

"Has Nothing Changed? Perceptions of Post-Ceausescu Romania"

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It is a summer evening at a new restaurant imbedded like a stucco pearl in one of the dreary housing projects in Cluj, the capital of Transylvania. Seated at one of the corner tables is a clutch of familiar-looking domni looking smug and self-assured, if circumspect, talking in low voices as they sip beer brought moments before by a harried waiter. The conspiratorial presence and demeanor of these important men, and their possession in a public place of a product as scarce and valued as beer, makes one think that one is back in the '80s, with The Leader Himself in his Bucharest palace and the chains of his security police firmly in place. But this is 1990 and a new epoch. For at the table next to the important men, several philosophical light years away, are five of the young editors of Nu, perhaps the most outspoken and critical of the dozens of opposition papers that have sprung up in Romanian cities and towns since the revolution. In contrast to the carefully coiffured and proper older men in ties and polyester leisure suits, the students are dishevelled, ebullient, spontaneous-andutterly fearless. Sitting at the table with them, I am fifteen minutes into a remarkable three-hour lesson in contemporary Romanian Social Reality.

In the middle of answering one of my questions, the mercurial head editor of Nu , Liviu Man, spots the beer on the neighboring table, lets out a hoot and calls his friends' attention to it. He catches the eye of the waiter, and signals him over.

"Hey, what's going on?", Man says. "We ordered beer and you said there wasn't any, what are those domni doing with it?"

The waiter, flustered, leans down and whispers something in his ear. Man bursts out with a contemptuous snort and, as the poor waiter shrinks away to the kitchen, he mimics his pathetic explanation: "the gentlemen at the next table brought beer from home, we have just chilled it and are serving their own beer to them."

It seems an old and familiar lesson: privileged access to scarce resources remains the rule in Romania. But the irrepressible Man pushes the limits--for this is the post-Ceausescu era, and

the borders are in dispute. He catches the eye of one of the important men whom he apparently knows slightly, just up from his chair to visit the water closet.

In his best impression of an injured fellow professional, the editor tells him this inequity is hardly fair, for in the new democratic Romania, they are all colleagues in arms, and besides, "is it right for our guest from the U.S. to drink mediocre wine with us while you drink good beer? What will they think of us." The response of the nattily dressed former apparatchik reveals the apparent depth of change in Romania; for he raises his shoulders and spreads his hands in that distinctive manner of the Other Europeans, smiles broadly, pats Man on the shoulder, and tells him "no problem, no problem". Five minutes later there is beer on our table, and the whole story is being rehashed with great hilarity for the benefit of another Nu editor who has just arrived. As I struggle to make sense of an event that would have been impossible to conceive of just nine months ago, Liviu Man's jet black eyes fix on mine and he gives me its moral: "You see, Domnul Professor, nothing in Romania has changed!"

Nothing in Romania has changed. This is one of two heavily-loaded catch phrases heard everywhere in Romania today. This one is the plaintive cry of most students, many intellectuals and artists, and a decided minority of workers and peasants who feel the revolution has been betrayed by Iliescu and the Front, and by the great mass of people who have allowed themselves to be taken in by a new version of an old lie.

Not only has one party assumed practical control of the nation, they say, maintaining itself by disinforming and deceiving its populace, the same corrupt infrastructure has been perpetuated, resources continue to be distributed inequitably, and worst of all, the security police are back in place. Phones are being tapped again, letters are being opened. There are not just wounds that have to heal, there remains a deep-seated-spiritual sickness in Romania that still must be vindicated.

The young editors of Nu do not see themselves so much in political opposition, as in moral opposition to the Iliescu regime. One of Man's colleagues, Alin Fumerescu, made clear that same evening "it isn't a question of political differences, of arguments about programs, laws, and so on--if it were, I wouldn't be interested". "Rather", he continued, "it is about the moral requirements of a democratic society". In words Havelesque in character, he said until there is complete honesty and authenticity in a new social and political order, there can be no real political dialogue.

