

DRINKING AND NOSTALGIA: SOCIAL IMAGINATION IN POSTSOCIALIST ROMANIA

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"And like this they drank... they drank because life was like this [difficult]. And they drank because the stress was high and society made them drink. And it was harmony..."

G.F.¹³⁶

"I mean they... the world twisted, the world turned piggish."

G.B.¹³⁷

This paper stems from my previous work on social drinking and nostalgia in postsocialist Romania. My aim is to understand the way experiences and practices constitutive of individual and collective forms of self-understanding in socialism are retrospectively valued at present, as well as to account for social drinking as a particular object of nostalgia. In this sense, I try to understand the way the discourse about the past is constitutive of the present condition of those articulating it.

At an analytical level, I understand *liminal nostalgia* as being a constitutive form of social imagination, that is, being a more or less collective phenomenon based on a shared register of symbols and rhetorical tactics, employed by strategizing social actors and productive of novel senses of social identity. At the same time, I treat *liminal nostalgia* as a particular form of social imagination through which meaning is created, practices are resignified and positions are renegotiated during periods of epochal change. In this sense, I try to conceptualize and typify nostalgia in postsocialist rural Romania, its connection with the social context in which it appears, as well as the temporal orientation it mediates. I hold that nostalgia, as a particular form of discourse on the past, is indicative of the more intimate connections between imagination and power relations in which social agents are enmeshed. At the same time, I argue that a focus on drinking and nostalgia in rural Romania is illustrative of the way the state is discursively reconfigured at the local level during the postsocialist period.

A burgeoning literature, too extensive to be reviewed here,¹³⁸ elaborates on memory and nostalgia after the collapse of socialism, during the postcolonial period, with policies of intensive modernization in diverse parts of the world, and even with the multifaceted process of Europeanization. I relate critically and selectively to the abovementioned literature, arguing that it is only

partially useful in interpreting the phenomenology of nostalgia in contemporary Eastern Europe. Thus, while I draw on Michael Herzfeld's (1997) and Jon P Mitchell's (2002) understanding of structural nostalgia as a powerful rhetorical device, as an idealized representation of the past being strategically deployed in the present by various social actors engaged in complex games of power, I also emphasize the primordial role of "modern"¹³⁹ apprehensions of time and historicity in the generation of what I call *liminal nostalgia*. In that sense, I was influenced by approaches to nostalgia emphasizing "modern" understandings of temporality and historicity, as well as those taking nostalgia as a form of social imagination, the play with lateral possibilities and the longing "for what might have been," all providing means of accommodating various teleologies of social change (Boym 2001; Appadurai 1996; Fritzsche 2002).

I use the concept of *liminal nostalgia* in order to describe a particular positioning in periods of disruptive social change by which social actors negotiate their place in changing fields of power, the novel temporal horizons that often undermine previous senses of purposefulness, as well as novel forms of social experience. By *liminal* I indicate that postsocialist nostalgia is associated with an acute sense of change in contemporary Romania. I draw here on Nancy Ries' flexible appropriation of the theory of the ritual process from Victor Turner (1995) and its use to interpret *perestroika* as a macro ritual involving the entire Soviet Society (Ries 1997:161-188). Although my analogy with Ries' interpretation is a limited one,¹⁴⁰ I find particularly insightful her use of the concept of *liminality* for describing a period of radical social change when the anthropologist can witness the proliferation of narratives about the past and moral discourses, the enforcement of cultural dichotomies and stereotypes, the rediscovery of religious identities and even ethnic nationalism, the promotion of archaic gender identities and patriarchal values, as well as the fetishization of authority and mystical leaders (Ries 1997:161-188).

At the same time, I do not share Ries' pessimism regarding the inhibition of rational discourse and action by the proliferation of moral discourses. I rather consider that the moral evaluation of the present through the lens of an idealized

representation of the past can be a very practical form of action, as Michael Herzfeld (1997) has brilliantly showed. Along the same lines, in contemporary Romania, *liminal nostalgia* can be understood simultaneously as a symbolic correspondent of radical political and economic transformations, as a narrative recuperation of past experiences and practices, and as a form of positioning in present circumstances. Such an understanding makes possible the interpretation of the paradoxical situation produced by the postsocialist social changes: the combination of a positive orientation toward the future expressed as a relative commitment to the Westernizing reforms coupled with nostalgia for the imagined security and the ethos of reciprocity characteristic of the socialist past.

