

SOME NOTES ON SOCIALISM AND POSTSOCIALISM:

VOICES FROM WITHIN

Theodora Eliza Văcărescu

University of Bucharest, Bucharest

© 2004 Theodora Eliza Văcărescu All Rights Reserved

The copyright for individual articles in both the print and online version of the Anthropology of East Europe Review are retained by the individual authors. They reserve all rights other than those stated here. Please contact the managing editor for details on contacting these authors. Permission is granted for reproducing these articles for scholarly and classroom use as long as only the cost of reproduction is charged to the students. Commercial reproduction of these articles requires the permission of the authors.

[L]ike postcolonial studies, the orientation I am advocating would *give voice to the 'natives'* [my emphasis] as analysts of their own condition. Although it is not clear who would be the Franz Fanon of this corpus, his or her forerunners surely include the East European dissidents and other scholars - people like Rudolph Bahro, Pavel Câmpeanu, György Konrád, János Kornai, István Rév, Jadwiga Staniszkis and Iván Szelényi - whose writing spurred us to seek an understanding of socialism different from that offered by Cold War categories, even if we now perceive deficiencies in their view of it. Yet for both postsocialist and postcolonial studies, as anthropologists *we ought to* [my emphasis] insist on broadening the category of 'native' to incorporate the understandings of people who have less privileged positions in their societies than do those I have just mentioned. (Katherine Verdery, 2002: 20)

We are living in Romania, and this is taking almost all of our time.

(contemporary Romanian saying)

Introduction

Although I had a strong feeling of orientalization when I first came across the passage I placed as an opening to my paper, I later realized that, beside the many things with which I would deeply disagree, there is one important thing Verdery points out very appropriately: the idea that the voices of the people (those not speaking from the 'privileged positions' that Verdery mentions)

who have been living and still live in postsocialism should be more often heard. My position is quite different from that of Verdery's. I am a 'native,' in this respect, and my 'situatedness,' although not assigning me an objective voice, seems to follow the orientation that Verdery advocates.

There has been a lot written on post-socialism in Central and Eastern Europe. This topic has been dealt with inside-out; one may almost have the feeling that there is nothing more to talk about. Both 'Western' and 'Eastern'¹ scholars have studied post-socialism from many vantage points: economically, socially, politically, culturally, etc. Monographs and ethnographies of the Central and Eastern European countries have been undertaken. Debates over the 'right,' or objective 'voice' in these studies and experiences emerged. As a 'native' (whatever this might amount to), I believe that the experience of post-socialism should also be considered from the point of view of the people who have lived these almost fifteen years in post-socialism. What is their lived experience? What is their vocabulary vis-à-vis post-socialism, or whatever they call this? How do they relate to

¹ Since there are significant problems when categorizing the world into the *West* and the *East*, for these are not mere geographical areas, but much more complex cultural, historical, religious, and even economic constructs, I will, for this paper, use inverted commas for both terms and their derivatives.

this period? How do they understand post-socialism?

I recently had the chance to meet and have lengthy discussions with several post-socialist and post-colonialist researchers from the 'East' and from the 'West.' And during one such discussion, I realized that what lacked was a 'view from within.' What does 1989 mean for large mass of the Romanian people?² What is their discourse about the events of December 1989? How do they relate to these events? Do they identify with the 'Revolution' – capital R? How do they perceive and re-present their lives during the communist regime (both represent and re-present, as a way of retelling and reinterpreting the communist period through the lens of the decade that elapsed since the fall of communism)? How do they understand and relate to the official discourse of the 'transition' and democracy? How do they see their lives and the lives of their children in the newly established democracy?

For my study I used oral history interviews³ with elderly people living in Romania. Most of the interviewees were born and raised before World War II, witnessed the changes brought about by the end of the war and the installation of communism, lived most of their lives in the communist period, witnessed yet other changes in December 1989, from communism to an alleged democracy, and are living now in the so-called 'transition.'⁴ The

interviewees come from different social strata, different educational backgrounds, and different regions of Romania; they are both women and men and had a wide range of occupations. Thus, their views on communism and post-communism are different, but there can be found several themes common to most of them.

