telephone or internet.

You know, she is aware of our girlish problems...for example, she understands if we need this or that kind of dress...but I cannot say that I haven't talked to her since she left, because we speak on the phone even three times a day...but when she is here it is different...I don't know how to say it...it's a question of safety... even she is very stressed there and cries all the time....she doesn't say she's stressed, but she cries....now that we have our little sister, it is even more difficult...she cries a lot.

Moreover the sisters understand that through the mother's sacrifice they have the possibility of continuing with their studies and both of them dream of being able to go on with their university degrees. Even if it is difficult, they support and approve the mother's choice to migrate, aware that with out this sacrifice their future possibilities would be very limited.

Now she left only for a few months and then, when she gets back, our father should leave, mother looked for some job for him. But I hope they can find something to work, because here there's nothing they can do.

(Ioana and Mirela, female, 12 and 13 years old, interviewed in the hall of the house of Catholic nuns in Roman.)

Experience and perspective of children from Borșa

In the Borșa reality, the extended family assumed an important role in the care and education of children even before the migration of parents. Actually, during the focus groups with Borșa children, one recurring element which emerged from their discourses was their relation with the enlarged family, particularly with grandparents, but also uncles and cousins.

c. What did you miss most when you were in Italy?

I missed my relatives, my grandparents, and I also missed the air here...because here we are, how can I say it... more home, more like this....but I also enjoyed it there.

c. And what did you miss?

My relatives.

c. But weren't you there with your parents?

Yes, but I missed my relatives, I missed my grandparents and my uncle, my cousins.

(Borșa, December 2011, focus group with children of elementary school, 8 class)

The role of the enlarged family in Borșa has a major importance. The grandparents are rather young in many cases because, as the Mayor's Hall registrar made me understand, traditionally people marry at very tender ages in the town and so there are families that are made of up to five generations. Also, the migration of Borșa inhabitants is characterized by a strong circularity. Almost all children that I conducted focus groups with have parents that go to and return from abroad, only a handful have a stable residence there, even though in the first migration period they experimented with longer periods of staying abroad. I also found out that about one third of school children spent at least a brief period in Italy, Spain and England, and some of them were actually born there. They have different reasons for returning. Sometimes the parents return with all the family due to the economic crisis of recent years and the loss of their jobs. In other cases, the children go abroad only for some periods, visiting their parents during vacations. In still other cases, the children, after attempting an initial insertion in the parents' host country, return because of the difficulties of integrating in the new context.

Many of them even attended for some years the Italian school, and then were re-enrolled in the Romanian education system. There are also various cases in which, inside the same family, some children join their parents abroad and live with them, while the other siblings remain in Romania.

I will discuss "transmigrant children" with reference to those children who lived for certain periods abroad with their parents and then returned to Romania. In fact, it so happens many times that their attempts to rejoin their parents fail and that children return to Romania after a longer or shorter period spent abroad.

Not always the nuclear family abroad can count on the support of members of the enlarged family, so the children are completely under the responsibility of their parents, who usually both have a job. Because of these difficulties, many children return to Romania. For example, one of the girls who participated in the focus group was born in Italy, where her mother currently works. She, her father and her brothers have returned to Borșa in the house of her grandmother.

c. What do you remember from the school there?

-We were there from early in the morning until five in the afternoon and here we are staying until 1 PM, maximum 2 PM. I liked it in Italy at first, but now I wouldn't return there.

c. Why?

-Because I was a lot of time at school and then mother and father worked all the time and they didn't spend time with me.

But it is also beautiful there, in Italy...mother would come and pick me up with the bicycle...I had a friend who lived close and I would go and play with her....

(Borșa, December 2011, focus group with children of elementary school, 8 class)

Contrary to what one might believe, only few of them say that they regret their life abroad, in spite of living with their parents. Their discourses hints not merely of a past of failed integration with their colleagues, but more at the solitude and domesticity of living abroad, compared to the freedom and time spent with friends and other relatives in Borșa.

c. But what would you think is the biggest difference between living here and in Italy?

For me it is, how do you call it....it is more....



you have more things to do, you can have more entertainment there, you have the amusement parks, the pools... here you are more free, you are more home, you can go wherever you want, but in Italy you can only walk with mother and father, because we are strangers there. (Borșa, December 2011, focus group with children of elementary school, class 6 and 7)

The contrast between the two views, of feeling more at home in Borșa and of being strangers in Italy, manages to express well a condition of inconvenience in the experience abroad belonging both to children and, implicitly, to their parents, highlighting the difficulties encountered by the family and by children within it through the migrating process.

This discourse also stresses two different ways of living one's childhood, a more free one in which it is possible to move and act, and a more domestic one in which the parents' supervision is always necessary. The "domesticity" that children complain about is associated not only with the solitude experienced in the host cities, but also to a limit in their agency within their families and their social context. The Borșa children perceive themselves in opposition to their peers abroad, smarter and more independent, and claim with a certain pride their autonomy from the adult world, emphasizing at the same time their participation in activities connected to the household and work environments.

c. May I ask you whether you think there is anything that Italian children cannot do? .yes! work! (General laughter).

Another child: for example, in Romania children take better care of themselves, they are more independent.

c. What does it mean for you to be more independent?

For example, we go to the shop alone, we are smarter, because we think faster, we know how to sort things out first.

Another child: For example, we know how to cook, we make bread,

A girl intervenes: yes, but in Italy they also brought us in school to see how bread is

made.

