East European Communities

The Struggle for Balance in Turbulent Times

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All Is Possible, Nothing Is Certain: The Horizons of Transition

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Shock Without Therapy

The so-called "transition" in Eastern Europe has usually been discussed in terms of the transition to a market economy (privatization) and to Western-style liberal democracy. Using these two categories, privatization and democracy, to judge the performance of the states of Eastern Europe has been convenient, but not very illuminating. As the EU's Enlargement Commission recently noted, the process of transition is not confined to the "old" countries of Eastern Europe. It is a continent-wide phenomenon, affecting every country in the region, including those that have never been under communist rule. This paper examines the extent to which these countries have been affected by the transition process and how far they have progressed towards democracy. The paper concludes that while there have been significant improvements in many countries, much remains to be done before a genuine democracy can be achieved.

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most of Romania's former dissidents remain on the political margins. And while Romania's ethnic tensions have not led to a Bosnian situation, conflicts remain frequent between Hungarians, Gypsies and the Romanian majority.

Virtually all change for the better in Romania is attributed to pressure by "the West," be it Brussels, Strasbourg, the World Bank, and other foreign or international actors. Romania risks not so much being exploited by the West but simply ignored. Western foundations, companies and aid programs are gravitating toward those Eastern European countries which can utilize aid provide a stable climate, who can bite the bullet of "structural adjustment," and furnish suitable conditions for Western aid agencies and profits for private companies. By any index, Romania is not high on the list. And this makes the gap between expectations about the transition and its realities that much greater. In the meantime, Romania is now undergoing inflation, stagnation, unemployment, corruption, and corresponding social and ethnic tensions, much the same as other East European countries have experienced. Yet the positive effects are relatively small. To use the cliches of privatization, there is shock but not much therapy.

The Transition and "the Transition"

"We are a society in transition" has become the phrase to explain just about every anomalous phenomena in Romania today. The transition is particularly acute for Romanians who live in rural communities. Romanian villagers don't know much about the workings of the Common Market or the World Bank, but they talk about them. They experience the "society in transition" every day; they see it on television, read about it in the papers (if they can still afford to subscribe to them), they talk with villagers who travel abroad, they discuss their personal economic projects among each other, and they decide on strategies for their children.

While the transition as desired by the West seems to have stopped short in Romania, it would be grossly misleading to conclude that the post-1989 changes in Romania are somehow less profound than elsewhere in Eastern Europe. At the local community level, at the level of people's social interactions and perceptions, Romanians' lives have been transformed profoundly in the last couple of years. Writing of Ceausescu's Romania a decade ago, M. Shafir (1985) invoked the concept of "simulated change" to describe a Romania which appeared to deviate from the Soviet model but which in fact was more Stalinist than even the USSR. Today we might accuse the regime of Ion Iliescu of simulating marketization and Western style democratic institutions. Romanian political debate is full of accusations that "nothing has happened," that Iliescu's "original democracy" is simply "form without foundation."

At the local level, however, not all the changes are simulated, nor are they intended. The transition in the Romanian countryside is undoubtedly of a quite different sort than simply a trajectory toward democratization and marketization. Moreover, Romanian villages may be changing faster than the national metropolitan institutions. The changes involve the emergence of autonomous households as economic units--the prerequisite for civil society--without the accompanying rise of public life. Villages may thus be experiencing the emergence of the partial civil society.

For anthropologists and social scientists, who have often assumed that innovations diffuse from the center to the provinces, from city to country, and from the powerful to the powerless, we may find it unfamiliar to envision the transition in Eastern Europe occurring faster in so-called "traditional" areas. But we should expect that the transition is also of a different order as well.

This paper will describe certain elements of the transition in Feldioara, a large, urbanized village in southern Transylvania, the near the town of Brașov. Feldioara, with about 3,500 people, is a large, well developed village on the main road and rail line north of Brașov. The village once had a Saxon German population of well over 1,500 persons, now down to a few dozens due to emigration to West Germany. Feldioara's continued population growth is due to the arrival of migrants from other regions of Romania who were attracted to the village because of its proximity to nearby industrial employment in the factories of Brașov. The village also has several administrative functions for the immediate area, and is one of the few villages containing its own high school.