Chronologically, the three most important themes that emerged from the interviews are: the communist period filtered through the experience of the fifteen years of 'transition,' the 'Revolution' – capital R and the way 'ordinary' people perceive and relate to it, and the post-communist period labeled 'transition' by virtually all the interviewees.⁵

The communist period revisited

Based on the interviews, and not claiming universality, Romanians' view and relationship with the communist period are mixed and not clearly defined. On the one hand, following the surface level of the official discourse and especially the anti-communist discourse of the early 1990's, they reject and demonize communism. On the other hand, in the interviews, they gradually come back to it, at a more personal level and they start making comparisons with their own lives 'before' and 'after' and their rejection starts losing its initial vehemence.

The theme that emerged very strongly from the interviews is one of the disaster brought about by the installation of communism. This theme appears in virtually all the interviews and is related to the way in which communism (often described as a Russian invasion and emphasized as such) destroyed people's lives by confiscating properties and land, eliminating undesirable individuals from

² I do not mean to essentialize, there is no such thing as "Romanians," but basing my study on oral-history, I might hint at some realities characteristic to the Romanian people.

³ The interviews had been undertaken by the students of the University of Bucharest in the period 2001-2003 for a course in structures of communication. The course is held by Professor Zoltán Rostás, Ph.D., and aims at building an oral history archive on several topics.

⁴ I agree with Katherine Verdery (1996), Michal Buchowski (2001 and 2004) and others with respect to the excessive use of the term 'transition' for describing the passing of the post-socialism countries to something that no one can actually say what it is, since the conviction that the anticipated capitalism, market economy, and democracy may

prove to be mistaken. I therefore consider 'transformation' a better choice.

⁵ I use 'communism'/'communist' and 'post-communism'/'post-communist' because the other term, 'socialism'/'socialist,' and 'post-socialism'/'post-socialist' commonly used in the 'Western' discourse is virtually absent from the Romanian public and private discourses. The interviewees never used the latter, but they heavily used the former.

educational institutions (high-schools, universities etc.), and from public offices, and the lack or shortage of basic products and services. What is very interesting with respect to the most important discontents of the interviewees is the fact that censorship and the prohibition of free speech do not appear as salient dissatisfactions. This can, of course, be explained by the fact that people under communism developed strategies of survival, i.e. learnt how to comply with the system and only those issues that constituted a direct threat to their lives were considered salient and thus were remembered.

Collectivization, as a hugely traumatic experience, is present in all interviews with people who lived at that time in the countryside. The extremely tormenting nature of this act is underlined also by the fact that the interviewees were actually children at that time and collectivization was something that affected more their parents and families and only indirectly themselves. However, their memory of collectivization is very strong and the story of the way communism took their land and other related properties (domestic animals, utensils, etc.) occupies a great part in the economy of the interviews.

The general feeling towards collectivization, shared by virtually all the respondents, is one of anger and helplessness. They could not understand why they and their families had to renounce their land and properties, why they had to suffer and endure terrible hardships in order to keep their properties a little longer, why they were persecuted for protecting their families.

The collectivization was the greatest evil done by the communists. To take away one's life long earnings? To share your possessions with all the lazy and the poor? Why was I guilty that my father worked hard and bought land? Sheer luck that he had died four years before and he hadn't lived to see this! [...] I was crying over his bed and he encouraged me: 'Don't cry, Marin, I am not going to die now. When I die, Stalin will die too!' And Stalin did die the same

night. I was crying for my father's death and I was happy Stalin died [...]. They [the communists] took everything from us in '59. Land, cattle, tools, they took it all. They left us poor. They took our land up to the entrance of the house. Whom to complain to? Who would listen? When I heard that they were coming with the registrations for joining the Collective, I left for the woods. I was in hiding for two months in the woods, until the Militia [the communist Police] caught us and made us sign. They beat us, they threatened they would make us rot in jail if we opposed the Communist Party. (Interview with Ion Antonescu [85 years] in Zoltán Rostás and Sorin Stoica, 2003: 284-285)

When the Germans left, the Russians came and the communist era started and the collectivization started and they [the parents] did not want to enter the collective. And for six or seven years they had to comply with the quotas, with many terrible hardships... They had to pay for the land they owned – grains, money... But they resisted as much as they could, hoping that things would work out and they would keep the property. But finally they had to give up the land and to enter the Collective and there was nothing left of the land. They didn't have a yard anymore, all that was left was the house... but they preferred to do this when they did not have a choice anymore, and because they refused to enter the collective from the very beginning, they were kicked out of the education system. And they spent eight years without a salary, without any means of supporting themselves. Then they gave in, in order to be reintegrated into education. (Interview with Silvia Nedelea [77 years] in Zoltán Rostás and Theodora-Eliza Văcărescu, 2005)