The Informalization of Alcohol in Postsocialism

Alcohol has been an important object of state regulation for modern Romania. During socialism, alcohol production, distribution and consumption were subject to a large number of laws, decrees and regulations; the overall approach to alcohol was subsumed under state policies aimed at creating a *communist new man*. Local agents reacted in various ways to the policies regarding alcohol - complying, interpreting, appropriating or subverting them, as well as taking advantage of the ambivalent position of state agents and bureaucrats. In postsocialist Romania, the majority of socialist laws were abrogated while new ones were adopted, fundamentally transforming the political economy of alcohol. The state presents itself as the protector of free markets endorsing most of the European Union legislation with regards to alcohol. At the same time, the selective enforcement of state regulations in the field of alcohol is a constant source of corruption and private arrangements evading the state.

Postsocialist reforms undertaken during the 1990s have completely changed the conditions for the circulation of alcohol. Restrictive socialist regulations regarding the consumption of alcohol in public places, at work, or imposing time schedules for the commercialization of alcohol were dismantled and the newly adopted ones are not effectively enforced. As part of the measures aimed at transforming the command economy into a functioning market economy, laws were promoted that allowed for the privatization of state owned facilities for the production and distribution of alcohol, and the establishment of new private enterprises. Adapting or simply endorsing most of the European Union (EU) Directives regarding fiscal policies and commercial laws or the regulations regarding alcohol, successive Romanian governments introduced and gradually increased the Euro denominated excise taxes for alcohol and alcoholic

beverages.¹⁴¹ Measures aimed at preventing tax evasion and for increasing transparency and accountability in the process of alcohol tax collection involve special techniques for the marking of alcohol based products, specific procedures for the authorization of production installations, detailed conditions and documents for the delivery of alcohol, or the setting up of special control teams formed of state representatives. More recently, state laws address the claiming of intellectual property rights and commercial rights for the production and commercialization of “traditional” beverages (the popular *palincă*, *țuică*, or *rachiu*) or newly created ones (such as *horincă* or *romagnac*) inside the EU, as well as the registration and compliance with EU quality standards of Romanian vineyards.

The ambiguities in some of the newly adopted laws and regulations, the corruption of various state representatives and bureaucrats as well as the high level of excise and value added taxes for a cash poor market are just some of the conditions facilitating the illegal production and distribution of alcoholic beverages. Tax evasion involves a set of practices shared by most actors in the field, from the large scale, highly visible, state of the art producers of alcohol to the low profile, frequently unregistered “bathtub”¹⁴² producers of alcoholic beverages. However, the allocation of responsibility is not even. The central government, and associations of the most important producers and distributors of alcohol (*GARANT*, *Vinrom*), blame small scale producers and local level state officials for the alarming dimensions of the illegal production of alcohol and the tax evasion it generates, as well as for the social effects of increased alcohol consumption in impoverished urban neighborhoods, provincial towns and villages.

The association between political parties and alcohol moguls became more transparent before the general elections of 2000. The temporary introduction of a state monopoly over the distribution of alcohol, presented by the central government as essential for controlling illegal production and tax evasion, proved highly advantageous for the most significant producers who would have had a secure market for a certain production under the arrangement. The monopoly was finally dismantled when the EU determined that this impeded free competition. However, the episode gave the media the opportunity to analyze the corruption phenomena associated with the alcohol market and to present numerous cases of political candidates supported with money from the alcohol industry during the elections.¹⁴³

The web of informal relationships becomes even clearer if, along with Josiah McHeyman and Alan Smart, “we view illegal practices not as a

category of abnormal behavior, and especially not as the subculture of a stigmatized group, but rather as an option, a resource, that diverse groups use at varied times" (1999:13). Although involved in acts of corruption, government representatives discursively allocated illegality to smaller and anonymous alcohol distilleries and local level bureaucrats who take advantage of the general state of poverty of the consumers. In so doing, they reify the state as the agent meant to fight corruption. The large producers and distributors associated themselves with such a discourse as they would be the only ones benefiting from the state monopoly. The claims of legality, transparency, competition and the use of audit-prone technologies (secure bottling and standardized distilling installations) can be taken as correlative, yet equally powerful discursive strategies.