Because of its geographic position and the presence of nearby minerals plant, Feldioara had once been on a list of future towns under Ceausescu's rural planning program, a program which was never implemented (Sampson 1984a). In the mid-1970s I carried out anthropological fieldwork in Feldioara to study the urbanization process, which like so many other aspects of Romanian social life was a combination of unrealistic expectations, bureaucratic distortions, laudable intentions to improve the quality of life, and daily practices of survival under nearly intolerable conditions. Not only was the plan to urbanize the village never fully implemented, the changes that did occur were often unenvisaged or unintentional.

I continued to return to Feldioara for short periods until 1984, when I was deemed persona non grata, and again from 1990. My focus was on how people developed informal mechanisms, to cope with the vagaries of a system which was repressive, irrational and unpredictable. I studied both bureaucracy and corruption, both the official and the second economy, both formal and informal leadership, both official censorship and informal rumors (Sampson 1983, 1989). I even began to speculate about the anthropology of secret police and of collaboration in a society whereby loyalty and betrayal, friendship and duplicity, were so integral to Romanian social life (Sampson 1986, 1990, 1994b).

I will begin by describing some aspects of the present situation, both generally and in the village. I will then proceed backwards and emphasize the pre-transition period. This may seem to be the easy way out; my research back
then was longer and more detailed than the kind of research I am doing now. But at a deeper level, I believe that we should view the collapse of socialism as a starting point for helping us understand how socialist societies functioned. To put it more concretely, we first begin to understand how systems work after they have fallen apart. This begs the question as to what it is which has fallen apart and what has been maintained. Our failure to adequately address this question is reflected in our continued use of the word “transition,” a usage also perpetuated by East Europeans themselves with various degrees of irony and cynicism. Is there a “transition of the transition”? When does the “transition” end? When does the “transition” begin? Perhaps a better look at local communities in their total sociopolitical context can help us answer these questions. In the latter part of the paper I will try to provide two examples of household strategies within this transition. Initially, however, I wish to elaborate some operating principles of the Old Order in order to show how they reproduce themselves during the transition period.

All Is Possible, Nothing Is Certain

In retrospect, we might extrapolate the basic social dynamic of Ceauşescu’s Romania in terms of some simple operating principles reflected in people’s everyday practice. Romania, including village Romania, was a society in which anything could happen, but where nothing was definite. It was a society where all things were possible and nothing was certain. In such situations, people were insecure, and individual abilities—especially the ability to manipulate others and maneuver through the bureaucracy—were at a premium.

Moreover, Romania was a society in which it was normal to have a wide gap between private thoughts and public action, a phenomena common to much of Eastern Europe (Wedel 1986, Shlapentokh 1989, Milosz 1952). Romania was a society of dissimulation, conspiracy and of drama. People assumed misrepresentation in the public sphere; they operated upon the assumption of hidden motives and unseen forces behind every action. There were no mere coincidences; rather there was always some kind of plot, and in the absence of reliable information (or verification), all plots, even the most outlandish, were plausible. Sincerity was viewed suspiciously. As a society of “drama”—of a front stage and a backstage—everyone was assumed to be playing roles in public. One’s public demeanor said nothing about one’s private thoughts, beliefs or alliances. Some observers have called this “social schizophrenia,” but this term implies some kind of pathology. Rather, we might see Romania as a “dualistic” society in which the gap between public and private, between acts and motives, between the play-acting self and the real self, was assumed to be the normal state of affairs. This is why it was normal to be in the Romanian Communist Party—the largest per capita in the world in 1989—but why the same party had so few genuine communists and disappeared completely following the December events. This gap between public and private also explains why the dissident—the person who actually said or did what he/she believed, who combined private thought and public action—who was deemed sick or conspiratorial.

The operating principles of “all is possible, nothing is certain,” and the normalcy of the gap between public and private behavior did not reproduce themselves in a vacuum. They were clearly a means of adapting to a changing, random, and often brutal social order in which resources were so scarce or access so uncertain that retaining absolute moral or ethical principles or abstract loyalties would be counterproductive. This is in fact the definition of “opportunism” as opposed to “fair play.” One may also see elements of “Baconfy” mentality” or “Orthodox tradition,” in which adherence to public ritual is more important than any kind of internal belief. We might see Romanians as experts in the kind of kaiman described by Czeslaw Milosz (1952), whereby the ability to mask one’s beliefs is an admirable talent in the face of despotic authority. Romania has been, and to some extent remains, a society where what James Scott (1984) calls “weapons of the weak” are the only available weapons.