And then, when they [the parents of the interviewee] left, the communists demolished their house and took their land [...]. In '47-'48, after the elections, the communists came to explain and convince the peasants to enter the Collective. They made them pay quotas and if you couldn't pay, the quotas added up and you were automatically forced to enter the collective. If you had a pig you had to pay, and it was the same with everything, with the vineyard, for example. If you had a cow, you had to pay a quota of milk, the same with the pig and if you couldn't pay, because the quotas were very high, you would lose the cow or the pig. (Interview with Victoria Mateuț [72 years] in Rostás and Stoica, 2003: 215-218)

The communist regime considered a wide range of people as 'undesirable individuals.' These were, of course, the former leading class (members of the parties that were in power before communism, public and military officials, Western European and American embassies' personnel, etc.) and the people who opposed the regime (this meant anything from direct opposition to refusing to enter the Collective) and their relatives and families. However, beside these people, many other categories of people who were less visibly disturbing to the regime fell under the stigma 'undesirable and dangerous:' intellectuals, people who owned private businesses, farmers who owned land. These people, besides being dispossessed (land and houses, including animals, furniture, books, etc.), had to suffer from expulsion from schools, universities, and working places (for a more detailed study, see an analysis of 'the second circle of suffering' in Theodora-Eliza Văcărescu, 2003: 7-45).

My husband had many problems because he was not a party member. When they had reorganizations of personnel,⁶ they used to fire him

according to a certain article, but then they would hire him back, according to another article, because my husband was highly appreciated and they needed capable people as well. It was more difficult for me, because once they fired me because of my background [the respondent's parents were schoolteachers – who were considered intellectuals –, thus she did not have the required 'healthy' origin], I did not have the courage to go back for a few months, even years... (Interview with Silvia Nedelea in Rostás and Văcărescu, 2005)

The difficulties of living under communism consisted also in the continuous lack of basic products and services: food, electricity, and heating were scarce and often rationed. However, even if this topic is one of the most widely known facts of life under communism, it was surprising to find that it was not among the first things the interviewees mentioned about life in communism. As it is natural to assume, people developed surviving strategies in this respect as well, they learnt how to live with these shortages and to find other ways of procuring the necessary means for survival (this is referred to in some studies as the 'second' or 'unofficial economy' – Nancy Ries, 1997; Caroline Humphrey, 2002). This does not necessarily mean that they 'collaborated' with the system (in this sense, all the Romanians who survived communism can be said to have collaborated with the system), but only that they managed to trick the system and to obtain what they needed. This fact is also reflected in the discourse; the complex set of relations and means whereby people managed to satisfy their basic needs was very well summed up by only one verb – '*a se descurca*' (approximately 'to manage,' or rather 'to manage to survive'), used very often as an answer to the question 'How are you' instead of the common 'I am fine.' It is still used, but it also acquired a negative connotation, related to the 'not-so-legal' and based on 'relations' grounds, rather than on an open, right, and fair way of succeeding in life.

⁶ In Romanian 'restructurări,' meaning dismissing personnel.

We used to stay in lines for hours for a morsel of food, weighed for every gram, proportionally with the number of people in the family. We used to go back home with only one kilo, or three quarters or even half a kilo of bread [...] I used to calculate how much money per day I could spend, so that it would last the whole week. I used to go to the market with only 10 lei and to buy half a kilo of tomatoes, or a kilo of potatoes or one cabbage. Still, we didn't starve to death! I remember that, in order to have heating over the winter, an uncle from my husband's side once brought us a carriage of wood from somewhere and I used to make the fire weighing the wood, in order to last more. (Interview with Silvia Nedelea in Rostás and Văcărescu, 2005)

The Revolution

The Revolution appears in the interviews as a corner stone, many things are weighed against it, people refer to the events of their private lives in relation to the Revolution, they often say "after the Revolution" even when the things they talk about have nothing to do with the change of the system. However, it is interesting to notice that the correspondent "before the Revolution" is far less used, instead they use "during the time of Ceaușescu" or "during communism." This aspect is actually extremely telling for the entire mythology built around the Revolution, a mythology rooted more in the public and official discourse than in the actual lives and experiences of the Romanian people.