Nothing has changed. Expressed with such conviction by the earnest student editors, this phrase fairly chokes the throat of the director of a provincial museum--long a steadfast opponent of the Ceausescu regime and now a fervent supporter of the Front for National Salvation.

"How can they say nothing has changed when they can now write whatever they want in their newspapers, when we have bread again, when there is enough gasoline for everyone, when the borders are open for Romanians to travel freely through Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia to the West?" I heard his complaint echoed in the voices of miners in Sighet, a Suceava schoolteacher, many Maramures peasants: we have suffered through fifty years of totalitarian rule and economic mismanagement, we cannot expect the problems to be solved overnight.

What Romania needs is a period of calm. This is the other catch phrase, a battlecry leveled at those whom Front-supporters perceive endangering and betraying the revolution: the defeated opposition party members, "reckless idealists", "tramps", and "opportunists", the "false heroes" of the opposition, interested only in self-aggrandizement and personal gain in their exploitation of the present chaos and uncertainty, they put the future of the nation at risk. Our best hope, in this alternative view, lies with Iliescu and the other members of the Front to oppose such chicanery and disorientation.

After all, our leaders are ordinary Romanian citizens like you and I.

They are the same people who kept us in chains.

The elections revealed the will of the people for calm and order.

The elections were rigged, minds and votes were manipulated.

All we need is a period of calm.

Nothing has changed.

In this clash of alternative visions and slogans, very little is clear- for this is a society where no rules have yet been laid down for public discourse. A year ago, there was no genuine public discourse in Romania; the great mass of citizens were trapped in the suffocating balloon inflated by The Dictator's Newspeak, breathing its deoxygenated air. In December the balloon exploded and Romanians found themselves in a world no better provisioned, but in an open plain seemingly without boundaries or guideposts. Directions, horizons, and the very atmosphere in which lives are now to be lived, still remained to be defined.

But at the very least, the oppressive dark cloud of mind-and behavior-control has lifted. The reality that one sees in contemporary Romania may be paradoxical, disturbing, and even depressing- but it is at least illuminated. No longer are people forced to live in a world of illusion. There are still lines in front of meat stores, but you can hear people openly complain about their time being wasted. Where there was once only one public truth, there is now a veritable smorgasbord of words and images to consume. On city street corners, vendors' stands reveal an utterly incongruous mix of New Testaments and prayer books, soft pornography, holographic visions of Jesus and Elvis juxtaposed. In the months since the revolution, hundreds of newspapers, pamphlets, gossip weeklies, literary magazines, professional and semi-professional journals, emerge, shine, and extinguish as in a night sky of shooting stars. Each publication has its unique character, its particular slant on current events, its idiosyncratic personalized stamp, its own history (or creation myth).

The Nu students started theirs in the midst of the December revolution, a rag-taggle band of students in history, construction, engineering, occupying a room in the University's student center and demanding their voice be heard. Their paper is printed on an old interwar vintage press once given as a gift from Mussolini to Marshall Antonescu--and temporarily on loan to them from the state. Another student publication in Cluj, the more literary-oriented weekly, Atlas, is run out of an office in the former Communist Party headquarters--a room won in the storming of the building on the night of December 22.

In those same heady moments a hundred miles away, the pro-Front museum director started his own weekly newspaper in his tenement apartment, and although with a modest--and almost entirely local--circulation of 300, its impact is limited, it nonetheless represents yet another public viewpoint, where a year ago only one existed.

But that one despised official view, the one absurd canonical illusion, united the people against it. The underground jokes about Ceausescu's ancestry belonged to everybody, the groans and moans of suffering were a societal chorus, the revolution when it came was itself a collective and authentic catharsis.

Today, with the monotone grey background removed, all foreground movements are atomized and discrete and unpatterned. There seems to be literally no ground for action. People who have been told for two generations what they must do are virtually paralyzed regarding what to do. In a stable social and political system, as we believe the Western democracies to be, such

argumentation about action is the very stuff of the system, and in its practice constructive. In a society such as Romania, with no firm democratic tradition, no confident grasp of political debate after decades of univocal cant, discussion runs quickly downhill to ultimatums: if we do not jail the securistii still running free..., if we do not throw those vagabonds and bums out of University square..., if we do not rid the country of the Gypsies... In place of debate over specific programs and policies (the stuff of the student editor Fumerescu's "mundane politics") are arguments over moral imperatives, the character of the new Romanian man."