In such a society, there is an intensity to personal relations in which the emotional and the practical are combined. It is an intensity which creates strong bonds of trust and solidarity, as well as tensions and intrigues. Romanian villages are indeed similar to their Polish counterparts in that they are “Villages without Solidarity” (Hann 1983). To use contemporary terminology, Romanian villages are full of “uncivil society.”

The persistence of these operating principles is because the key factors which have maintained these principles have been themselves maintained. It is not a matter of some kind of cultural lag from the past. Randomness, caprice, uncertainty, and the need for personal alliances still exist, but for different reasons.

In “transitional” Romania, different tactics are needed to deal with the different kinds of uncertainties and randomness. The daily life of Romanian villagers like those in Feldioara lies in discovering the proper tactics, in a kind of trial and error. For example, in Ceauşescu’s time, there was a real enemy, a “them,” consisting of Ceauşescu, his family, the regime, the local party cadres, and the secret police. Bureaucratic behavior could be capricious, which meant that one could have to act in such a way so as to foster social connections which were predictable and profitable. Access to material goods was administrated via rationing, and via contracting arrangements the bureaucracy could squeeze surplus out of various households. Money was not always crucial, as incomes were low and prices stable. Bureaucratic access counted more than cash. Social or political capital was more important than money.

In the “transitional” society of Romania, “Them” have been replaced by more nebulous market forces which make one’s hard earned money disappear with inflation, while others seem to become rich without real “productive” work.
transition is nothing else but the institutionalization of new kinds of uncertainties replacing old ones. It is the uncertainties and randomness of the "economy of shortage," once called "socialism," is replaced by an uncertainty of how to act in a "wild west" capitalism characterized by political manipulation and lack of institutional stability.

Pierre Bourdieu might call this change of horizons a change of "habitus:" a re-structuring of the structures. Romanians themselves often lament that "there are no rules anymore," which seems to confirm the emphasis placed by contemporary social theory on the role of practice in structuring cultural behavior. In theoretical terms, we might define transitional situations as those in which practices totally dominate cultural schemata.

Such a concept of transition is not to be thought of as alteration in the villagers' fundamental life values. Villagers in Feldioara, whether pensioned farmers, status-anxious school teachers or MTV watching teenagers, still seek what they sought in Ceausescu's day: they want reasonable living standards and security for themselves and their offspring. They want dignity and prestige. And they want to see benefit from their investments. Whether these investments are fertilizer for their fields or private tutoring for their children. The villagers' attitudes about public institutions (as both a threat to one's personal autonomy and as resources which will be exploited for personal benefit, either by others or by oneself) have changed little. In this sense, there is not much of that sought after "civil society" or "public sphere" which Western experts and aid agencies are seeking. What has changed, however, are the actual means by which people can achieve their goals. In Feldioara, people are trying to determine what kind of horizon is "out there," and they are altering their life strategies accordingly. They are trying to locate themselves in a social field whose signposts for action are unclear. Such lack of clarity--"an age of confusion"--leads to an "anything goes" mentality which villagers experience as a society without limits or as moral decline. Romanian villages are replete with manifestations of "uncivil society." Villagers' lament that things are getting more uncivilized, that people are more unscrupulous, that "we do not have democracy," "there is anarchy," that "there are no rules anymore." Little wonder that there is nostalgia for the kind of order and predictability which the Ceausescu regime offered. Or more accurately, nostalgia for familiar forms of disorder and uncertainty.

The Global Horizons in Feldioara

In their efforts to locate a horizon, and during the uncertain conditions where this horizon is hazy and receding, individual villagers suddenly find themselves in an unfamiliar social and geographic space. Socially they are rich or poor, or are on their way to becoming richer or poorer. A number of villagers are in fact moving both ways in shorter, more violent cycles of wealth/poverty. People's
geographic horizons also change: some villagers will remain in the community; others intend to leave for large towns, and still others seek to leave Romania, either temporarily or permanently. Invariably, the extension of geographic horizons to include “abroad” involves new kinds of interactions with foreigners, Romanians abroad, or returned Romanian citizens, all of whom are seen as potential aids in improving one’s life chances, or those of one’s children. Like so many anthropologists who have worked in Eastern Europe, I receive letters from close or not-so-close acquaintances asking for small or large favors or simply for information. Some want a job in Denmark, where I live. Others want to know if I can find them a used tractor, or if I know someone who wants to buy an icon, or if there is a company which needs medicinal venom from bees. Others simply want an invitation to visit, or to borrow money, or to buy a specific book, or to find some distant acquaintance who they heard lives in Florida, or to send their daughters somewhere as au pair girls. Part of the transition is the change in people’s potential social network: brokers or resource persons are now farther away and exchanges and alliances now stretch not just from the village to nearby towns, but to other countries in Europe or North America. Bonds of exchange and bonds of trust are changing, especially as involves exchanges of valuable goods, services, or money.