Drinking and Nostalgia after Socialism

The people that seem most affected by longing and nostalgic recollections of past sociality are those that took part in the socialist policies of industrialization, urbanization, or mass commuting between villages and towns in provincial Romania. In their memories, social drinking is almost always associated with stories about their experiences at work, their commuting to the nearest town, their exchanges involving goods and services that were scarce in the socialist command economy, as well as their struggles to make ends meet for their families. Mundane experiences as the ones mentioned above were always the most important in setting social boundaries between "alcoholics"¹⁴⁴ and "worthy" men, between villagers and town people, between those that belonged and those that did not belong to the community.

For the consumers of cheap spirits and beers in Southern Romania I interviewed, the longing for past relationships and reciprocity constructed around social drinking is based on vivid memories that convey a strong sense of the materiality of those practices. My interlocutors mentioned the smell and taste of particular drinks, the shapes of bottles, and the smell of the air in the village tavern. Although various categories of individuals (including women and children) adopted similar consumption patterns during the 1990s, the most important group still comprises middle-aged to old men, former workers in state factories or on collective farms during socialism. The majority of these men are unemployed or retired as a result of the radical economic and social changes experienced in the last decades. Living on small retirement or unemployment benefits and looking after small plots of land received after de-collectivization, they now "stay all the time in the

tavern and pray to God to provide rain," as one of the most diligent young villagers ironically put it.

For most of them, the "better" times in the past are not only a symbolic, but, in many respects, a powerfully real referent. Their frequent recourse to idealized memories is not only an empty form of social poetics to be "filled" in and made meaningful contextually. Most of them had jobs, secure revenues and in more or less foreseeable life trajectories. The shortages of the command economy could be dealt with by taking part in a sphere of consumption and exchange, a male dominated realm, one in which the consumption of alcohol lubricated the exchange of services and goods - many of them stolen or "taken" from state enterprises. Faced with the hardships of the present, many of these men remember a time when they had friends they could rely upon for getting what they needed, and when the reciprocal nature of such relationships was reproduced through the common consumption of alcohol. It was also a time when, as distinct, women and children knew their place, almost never drank and entered the tavern only in exceptional situations.

The particular relationship with the remembered past, the proximity and lived character of the experiences recollected by people I discussed with, make concepts like Herzfeld's "structural nostalgia," (1997:109-138) or Mitchell's somewhat less inspired "strategic nostalgia," (2002:121-146) as well as Appadurai's understanding of *ersatz nostalgia* (1996:75-79) ultimately unfit for the analysis of the narratives of my informants. Examples like the ones above necessitate the creation of novel concepts to explore the phenomenology of contemporary nostalgia in Eastern Europe. I suggest that the concept of *liminal nostalgia* introduced above can capture the dialectics between the remembrance of real social experiences and their idealization by selective recollection and deployment in nostalgic discourses.

At the same time, it is by extrapolating the real referent to the totality of social relations that the people I describe reproduce metonymically a set of lived experiences that reify the structure of a perfect world, one dominated by reciprocity, however imperfect it was in reality. The concept of *liminal nostalgia* is centered on the idea that what drives the dialectic play between lived experience and social imagination is the longing for what could have been better, the sense of irretrievable loss that is the counterpart of the teleology of social change and economic improvement consecrated by the various ideologies of transition. At the same time, the mandatory reading of transition as progress or improvement, consecrated by state discourses, has a counterbalance in the loss of status and resources that

was experienced by the group of people I worked with most closely.