Commonly referred to as 'the Revolution of December 1989' or 'the overthrow of the communist regime,' or, more recently, 'the events of December 1989,' the revolution was experienced in different ways by Romanians. Although the public discourse constructed it as an outcome of the wish of the people, as a sudden breakthrough in which all Romanians took part, if not actively, at least at the level of belief and hope, more than a decade after the Revolution, many Romanians seem rather weary with respect to the supposedly popular

movement of December 1989. The Revolution itself is thus minimized and its outcome is weighed against their own wellbeing before and after.

The first thing that the respondents mentioned when they were asked about their opinion of the revolution is the reference to the killing of the Ceaușescu couple. The revolution itself is defined by the act of the murder of the two dictators, who were considered the symbol of the communist regime. Moreover, the fact that the killing of Ceaușescu became a symbol of the revolution and even a symbol of 'democratic' Romania, is also reflected in the language. Many interviewees refer to Ceaușescu by the word 'împușcatul' ('the shot-one') as in 'during the time of the shot-one,' instead of 'during the time of Ceaușescu.' However, virtually all the interviewees disagree with the decision to kill the two dictators, but they do this for different reasons. Some simply consider it a barbaric act that should not have taken place, especially around Christmas; others think Ceaușescu was not guilty of anything, they even regret losing him and the things they gained during his rule.

I wouldn't want to talk to you about how it was, about what happened during those days of the last decade of December and the first days of January 1990. My consciousness as a Christian is burdened with the shooting of the two in the Christmas day and it is very clear to me that I have no reason to regret the fall of communism. I regret, though, that it took blood on asphalt, because – without being a convinced conservative, or educated in the conservative spirit – we wallowed in the "honey" of ovations while the Berlin Wall was falling! We were the last ones and we remained – in a wrongly conceived transition – tributary to communist teachings. (Interview with Oltea Suceveanu [67 years] in Rostás and Văcărescu)

During the Revolution I was here, in Mangalia. I heard from time to time

loud shouting and booing, but there was no big deal here. Some went to Bucharest. Some who died were innocent, some were guilty. The same with Ceaușescu. He was not that bad. He gave us an apartment, he gave us a gas cylinder, he gave us everything we needed. But he did not have faith. If he had had faith, he would have still been alive. (Interview with Elena Brehoiescu [65 years] in Rostás and Văcărescu, 2005)

For many Romanians the Revolution – capital R was something that went on very close and, at the same time, far from them, they knew about what was going on, but it was not something they directly participated in, in many instances not even at the level of a common consciousness. The public discourse constructed a ‘TV Revolution,’ a ‘Live Revolution’ and a people of ‘couch-revolutionaries,’ a people that participated in the Revolution in front of the TV sets from their homes.

I went to these friends of ours and I told them that Doru [her husband] was not at home, that I didn’t know what was going on, what to do. And they told me: ‘Don’t go anywhere, don’t worry. Look, on the TV they said it’s a revolution.’ Ceaușescu was talking and then they started to shoot. And I said: ‘I have to get some bread, because Doru will get home and he will be hungry.’ I went out. I run into Doru and then we both stayed home until Ceaușescu left, and then we went out to see what was happening on this side by the Scala cafeteria. Doru said we should go back, but I wanted to go on the other side, at Patria, to see what was going on there [...] Then we came home and we heard gunshots. I called Doru who told me to get under the table immediately. They were firing from somewhere very close. The electricity went off and I was terribly scared. In about one hour Doru calmed me down and told me to continue to bake the cake. We

watched television the entire night, day and night. (Interview with Elena Ionescu [84 years] in Rostás and Văcărescu, 2005)

Post-communism and ‘transition’

The predominant feeling expressed by the respondents with respect to the last fifteen years is disappointment and anger. Following the official discourse, they describe the period of time they are living in with such words as ‘transition,’ ‘democracy,’ ‘capitalism,’ ‘freedom,’ but all these concepts are two-layered. On the first level they can be interpreted as positive aspects of the post-communist period, but, at the second level of meaning, they are all used in a negative and critical way. Thus, ‘transition’ is a period of instability and chaos, ‘democracy’ and ‘capitalism’ are ‘Western’ imports that cannot function in the Romanian landscape, ‘freedom’ is understood in the sense that everybody can do whatever they want, without any sense of responsibility and care for the others.

The respondents reconstruct and reinterpret the communist period through their personal experience of the fifteen years that elapsed from the ‘overthrow’ of communism and, since they consider their living standards to have been worse during the last period, they criticize the newly established regime for its inability to ensure wellbeing and security for the people. Therefore, the moment the respondents start talking about their present-day lives, they start condemning the poverty they have to live in and the corruption of the ruling class, thus finding ‘good sides’ of communism. This is not to say that Romanians regret the end of the communist regime (although many explicitly expressed this regret) or that they would like to go back to it, it is just that many interviewees expressed their profound dissatisfaction with the present state of affairs in Romania and also with their own life standard.