The global social field of villagers is not simply a matter of watching Western television and incorporating Western tastes, but of concrete relations with Western individuals or Romanians from abroad who may help them achieve their goals, or even more profoundly, create their horizons, i.e., restructure these goals.

Romanian villagers, like all Romanians and so many other East Europeans, have been obsessed with the West and its cultural manifestations. This obsession may be expressed in quite different forms, ranging from an unmitigated admiration for all aspects of Western pop culture (the Michael Jackson cult of 1992) or a defensive overemphasize on all things Romanian as in the Romanian philosophical “protochormism,” or in the more spectacular exorcisms of Michael Jackson’s diabolical spirit following the accusations against him. The Western obsession may appear in Romania’s formal demand and Romanians informal pleas that the West ought to provide more aid, that the West owes Romania something, or in the paranoid feelings that the West (or foreign countries like Hungary or foreign forces like the Jews) is plotting against Romania. Today, with more foreign influences in Romania, we might be tempted to simply call this Western obsession yet another instance of “globalization” (Hannerz 1992). The role of the “foreign” in Romanian village life pervades people’s standards of who they are, who they are not, and what they would like to be. Not global influences but local identities are at stake in determining village horizons. The combination of global horizons and the local operating principles of all things are possible—nothing is certain and mistrust of public behavior, structure the transition in villages like Feldioara. The transition, while not the conventional one, is nevertheless a real one. Paradoxically, it may be more profound out in the village than in the capital. Let us first, however, review the village horizons during the Ceausescu era.

**Feldioara Under the Old Regime: Keeping People in Place**

In Eastern Europe, and especially in politically repressive Romania, there existed a contradictory policy on the part of the regime by which Romania was to be an important player on the world stage while individual Romanians would remain isolated from it. Ceausescu sought to make Romania a key actor in foreign policy, an intermediary between east and west, north and south. In doing so he connected with the world via frequent trips abroad and by inviting foreign dignitaries or selected foreigners to come to Romania when it served the national interest (even American anthropologists; see Sampson and Kideckel 1989).

While Romania and Ceausescu were playing their global role, ordinary Romanians were prevented from interacting with the world: telephones were tapped, letters to and from abroad opened, and travel abroad nearly impossible. It was actually illegal for Romanians to speak with a foreigner without authorization, or for foreigners to overnight in a Romanian home. More than contact with foreigners, Romanians were also prevented from any non-organized contacts with each other: typewriters were registered, informal associations forbidden, even the bridge clubs were closed since it entailed traveling intellectuals. And laws prohibiting changing residence limited Romanians’ possibility to expand their social horizons. The ideal socialist society was that everyone stayed in their place of residence, worked quietly at their job, consumed as little food, electricity, heating as possible, and came together only to celebrate Ceausescu. The secret police, the Securitate, could be anywhere (randomness, uncertainty), even though they successfully promoted the image of being “everywhere.”

In villages like Feldioara, villagers could experience the regime in various ways. Ration cards governed purchase at the local store, in which meat was available only a few hours a week. Collective farmers were paid a pitance but could cultivate private plots, but were prevented from selling to city dwellers on the free market. Most villagers commuted by bus to jobs in Brașov, 22 km away, while others worked at the local uranium processing plant or in local administrative, school, health or retail facilities. Officials could easily observe villagers’ contacts with the outsiders via letters, central phone calls, and the visitors’ foreign cars. Returning villagers, many of them Saxons Germans now living in West Germany, would come back each summer to visit. The American anthropologist and his wife were under constant surveillance, as were my movements in my German registered car.
The village had a collective farm with a largely elderly, feminine work force. Many households had access to the farm, however, because family members were pensioned, or because people took land and worked it independently.