Another girl: yes, but it is different here, in Romania, because you do things, you can do them, there are the cows, we know how to milk them. You couldn't do these things in Italy, you just go to the supermarket and buy some milk....

(Borșa, December 2011, focus group with children of elementary school, 8 class)

It is a recurring fact for children to have a discourse that highlight the contradictions: "I want to stay here because I feel better, but I want to go there to stay with my parents," which highlights not only the experience of an idealized childhood in Borșa, but rather their being trapped between two dimensions: being here and being there. These are the words of a girl in the focus group which was for a period in Italy by her mother, who worked there, and then returned to live in Borșa, and going to visit her mother only in vacations:

c. And where do you like most?

Here, but also there. It is beautiful there because I don't go to school (because she only goes on vacations). But here because ...it is more beautiful and here are my friends.

c. But where is the most beautiful?

Here, because I have my friends...there are no kids there and then mother works and the few kids there are distant and I cannot go and find them there...but here I can.

After a brief interruption: But it is also beautiful there. (Borșa, December 2011, focus group with children of elementary school, class 6 and 7)

This discourse also emerges from children that have never been abroad because the dimension of being there is actually present and lived through the remote relationship they have with their parents in the transnational social field which creates a means of contact between parents and their children through movements, a transfer of resources, frequent phone calls, and video conference.

Therefore, the children themselves live and animate a social field which connects two or more places, either physically crossed like in



the case of “transmigrant” children, or part of their imagination through the links they create. Within this field, however, their identity representation doesn’t seem to be placed in a “here” and “there”, but it is more suspended between a “home”, where they are “more free” but experience the distance from parents, and a “there”, where there is more beautiful entertainment but they experience the feeling of being “strangers”.

The ideal solution that children find to solve this contradiction is to “stay here, but also there”. Although this is only a verbal solution, which cannot be concretely realized, it is on the other hand an interesting idea which reflects how the views of these children are perhaps neither here, nor there, positioning their own identity in a future space, uncertain and still open to new possibilities. Nevertheless, the transnationalism of their lives, as well as their parents’ lives, is not considered here as much by opportunity than as a necessity. I agree in this respect with the conclusions drawn also from Boccagni (2009) in his study on migrants, Ecuadorians in Trentino, that argues : “This conclusion (...) it follows an opposite direction from the unilaterally celebrating visions which would make from transnational migrants neo-cosmopolites able to elude the regulatory systems in the national states (or at least to lead a “double life” indifferent to geographical distances), still implicit in part of the writings on this topic⁶” (39).

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CONCLUSIONS

The term “left behind”, used in newspapers as well as in academic papers to refer to those children who remain home following the departure of one or both parents, is critically considered here both theoretically and through the empirical evidence of the ethnographic research I conducted. In my opinion, this term is founded on constructs of gender, childhood, and family which are firstly not universally valid and, secondly, are used here in an instrumental and compliant manner to

make parents feel guilty and remove responsibility from society, including at an international level, regarding their existence.

The implicit contents of the notion of this category subtend a childhood model which, in line with the literature on the anthropology and sociology of childhood, is not universal. This childhood model which sees the child as a subject completely depending on the care of adults, vulnerable, and characterized by “domesticity”, is not always useful to describe the lives of children that I had contact with, and it also limits a proper understanding of their experiences. In the same manner, the model of the nuclear family is not the only possible one, but one among many others. In the context of the extended family, the education of children is not taken exclusively by parents, but also by other members who, following the departure of parents, are called on even more to perform such a task. Although this cannot cancel the pain caused by the distance between parents and children, it is very important to attenuate it.

Therefore, using the ethnographic material, I highlighted how different experiences of the so-called “left behind” are very different and how they frequently question the very definition of the “left behind”. Using a diachronic perspective to analyse the movement of subjects, both adults and children, from traditional Romanian families that I contacted, and repositioning the category in the largest migrating context, one can infer how the left behind frequently rejoin their parents abroad or become themselves transmigrant subjects which cross many times the national borders to position themselves in a “here” and “there”. I talked about them as “transmigrant” children because many of them, even only for the holidays period, have frequently rejoined their parents abroad, while others were actually born abroad and still others have attended Italian schools for some periods and then returned to Romania.

Finally, I conclude by observing how the term “left behind”, in my opinion, strengthens a discourse of stigmatization with regard to

⁶ Translation from Italian to English by Cristina Bezzi.

parents and, in particular, the mother, allowing to throw on the latter the guilt of "abandoning" these children, obscuring the real responsibility of national and international policies. It is not the parents who abandoned their children, but the international society which abandons families to themselves.

Therefore, I consider that it is more correct to talk about a "transnational childhood" when describing the lives of these children, either when there is a concrete physical relocation on their part, or when family members are the ones to relocate. The contradiction stressed by the children's words, on wanting to be "here", but also "there", or perhaps "not here" and "not there", highlights in my opinion a condition in which these children and their parents are trapped, rather than their effective integration in the two contexts. Despite the fact that families considered were able to find strategies to face a situation otherwise unbearable in the country, and despite their ability to elude the regulatory systems in the national states by means of such strategies, creating transnational social fields, one cannot forget that this condition is dictated by the necessity to migrate and by the inability to ensure a satisfactory existence to their families even if they remained home. As a result, even children, while being active subjects capable of agency within their families, actually suffer the consequences of a context of structural poverty in which families are left alone to provide for the well being of their members. In such a context, migration becomes a strategy and a choice, but from a very restricted range of possible choices.

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