The one point of universal agreement concerns the nature of the cooking pot in which emotions and fears are being heated: the decrepit and dysfunctional economy. In a society fed on illusion and little else for fifty years, where expectations have been raised so high by ideological rhetoric, and Dallas reruns, and spirits depressed for so long by day-to-day deprivation, there is little patience for taking stock and incremental change--even among the Front supporters. The latter, fully cognizant of the fundamental problems riddling the system, nonetheless find answers in short-term profits, long term rationalizations-- or scapegoats.

There is virtually no will among any segment of the population for anything smelling of self-sacrifice. The false, involuntary altruism of the "Communist" regime has bred a population primed to squeeze maximal personal or familial benefit out of any opening of the system. The experience and expertise of entrepreneurship is all but lacking, and there is a genuine fear of losing everything in a long term commitment, so people fall back on the quick fix. The trip to Germany or Austria to buy a hundred pairs of Levis or fifty clocks or a couple dozen walkmen. With virtually no regulation of domestic sales, this can mean the doubling or even tripling of a year's income in a month's time. A jolly street vendor of blue jeans in Cluj showed me a wad of 100 lei notes as big as a Maramures peasant's fist. The Timisoara students I met crossing the border into Yugoslavia felt confident they could buy off the customs agent and carry in half a train compartment of slivovitsa.

With seemingly every family on the make with this petty black market capitalism, no one seems to be working--and everyone seems to be complaining about everyone else taking advantage of the system. Ominously, the Gypsies and the Jews are singled out by some Romanians as the worst offenders. Productivity has dropped precipitously in the past twelve months, with many state employees playing a waiting game. The old saw of workers under Communism: you pretend to pay us and we pretend to work, now takes on a new realism: you

pay us hardly anything and we work hardly at all. The new version is neither as funny nor as evocative of sympathy as the original.

In the mountain villages of Maramures, close on the Soviet border, the irresolvable contradictions of the enigma that is Romania slip away and one finds an abiding stability. Perhaps out of a sense of desperation, the student of Romania seeks clarity here, in its clean air, pure water, and predictable life rhythms.

Seventeen years ago the hard-working and devoutly Orthodox peasants of this region spoke to me of Ceausescu's government as "this regime", knowing it to be just the most recent in a long succession of imposed and flawed ruling orders. It will pass, like all the others, they assured me. And so it has. So too, one has to believe, will pass whatever system is constructed to replace it--whether it be the disabled quasi-democracy of the NSF or the idealized moral utopia of Nu's heroic student editors. In those dramatic days of the revolution, most villagers watched events unfold on the television. The streets were left, as usual, to the chickens, geese, and sleds bearing winter firewood. In the months following the revolution the peasants have, in most cases, managed with minimal disruption to decollectivize their villages, adjust to the new liberalism, maximize their advantages in the new economy as it lurches towards a free market system.

This last year the people of Poienile Izei decided to plant large amounts of wheat on their hilly terrain, for, with finely honed foresight, they saw the price of bread going up and the availability of flour going down. Working sixteen hour days with sickle, scythe, and pitchfork, they got the harvest in on time and it was a good one, although the lack of rain hurt some of their other crops. Sitting on the porch of Maria and Gheorghe Tomsa, I watched their neighbors bring in backloads of freshly cut clover for their lambs, the same way Poienari have been carrying in fodder for centuries. I ask them what's new and they say not much--same old stuff. It would be nice if it rained; this drought is a bother.

I know it is too simple a question, but I cannot help but ask myself: has nothing changed.

Notes

Over the past seventeen years I have lived a total of thirty months in Romania, most of this time in the northern Transylvanian region of Maramures. During this period I have conducted ethnographic fieldwork supported by three Fulbright-Hays and two International Research and Exchanges Board fellowships. I am currently Associate Professor of Anthropology and former chairperson of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Linfield College.