The social changes of the 1990s have consecrated new situations and patterns of alcohol consumption. During the first years after the fall of socialism, Caracal (a small provincial town in which I conducted fieldwork) and the neighboring villages were flooded by highly potent home made beverages brought from the hilly regions of Vâlcea and Argeş. The number of *cazane* (small stills for the distillation of alcohol) and the home production of *țuică* (plum brandy) have plummeted as well. After a few years, very cheap illegally produced spirits became the most frequently consumed beverages in the cash poor local economies such as that of Olt County. This was supported by the spread of informal credit relations between consumers and the owners of shops and bars. Ironically, some of the most important forms of alcohol circulation in socialism, home brewing and moonshine production, which were intimately connected to the second economy at the time, were undermined and replaced by the practices of the newly emergent informal economy in the postsocialist period.¹⁴⁵

New categories of individuals, including women and children, who were not frequent drinkers during socialism (or not as visible as the men), became more prominent consumers of alcoholic beverages. While the former instances of drink (celebration of holidays or rites of passage, mourning ceremonies, commensality, conspicuous consumption, treating one for a service or even paying in drinks) have mostly survived the social changes after 1989, some have been adapted and other new ones have appeared. New religious holidays have been invented and old ones revived; at the same time, alcohol has become an essential ingredient in what can be seen as a "new work contract" between owners of land and daily workers. This latter practice is symbolically connected with the interwar system of reciprocal work on the land in which the drink of *țuică* was an essential ingredient (Kideckel 1985), as well as with the exchange of goods and services on alcohol as part of the second economy during socialism. After de-collectivization alcohol, consumed during work, became part of a daily payment in an asymmetrical and more impersonal relationship than those mediated in the past.¹⁴⁶ These phenomena are repeatedly lamented and constitute motives for negative moral evaluations of the social situation at present (as well as oblique protests towards their contemporaneous condition) by the people with whom I worked most closely.

The bars that opened during the postsocialist period continue to be, "generous arenas for social interaction" (Herzfeld 1985:51), like the old state

owned *MAT* that they have replaced. The criteria for the constitution of identity and local power relations, however, have changed from one period to another. The former idiom of local respectability during socialism, based on hard work and formal positions of power, continues to play a role, albeit diminished. At the same time, new sources of symbolic capital and new criteria of manhood shape the construction and reproduction of temporary power hierarchies in the bar: real or imaginary performances in acts of theft, sporting events, fights, or demonstrations of the capacity to drink as much as possible.

The picture is more complex at present due to the prominence of groups of young men, many of them unemployed and consequently spending large periods of time in the bar. Constructive drinking (Douglas 1987) is connected to practices of conspicuous consumption and competitive drinking, and in "rituals" where alcohol consumption and story telling¹⁴⁷ are essential ingredients in the negotiation of identity. Drink can help one cross the boundaries of community and group and help in the creation of a "'we" established or assumed" (Pesmen 2001:181). Important aspects, such as ending up on the upper or the lower side of the hierarchy, depends on the game of association in the bar.

At the same time, men aged fifty or older, among whom the former worker commuters are a prominent group, no longer seem to be able or willing to keep up with the "rigors" of a more playful and fluid reality. While older people have lost their main source of prestige and income, a job in town or at the local tractor farm, younger people are not willing to stick to old drinking patterns or social hierarchies and this makes youth the target towards which the frustration of most of the old people is channeled. During the socialist period, social drinking was the privilege of mature men and was constituted as sphere of relative autonomy from the family and the rest of the village. Drinking with their fellow villagers or workers was subject to a special ethos; one had to know *how*, *when*, *with whom* and especially *for what* he was drinking. Moderate drinking was seen as "normal," the sign of a healthy man, and local narratives always associated it with hard work and respectability. As long as one worked (as was the case for most of the men during the socialist period), was able to take care of one's family and did not make a fool of oneself, one was expected to drink as much as one could.