Villagers' social and cultural horizons were governed by working in Brașov and getting education for their children. Where no one was allowed to own land and where houses were inherited, self-built or paid for, extra money was spent in investing in family members cultural capital (private tutoring) or buying a car. Investment in a child's education gave status, prestige, and the kinds of new networks a well educated child could acquire in a new job preferably in a nearby town. One could achieve a degree of network security in a system characterized by profound insecurity.

Villagers lived close to Brașov and Romanian law thus prohibited them from moving to the city. Procurement of a residence permit, much like moving from one country to another, was allowed only by marriage or by various corrupt practices. Feldioara's horizons were thus restricted, and this was only broken by the listening to foreign radio broadcasts, or by the summer visits of Romanians who had emigrated (invariably with their used Mercedes), or by meeting foreign tourists at in nearby Brașov.

This very closure from real life in the West created not just ignorance but also a preoccupation with things Western. The most obvious manifestations were those items of the West which could be acquired on the black market or via the hard currency shops (which only foreigners could enter but whose items were destined for Romanians). These items could be worn, eaten, drunk, smoked or used. (Such an obsession with Western goods should not be considered irrational: in a country where there was no soap, a bar of "Lux" was Western, but also soap). Consumption of these items demonstrated that one had the connections to acquire them--for it was both connections and money that mattered back then--and that one knew how to use one's money for good taste, too. One ought not to underestimate the political content of consuming forbidden fruits, of demonstration of one's disgust with the established order. The crass materialism of the East was as much a political statement as a response to shortage or simple imitation of a foreign lifestyle. This urge to consume was also common in Feldioara: the youth wanted Western cigarettes or cassette players; their parents wanted Western deep freezers or washing machines; car owners wanted Western motor oil and Western spark plugs. The goods in the shops, insofar as they were not consumed, became an alternative currency in Romania, used to bribe officials. Cartons of cigarettes and bottles of whiskey circulated without being consumed.

Feldioara in the Ceaușescu period was a place where the second economy thrived, where bureaucracy and corruption were rampant, where everyone was out for themselves, but where being out for yourself also meant fulfilling obligations for others and asking others for favors. It was a place where rumor, gossip and innuendo thrived. Feldioara was a place of everyday conspiracy, of tension, of fear and of revenge. There was constant talk of tension between or within families, talk of thievery, stealing, mistrust, and fear of betrayal to the police was part of daily life in this village. Where even basic goods became increasingly scarce and where they were distributed either haphazardly or unequally, explanations in terms of conspiracy or privilege became rampant.

Given this social isolation, material shortage, mistrust of and fear of the authorities, the near total collapse of basic functions in Romanian society of the late 1980's (Sampson 1989), led to a corresponding heightening of the value of the informal, friendship links, and to the fortification of the household as unit of defense against a threatening social world. Friendships and alliances had to be continually put to test: through material prestations, via loans, favors, and instrumental use of networks. In a country like Romania, where so much was either illegal or suspect, these social alliances themselves acquired a conspiratorial character, so that social relations also came to involve the keeping of secrets. Claims on loyalty led to fantasies and fears of betrayal. People believed in the value of friends and family; but these values were always being tested to the utmost. People were under pressure from the authorities to fulfill impossible plans; food was scarce, heat was turned off, contraception unavailable, abortion illegal. People also competed with each other ("un civil society"). The gradual collapse of the Romanian economy meant that getting even basic commodities required connections all of which led to an overheating of social relations. People made compromises with the authorities which entailed real or imagined betrayals. "Everybody made compromises," as one opposition leader has stated, "but some did it for a loaf of bread, and others for to get a nice villa."

The Revolution

Like most villages in Romania, the December 1989 "revolution" (what the Opposition calls "the events of December") came to Feldioara by way of television. During the crucial days around Christmas of 1989, some villagers and Home Guard members were sent to guard some nearby radio towers from saboteurs, but otherwise the revolution went quietly.

Soon after the revolution, the former local party apparatus disbanded, and the major event was the arrival of a truckload of aid from France. Reminiscent of African villages who met the British centuries ago and had to find some villager to become "chief," Feldioarans found a local agricultural technician and a French speaking school teacher to meet the foreigners with their precious cargo, and thus emerged these first villagers to obtain foreign contacts.