During the time of Ceaușescu there weren’t so many people without work, if you wanted to work, you would find something. Now, you can starve to death, if you are not a sleek.

Everybody's steeling, they only care for themselves and for their fortunes and they do nothing for this country. All those that I spoke with live a bad and poor life. When I meet old people like me in the park and I talk to them, they say we had a better life during the time of Ceaușescu. (Interview with Elena Buculei [87 years] in Rostás and Văcărescu, 2005)

The regime established in 1990 made several attempts to repair some of the wrongs done by the communists. One such attempt is the law on retrocession, which, supposedly, ensured the return of the properties to the people who owned land and real estate that was confiscated by the communists. The process of giving back the properties was a very difficult one and, since in many cases was deficiently managed, lead to an even deeper dissatisfaction of the people and thus to the failure of these endeavors. Consequently, the people felt that they cannot trust the 'democratic' system, just as they could not trust the 'communist' system. Moreover, since their expectations were even greater this time, they feel even more betrayed and cheated by the newly established class of leaders.

Now, after the Revolution, I started to go to law courts to get back my parents' land. But in ten years I only got back ten hectares and above all that, they gave me land where they wanted to, not where it was our land before. Whom to argue with? Where to go to? If you don't know anybody, nobody takes you into consideration! We thought we would get back what was stolen from us, but these people rob us even more... (Interview with Silvia Nedelea in Rostás and Văcărescu, 2005)

After the Revolution they gave us back our land, but it was for nothing, it was in vain, because we are old now, we cannot work the land anymore... Cristea, my husband, is dead, we do not have the means to work on the land because it is very

expensive to pay for trucks, to pay for... And you cannot work with horses, we do not even have horses. (Interview with Ioana Rotaru [82 years] in Rostás and Văcărescu, 2005)

Conclusion

Romanians' relationship with their communist past and their post-communist present is neither uniform nor clearly defined. Both periods are doubly constructed: first, through the period itself and the events specific to each period, and second, through the experience of the other period. Thus, the communist period is first seen as the period when they were dispossessed of their properties, they were persecuted for being 'enemies of the state,' they had to endure many hardships and shortages. But at a closer scrutiny and after the comparison with the post-communist period, many respondents reconstruct in the same discourse a communist period that was bearable and even desirable.

The 'transition' period is also constructed on two layers: initially according to what happened and referring first and foremost to the Revolution – capital R and the instauration of a long-wanted democracy. Then it is reconstructed as a period of instability and insecurity, of corruption of the ruling class, and extreme poverty of the people.

References cited:

- Buchowski, Michał. 2001. *Rethinking Transformation. An Anthropological Perspective on Post-socialism*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Humaniora.
- Buchowski, Michał. 2004. "Between Stigmatization and Resistance: A Creation of 'Victimized Groups' Identity in Poland" in Enikő Magyari Vincze and Petruța Mândruț (eds.), *Performing Identities. Renegotiating Socio-cultural Identities in the Post-socialist Eastern Europe*. Cluj-Napoca: Editura Fundației pentru Studii Europene.
- Humphrey, Caroline. 2002. *The Unmaking of Soviet Life. Everyday Economies after Socialism*. Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press.

Ries, Nancy. 1997. *Russian Talk: Culture and Conversation during Perestroika*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Rostás, Zoltán and Sorin Stoica (eds.). 2003. *Istorie la firul ierbii. Documente social orale*. București: Tritonic.

Zoltán Rostás and Theodora-Eliza Văcărescu (eds.). 2005. *Cealaltă jumătate a istoriei. Recuperări sociale orale*. Cluj-Napoca: Limes.

Văcărescu, Theodora-Eliza. 2003. "Women and/ in the Communist Political Prisons. The First and the Second Circle of Suffering:

Romania 1947-1965," *Romanian Journal of Society and Politics*, vol 3, no. 1/2003, pp. 7-45.

Katherine Verdery. 1996. *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Verdery, Katherine. 2002. "Whither postsocialism?" in C. M. Hann (ed.), *Postsocialism. Ideals, Ideologies and Practices in Eurasia*. London and New York: Routledge, p. 15-21.