Without exception, each of the former worker commuters I interviewed decried the "foolishness" and the "degradation" of youth. They told me that during the old times, only "the old men gathered at *MAT*,¹⁴⁸ unlike now, when every imp (*tot boracu*) enters the tavern." Then, they used to chat

about "important things, about agriculture," while the "youth today only barely if ever (*mai tango, așa*)" addresses such issues. According to my interlocutors, youth have literally "crowded (*au năvălit*) the bars" after 1989, taking advantage of the fact that "they have found free tables and chairs," left by the elders. They are impolite, they do not offer their chairs to their elders, "they rob your pockets" sometimes and, even "enter the bar embracing their girlfriends which they brought in", something that one never did before. The older men I spoke to believed that most young men must steal if they can afford to drink daily, since few of them are employed. As one informant put it, as "people went foolish (*s-a prostîi lumea*)," the youth had "democracy entering their heads," and acted like "people with no head at all." Consequently, most of the older people and former commuters prefer to visit the bar during the day, or during times when youth are not usually present; alternatively, they take their glasses and bottles of brandy to drink outside. To the former gender segregation of the tavern world (which was mostly spatial), a new one is added, based on age (which is mostly temporal).

Other people, including many old former commuters, prefer to buy cheap brandy, vodka or liqueur and drink at home. Although encouraged by their families to stay away from the watchful eyes of their fellow villagers, this practice is not necessarily helping them; drinking outside of the group and community and escaping their social control can easily turn one into an alcoholic. This phenomenon was confirmed to me by several barkeepers, who are knowledgeable of the consumption patterns of their customers and neighbors; they presented their practices in a different light than the elders did themselves.

The Discursive Reconfiguration of the State

Exploring the ambiguities related to alcohol policies and their enforcement, it is possible to illustrate the duality of the actions of most of the actors involved in the political economy of alcohol in contemporary Romania. On the one hand, state officials, although promoting the rhetoric of accountability and free market initiative, get involved in acts of corruption and activities of the informal economy. Excuses for not being always able to enforce the standards they set are always linked to general poverty and the disruptions created by the economic transition. On the other hand, although aware of the state devised discourse of corruption and accountability, consumers of cheap beverages produced in the informal sector subvert it through their practices of consumption and exchange. At the same time, I suggest that by reproducing the

discourse on corruption, as well as a critical evaluation of the present mediated by an idealized representation of the past, consumers enmeshed in the informal economy of alcohol naturalize the state making it a constant presence and referent in their lives.

Overall, the inhabitants of Caracal and the neighboring villages hold that alcohol consumption has increased during the postsocialist period and drinking has become more visible. While this claim is hard to assess due to the lack of reliable data, especially for the socialist period, those who are familiar with Southern Romania will likely agree with it. Media lamentations, echoed to a certain extent by governmental organizations and the main organizations of alcohol producers and distributors, blame increased consumption of poor quality high-grade spirits for numerous health and social ills; they consecrate poverty as the ultimate (and most important) cause for this type of consumption.

While poverty, unemployment, and the lack of a sense of purpose brought about by the social and political changes provide favorable conditions for excessive drinking, and although the high level of taxes in a cash poor local economy make illegally produced alcohol an appealing option, the whole picture is more complex. It can be said that the most important actors active in the field of alcohol production, distribution and consumption (from large scale to "bathtub distillers," wholesale distributors, owners of shops and bars retailing alcohol, consumers and the state) are connected at a symbolic level, sharing a sphere of "cultural intimacy" (Herzfeld 1997: 3) and the nostalgic positioning towards an idealized past. For the majority of the consumers among whom I conducted research, the object of nostalgia takes the form of a past sphere of consumption and exchange, a reciprocal, more or less autonomous and self-regulating sphere associated with the second economy during socialism, in which the exchange of goods and services outside the official channels and social drinking were the main ingredients.

Exploring the repertoire constitutive of *liminal nostalgia* shared by those involved in the social biography of alcohol (Kopytoff 1992), one can interpret their paradoxical, ambivalent positions. On the one hand, the second economy is appreciated for having made the socialist command economy more flexible and for having been an arena for the display of sociality and reciprocity, a sphere of relative autonomy from the state where a weak sense of entrepreneurship could manifest during the socialist past. On the other hand, the contemporary informal economy is usually condemned for having a corrosive effect on attempts to create an ideally

lawful, transparent and self-regulating market economy, the state to be attained at the “end” of transition. This position, when assumed by higher authorities and state representatives, can be considered conceptually ambiguous, especially by somebody aware that many of the current informal practices have both a symbolic and a pragmatic referent in the socialist second economy. Furthermore, although many central government officials are involved in acts of corruption related to the alcohol industry, responsibility is seen to lie with small (sometimes anonymous) producers and local bureaucrats, and ultimately attributed to poverty and the disruptive effects of reforms. Such discursive practices have the effect of reifying the state as the agent meant to restore order and to fight poverty, and consecrate a fictitious divide between state and society. The most important producers and distributors of alcoholic beverages subscribe to a similar vision, since playing the card of legality and accountability seems to be the profitable option.