And it was foreign contacts, in the context of the Western obsession, that led to the first accusations and gossip about unequal access to new wealth. Not only did the foreigners come with material goods, food, clothing and medical supplies. They also came with channels of access to the outside world. There were the
small informal gifts. But there was also the trips: a delegation from Feldioara visited a sister town in France. For most of the local delegation, largely consisting of local teachers and professionals, it was their first trip to the West. Part of the trip had been paid, and the most expensive part, travel and residence in France, was free. It did not go unnoticed in the village that some of these villagers also had children and spouses with them, some of whom ostensibly functioned as interpreters. Regardless of whether the spouses/children/colleagues were qualified (and how does one determine who is qualified to represent a community a few months after the demise of the communist regime), the benefits of the trip remained unclear to most villagers and the members therefore suspect. In short, it was assumed that everyone had some kind of private agenda.

After this trip, other trips followed. The foreigners took a liking to a few young people in the village who they met on or who had acted as interpreters. Throughout Romania similar events occurred, and many young people, especially those who spoke French, English or German, ended up taking trips to the West to visit those they had met. Others became the obvious first recruits for the earliest work or educational exchange programs. Gifts, small monetary payments, and other benefits accrued. I myself helped establish links between Danish school authorities and school authorities in Feldioara and Brașov. The village school ended up receiving some computers, but the Brașov press was intensely critical when the country delegation traveled to Denmark to observe Danish schools.

The immediate post-revolutionary relations brought with them a new kind of "us" and "them." They were now those involved in new foreign networks involving access to foreigners, foreign goods, or the chance to earn foreign currency, however little. That several of these individuals had held high posts in the former apparatus did not go lost on some villagers.

In the context of a Romania where Romanian currency and economy simply collapsed when it began to come into contact with Western economic competition, access to Western hard currency came to be the absolute key to economic survival. Like elsewhere in Romania, Feldioarans acquired passports and began to travel. Traveling for villagers meant only in part seeing the world or visiting family members and acquaintances. It meant, rather, business tourism. Through friends and acquaintances in the West, one could live for free, obtain an illegal job, borrow money and buy scarce goods and transport them back to Romania—used cars, electronic goods, clothing. Working in the West to earn cash might mean painting houses in Germany or selling homemade textiles on the streets of Budapest.

The new horizons which opened were prominent when I returned to Feldioara four months after the 1989 events. Villagers spent most of their time telling me about who had traveled where, who had come back with what, and who had not come back at all. Economically speaking, these first few months were a kind of "honeymoon" in Romania. Hyperinflation had not set in, factories had not closed, legal regulations on commerce were nonexistent, and in the consumer shortage economy which prevailed, anyone with anything to sell could make money. For about a year, the empty niches in sale and petty trade and the massive demand for consumer goods generated enormous incomes for some people. This, combined with plunder or manipulation of state owned resources, including the collective and state farms to generate additional incomes. Speculation, corruption, and mafia-style organization were most widespread in areas with larger markets and more resources to plunder, i.e., the large cities. Since most villagers either worked in or had families in Brăila, their knowledge of these new income sources was extensive. And since most also had networks there, benefits could be derived, most obviously by selling agricultural produce at free market prices to city dwellers.

The result was an initial satisfaction of pent up consumer tastes—color televisions, cars, trips—-together with a subsequent stratification into "have more" and "have less." This stratification only intensified as the collective farm was gradually eliminated and as the Romanian economy began its plummet into hyperinflation, unemployment regulatory free for all and vicious corruption.

Decollectivization and Social Stratification

Feldioara's collective farm had been established early, 1950, and the village also had a state farm unit, IAS. The land was relatively fertile, growing grain and sugar beets for a nearby sugar refining plant (for a more complete description of the collective see Sampson 1984a; for a comparison see Kidder 1993). In its final years, however, the collective's labor force had declined to a core of agricultural specialists, a larger group of elderly villagers, mostly uneducated women, and periodic migrant or Gypsy laborers used in the summer.

Decollectivization involved several processes. Among them the breaking up of the old collective farms, the reconstituting of new associations, some of them as small as a few families, and the giving out of property certificates for the new owners. As in all revolutionary processes, the breaking down of the old system has been easier than the build up of a new one. In particular, "family farms" have proven difficult to operate when families were without labor, capital, or developed retail possibilities. And the arrangements between families have given rise to new forms of social cooperation and conflict, especially in a society where contracts and legal measures are unfamiliar or under suspicion. Let us discuss these transitional forms in turn.