At the same time, the owners of shops and bars in provincial areas find themselves more or less “voluntary prisoners” of a system of relationships in which they sell alcohol on credit, sometimes by the glass, to some of their fellow villagers or inhabitants of the same urban neighborhoods. Granted initially as a personal favor to a narrow circle of friends, informal credit became widespread and a *sine qua non* condition for commercial survival. As one bar keeper confessed, “they [the customers] already think it is normal to give them [on debt], that it is their right to give them, and if you tell them [that you won't give them] they get angry, they feel offended”. Such retailers are aware of legal practices, but feel that regulations are unfairly strict and taxes are unrealistically high in a cash-poor local economy. At the same time, they are aware that high-level politicians do not conform to the immaculate self-image they put forward. The most talkative of them can describe in detail the workings of a system of relationships in which they sell alcohol on credit to their customers, are granted informal credit (in the absence of accessible bank loans) by the alcohol wholesale distributors, who are in turn credited by the alcohol producers. At the other end of the “chain of weaknesses” are the large-scale distilleries and breweries that rely on numerous tax exemptions and fiscal credit granted by corrupt politicians. Illegal and unreported products play an important role as some of the actors in the chain described above conduct more than half of their trade off the books.¹⁴⁹

A nostalgic positioning as the one I explore in this paper plays an important part in shaping present consumption and makes more easily understandable the informalization of the political

economy of alcohol. Continuing to drink as one did during old times, when everybody had a job and a substantial income, and when social drinking was a privileged arena for masculinity is a way of dealing with the hardship of the present condition. Continuing to drink despite one's poor economic circumstances is a way of showing that “you still have a face for the public,” as one bar keeper noted. From a different perspective, providing drinks on credit to their fellow villagers is conceived as a sort of moral obligation for the newly established owners of shops and bars (*patroni*), since commerce is still stigmatized and considered as a sort of non-work.¹⁵⁰ Since villagers talk about buying on credit as a sort of favor extended to the new owner of bars, that allows them to enrich themselves, informal credit is a way in which the new *patroni* can reciprocate the initial favor.

Finally, the focus on *liminal nostalgia* allows one to understand how the state is experienced and discursively reconfigured at the local level.¹⁵¹ The frustration of living in an uncertain world as opposed to the past that was organized around a certain morality is evoked with pathos by one of my interviewees: “Now the situation is more knotty. Before you were sure you had a job. As I've told you: they [state representatives] took you of the streets and gave you a job. Now you do nothing wrong, no mistake at all, no violation, but they fire you.” Such laments provide consistent alibis for excessive drinking and signify that current drinking practices are attempts to temporarily reconstitute a sphere that offered security, reliability and meaning during socialism. Furthermore, people comment on their daily encounters with corrupted clerks and bureaucrats and are aware that neither they nor high level politicians are immaculate. Even more than that, people lament that today's bureaucrats are rapacious and interested in personal gain, as opposed to the ones in socialism whose unlawful conduct allowed things to be favorably arranged for everybody.

The discourse on corruption and public responsibility, initiated by politicians and the international organizations, is brought to and sustained at local level by the media. People are aware that alcohol gotten on credit is of dubious origin, as its price¹⁵² barely covers the production and distribution costs and cannot cover the excise and other taxes. Contrasted with the ideologies of transparency and accountability, the staffing of the state with rapacious bureaucrats creates room for moral ambivalence and makes “too much obedience to the law [...] silly,” as Herzfeld put it (1997:5). Maybe more important than the justifications of petty illegalities at the local level is the way criticism addressed to politicians and bureaucrats using the

idiom of corruption and accountability consecrates the standard of an impersonal and transparent state apparatus. In the very act of accusing state representatives of misconduct and corruption, the state is reified and naturalized as a permanent fixture in people's lives, as the agent meant to combat corruption, to fight poverty, to conduct reforms and, ultimately, to reconstitute the coordinates of a past order in reference to which the present can be perceived as a fall.