Like so many other state enterprises in Romania, the state farm remained untouched. It continues to specialize in animal husbandry and growing of fodder crops, with its work force salaried like workers. Similarly, the machine tractor station is now a state company which conducts operations of plowing, threshing, etc. for a fee. As before, peasants often need the SMA services at the same time.
and speed payments are not uncommon to obtain rapid service or high quality work. Control over machinery and its allocation is primarily what stimulated Feltioara to purchase their own tractors: from eight in 1990 to nineteen in 1991 to forty-five in 1994.

Two agricultural engineers in the community have established agricultural enterprises containing 470 and 600 hectares, respectively. As no family may have more than ten hectares, the land in these associations has been donated by families who do not have the labor, or time to cultivate their own land. In most cases these are elderly couples whose children are no more at home; in others there are nonagricultural families who have inherited land and now do not want to have anything to do with it.

Families who are full members of the association receive a percentage of the income from the land, typically 30-40%. Families who do nothing but give up land receive somewhat less, 20-25%. Production on the association has definitely increased over the last two years, with wheat at 3,000 kg/hectare, potatoes at 18,000 and sugar beets at 32,000. The head of the smaller association wants more land, and will take from anyone. His biggest problems are poor quality machinery, lack of money, and lack of support from the county administration who sullies the association with a high interest rate and lack of credit. In 1994 there was an additional problem of land tax based on land area rather than quality of the soil. Twenty five percent of his expenses are interest.

The associations were both an obvious transitional solution in 1991 and 1992 and for some peasants the only solution. There were indications that by 1994, however, some peasants were becoming dissatisfied with membership. Several of the smaller associations of families and neighbors collapsed when they could not pay out the promised payments. Their costs of administration and renewal of capital were higher than expected. And with the unclear legal regulations and lack of enforcement, there was the usual amount of corruption.

The elderly, those without capital or labor, have remained in the associations. But most productive peasants have left. Especially the smaller associations of a few families have been riven with conflicts about who owns what, how to allocate work and derive income. The desire for household autonomy has been fulfilled as people buy tractors and horses, the number of horses nearly tripling, from ninety to 225, in 1994. Some villagers have been fortunate enough to have paid off their tractors with the income from the harvests of 1992 and 1993. Several families actually lamented that, “We don’t know what to do with our money.” In transitional Romania, this can be a problem for the rampant inflation and high interest (80% on loans, 50% in banks) means that keeping money is in effect losing it. In a truly free market economy, the solution might be to acquire more land. But there are regulations against large holdings, and labor is limited. Moreover, larger production would demand more storage facilities or more complex marketing arrangements in the case of, say, milk.

The result of extra money, given the horizons of the newly wealthy peasants, has been to invest in status consumption items: the second car, the bigger tractor, the newest television, the trip abroad, or in the purchase of dollars or gold. The 160 cars and ten jeeps in 1991 have grown to 1,000 cars and twenty jeeps in 1994. Finally, there has been investment in various pyramid schemes such as “Caritas” which, after having made several hundred thousand Lei multi-millionaires, finally collapsed in late 1993.

The transition not only created new outside signs of consumption, but had more subtle affects on how villagers view their children. Up to now, an investment in children meant their getting educations to take state employment as specialists or to work as technicians in large industrial enterprises. Needless to say, these sectors are unstable as workplaces and inadequate as to salaries.

What used to be an investment in higher education may now be replaced by extreme efforts to get one’s children abroad, either working or training. Alternatively, children in households which have land can be kept home because income chances are greater than continuing school. Higher education or industrial employment do not necessarily generate higher incomes. Villagers now see highly educated engineers from Bragov working the land as farmers on weekends and vacations. Two large factories near Feltioara—a brick factory and sugar beet refinery—are also closing down so that its workers are now becoming farmers or leaving the area altogether. The question is whether this is simply downward or horizontal mobility. In income terms, farmers may be prospering, and it remains to be seen whether the prosperity of farming for some villagers will overshadow the status which education has had in Romania.

What is beyond doubt, however, is that non-farming villagers’ horizons have been fundamentally transformed by the simple experience of seeing traditional workplaces and established institutional channels of mobility close down. The social mobility once provided by the Communist Party, whose “social corps” controlled the economy and distribution, is certainly not replaced by the small number political posts in post-Ceaușescu Romania.