Concluding Remarks

This paper explores the connections between social drinking and nostalgia in postsocialist Southern Romania. I treat nostalgia as a form of social imagination through which meaning is created, practices are refashioned and power positions are renegotiated during periods of epochal social change. I also hold that in the case of contemporary Romania, liminal nostalgia can be understood simultaneously as a symbolic correspondent of radical political and economic transformations and as a form of positioning in present circumstances and towards renewed expectations. The concept I prefer to use is indebted to previous approaches to nostalgia mentioned in the first part of the paper: it recognizes the longing for an idealized (past) sphere of sociality, but it underlines the existence of a real referent for nostalgic recollections, one that may be idealized in time, and stresses the primordial role of "modern" apprehensions of time and historicity in its constitution.

Liminal nostalgia appears in a period of radical transformation that may be viewed as a period of *liminality* (Ries 1997), of intense renegotiation of the bases for identification and social stratification, a period that is "no longer here, but not yet there." It is an attempt to reconstitute a sense of "moral" direction, to recreate a sense of purposefulness and to narrate disruptive social changes for those whose mundane experiences contradict the teleologies of progress and improvement consecrated by the various ideologies of transition. I consider that postsocialist nostalgia is a form of resistance to the Manichean vision of the world essential for the teleology of transition, one that opposes what was *old/communist/bad* to what is supposed to be *new/capitalist/good*, expressed by people for whom the social changes of the 1990s meant the loss of material and symbolic security.

Finally, although by using the term liminal I indicate that postsocialist nostalgia in Southern Romania is associated with an acute sense of change, I do not want to create the expectation that it is necessarily a short term, transient phenomenon. As

the generalized sense of transition and liminality becomes intertwined with the process of Europeanization, nostalgic discourse could be expected to adapt, to transform and ultimately to find a more resilient place in the rhetorical repertoire of those adversely affected by the integration into the European Union – peasants, farmers, or retired people. Similar phenomena associated with the integration into the European Union of other "peripheral" countries such as Greece and Malta, excellently analyzed by Michael Herzfeld and Jon Mitchell, substantiate such an informed guess and call for renewed approaches to nostalgia as both object of study and powerful lens into processes of profound social change.

Notes

¹³⁶ The quote come from an interview I took in 2003 to GF, former chief of personnel at the train carts factory in Caracal, the town in which I conduct research, and was meant to describe social drinking during the socialist period.

¹³⁷ In Romanian: "Adică ăștia... s-a răsucit lumea, s-a porcit lumea." Commenting the decision of postsocialist local authorities to approve the construction of a bar next to the monument erected in the memory of local heroes fallen in World War One in the center of the one of the villages in which I conducted research, one of the old villagers concludes that the world has turned upside down and is empty of moral values. I took the interview during one of my brief returns to the village in the summer of 2004.

¹³⁸ Svetlana Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia* (2002) is an excellent review of the history of nostalgia as an object for the medical, literary or academic discourses, as well as a brilliant illustration of the ways nostalgia can be refashioned and used for the interpretation of postsocialist phenomena. Other authors on whose writings I do not elaborate here but were important sources of inspiration for my work are Daphne Berdahl (1999), Antoinette Burton (2001), and Stathis Gourgouris (1996).

¹³⁹ I am aware of the danger of reifying categories such as "modern" versus "non-modern" and my argument is not that the inhabitants of contemporary Southern Romania are modern as opposed to what they might have been several decades ago. I find it useful to employ the category of the "modern" for conceptual clarity, as well as for the accuracy of citations, when discussing a conception of linear time and progress(ion) towards the future. In the case of my informants, I do not attempt to place them in or out of modernity, but I argue that the modernization policies of the socialist state consecrated such a "modern" apprehension of time and an expectation of

progress and improvement in the area in which I study.