New Status Hierarchies

Seen from the outside, the village has changed little in the two decades I have known it: the main road remains largely unasphalted, there is the usual amount of mud and gravel on the side roads, those on the margin of the village still have no telephones, people heat with wood. The pharmacy, butcher, bookstore, hardware store, post office, bank, and local school and gymnasium are as they were. The bakery remains modest bread is now trucked in at a lower price. There are several more kiosks and three cafes. All these shops now have somewhat more goods, of more stable supply.
The real changes, however, are behind the high walls of the individual houses. Each courtyard has a car, or two. Several dozen have tractors or a jeep. Many have built new barns. In the kitchens there are new devices. The living rooms have the obligatory German or Japanese television set. And there are dozens of homemade parabolic antennas.

A few years ago, local functionaries and professionals—the doctors, teachers, engineers—held important positions informally and in the party apparatus. These were positions which combined responsibility and obligations. As is the case for local elites, many found it difficult to balance these formal and informal functions, and the increasing control by the regime created tensions which remain to be fully understood and described (Sampson 1983, 1984a, 1984c).

In the transitional community, however, these local functionaries are among the most dissatisfied groups. First, they are dissatisfied politically, as most side with the oppositional forces which never gained power in Romania, nor even in local elections. Second, they are dissatisfied economically, as they see the peasants or some local skilled workers becoming millionaires and their relative status dropping. Their own state salaries are stagnant and their possibility to make money via private enterprise is more complicated. The local doctor, dentist and pharmacist, for example, were in the process of establishing some kind of partially private practice. But they often did not have the kind of equipment or medicine which urban doctors could have, and therefore not the same clientele.

The school teachers and other state employees had only to bite the bullet. Their supplementary income only came from taking land for cultivation; what several have done. In one instance, a school teacher formed an association with her two brothers and sister. The brothers operate the local road maintenance facility and the sister is also a teacher. The four households together hold about 40 hectares, but it is the older brother who does most of the full-time agricultural work. The school teacher and her husband, a doctor, purchased a tractor. All the brothers and sister use it to cultivate the land. The family members hold periodic meetings, and she in fact is quite satisfied to have the family acting as a kind of firm. Informal relations of exchange have continued: the children of her brother come to her house for French lessons and German and piano lessons. She and her husband do little work on the land, but they purchase gasoline and let their courtyard be used for storage. She keeps all the accounts and balances for the firm, but as yet there have been no arguments or serious discussions.

The teacher is aware of how many other such associations, some found upon families, others via neighbors, have collapsed. A former activist in local cultural affairs, she also had the talents to ameliorate potential conflicts. Under the new conditions, however, she must find the way of combining kinship relations—always tense—with exchanges of economic resources in a quasi corporate way. The task is not easy, and perhaps this is what the transition is about: learning to combine old arrangements: kinship and exchange, in frameworks which are uncertain. Such arrangements leave much room for personal initiative and difference: all things are possible if there is enough flexibility and initiative. But it is not without its price. The family members all derive income from several sources, and status from different ones. Being a French teacher gives status but no money; agriculture gives money but no status.

It appears, however, that whereas the peasants seem to be able to become more autonomous units, the functionaries may be forced to have to collaborate more with each other. It is this kind of creativity, a creativity wrought with tensions, which is the testing ground of "transitional" society. How do families go from status to contract ties? To what extent do formal firms succeed precisely because of informal means? How does one calculate a balance between piano lessons (cultural capital) and tractor use (application of capital)? It is these kinds of mechanisms which characterize the transition in Feldioara.

Some Conclusions

In situations where the frameworks for human action are being restructured, and where these restructurings are poorly understood by the actors, the operating principle of "all things are possible, nothing is certain" takes on crucial importance. People in transitional Romania are constantly testing their limits and expanding their horizons. In the geographic world where the West takes on significance, and in the social world where one's status relative to others suddenly rises or falls, people must expend considerable efforts to locate their place in and changing world.

It is in these individual, everyday practices of trying to locate oneself, to plot one's horizons, that the transition is having its effect. Invoking phrases like "privatization," "democratic institutions" and "civil society," may be useful as rhetorical devices, and may even be effective code words for East Europeans making connections with the West. But these clichés tell us little about the transition going on in real communities, in the way people evaluate social relations, and in the way new practices arise in a world which is both uncertain and full of open horizons.

In this sense, the "transition" in Romania is a permanent state of affairs.

References

PART THREE

Debates over Meaning and Identities
East European Communities

The Struggle for Balance in Turbulent Times

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