¹⁴⁰ I do not describe the process of profound social change associated with the exit from form socialism, or what is called “transition,” as a ritual in as much as the future is open, the finality of this transformation is unclear, the results for various social groups even more so, and there is no other similar historical process to which we can compare it analytically. Furthermore, while Nancy Ries’ book describes historical processes happening in the recent past, my account describes more contemporaneous events and discourses whose interpretation can be at most tentative for the time being.

¹⁴¹ Promoting a uniform legislation and system of taxation in the fields of alcohol and alcoholic beverages for the member states or the acceding countries is an important objective for the European Union. Considered an important component of the social and cultural identity of any country, the taxation of alcohol is a good indicator of the degree of integration for the EU as a supra-national organization, as well as for each member state in the common institutional structure of the EU (Lubkin 1996).

¹⁴² The low quality – low price spirits are usually called “bathtub produced spirits” (*băuturi făcute-n cadă*) to denote the poor hygienic conditions under which they are made. The same category of beverages is called “genocide” (*genocid*) in an attempt to reveal their effect on the health of their consumers.

¹⁴³ The Romanian edition of the economic weekly *Capital* has published a number of articles analyzing the relationship between the most important Romanian producers of alcohol and alcoholic beverages and the various political parties. See Adrian Halpert, Manuela Preoteasa, Carol Popa, Vasile Damian, “Money from Distilleries Drain into the Electoral Campaign [Banii din distilerii se scurg spre campania electorala],” *Capital*, No. 47, November 23, 2000, “Alcohol Magnates Support 100 Candidates [Magnatii alcoolului sustin 100 de candidati],” *Capital*, No. 47, November 23, 2000, or Laurentiu Gheorghe, “6.000 Billion Lei a Year for Alcohol Mafia [6.000 miliarde lei pe an pentru mafia alcoolului],” *Capital*, No. 40, October 4, 2001 for a good analysis of the phenomenon. Other daily newspapers or weeklies such as *Adevărul*, *Evenimentul Zilei*, *România liberă* or *Academia Cațavencu* also documented the unlawful relationships.

¹⁴⁴ Here “alcoholic” refers to a social category bearing a powerful stigma among the people I interviewed and is only remotely connected to the medicalized category. In this context, it is rather a

moral category condemning the lack of control and “manliness” of the person that was seen inebriate, unbalanced or prone to wandering in the streets at improper hours.

¹⁴⁵ I rely here on the comprehensive review of the literature on the second economy realized by Steven L. Sampson (1987: 120-136). I understand the concept of *second economy* as referring to a set of activities that were “unplanned, unregulated, unreported, privatized, and/or illegal” (Sampson: 124) in socialism. For a similar analysis of informal economy I rely on the work of Alejandro Portes (1994: 426-448). I subscribe to a definition of the informal sector of the economy as encompassing “those actions of economic agents that fail to adhere to the established institutional rules or are denied their protection” produced by Edgar L Feige and reproduced by Portes. The underground economy is seen as a set of activities subsuming those of the illegal, unreported, unrecorded and informal economy (Portes: 428).

¹⁴⁶ The relations between landowners and daily laborers are not completely impersonal being usually based on mutual knowledge and a certain amount of trust. However, they are “thinner” than the reciprocal relations before collectivization, which usually duplicated stronger relations of kinship, friendship or patronage.

¹⁴⁷ Assuming the structural analogy between social events (action) and narrative structure, Herzfeld described how meaning can be “conveyed through actual performance” (xiv) in the shepherds community of the Cretan villages. At the same time, narration replace immediate action in conveying meaning during the interactions in the coffeehouse, when “the story does what otherwise the actions have to do for themselves (Herzfeld 1985: 141).

¹⁴⁸ The name of every village tavern during the socialist period.

¹⁴⁹ For a more detailed historical analysis of the practices of selling alcohol on debt in the region I describe here see Daniel Lățeș, *The Parody of Abstractedness*, 2002.

¹⁵⁰ When discussing commerce and the new entrepreneurs in the village, many of the consumers rhetorically ask “What does this mean ... not doing any work?”

¹⁵¹ Akhil Gupta provides an exemplary analysis of the way the state is produced at the local level by the discourse of corruption and accountability in contemporary India (Gupta: 375-402).

¹⁵² A bottle of spirits may be bought for approx. USD 0.30.

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