

# MARTOR



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Title: "The colours of transition"

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How to cite this article: Anghelescu, Șerban. 2005. "The colours of transition". *Martor* 10: 12-16.

Published by: *Editura MARTOR* (MARTOR Publishing House), *Muzeul Țăranului Român* (The Museum of the Romanian Peasant)

URL: <http://martor.muzeultaranuluiroman.ro/archive/martor-10-2005/>

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*Martor* is indexed by EBSCO and CEEOL.

## The colours of transition

Șerban Anghelescu



*Transition* as a notion implies the existence of two different, consolidated structures, between which a society, an individual, an object moves and is becoming. Transition is an intermediary period of time meant to disappear once the passage<sup>1</sup> ends. It is a fluid bridge between the stage left in hindsight and the desired stage. It represents a fascinating field of study for sociologists and anthropologists because of its richness in ambiguities, paradoxes, tentative to regression, loss of identities, frauds and impostures. Historians have agreed to define *transition* as the period of time when a certain situation slowly or violently dissolves, while in the meantime a new system is being formed.

Social actors of the past, either voluntarily or non voluntarily engaged in disintegrating old empires or religions, do not have a clear consciousness of their limited existence, while millennialists and socialists have a rational and relatively clear image of the community or society they want to achieve. The latter are inexperienced novelties up to the moment when we exclude imaginary times and the edenic spaces which utopists claim to reconstitute. The passage conform a revealed model or *science* and *law*

will torture the social reality for making it to coincide with the ideological project. It will invent a linguistic screen that it will present as the only coherent and controlled reality.

In the case of Romania, transition leads to a lively liberal, known, society that is not utopic at all. What is missing is the tyranny of a unique and frozen model. The temporary advantage of a unique structure is that it mobilizes all energies in a single direction, contrary to the competition between alternative models. It is interesting to notice how the notion of *transition* has been accepted in official language and that this very fact represents an elementary precaution. Political blunders, stagnations, mistakes that our leaders make during the passage will be blamed on transition, which by definition implies risk and being out of line; a no man's land where everything is permitted. Moral responsibility is perceived differently or completely disappears.

A word also about ritual transition, the only perfect notion because its symbolic process of transformation is codified uniformly and produces in masses adults, deceased in peace, monks, shamans, etc. We will let now personal memory speak, leaving aside any kind of theory

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<sup>1</sup> Passage is a concept defined and theorized by Arnold Van Gennep, 1909, *Les rites de passage* (Librairie critique Emile Nourry, Paris) and Victor W. Turner, 1969, *The Ritual Process. Structure and Anti-structure* (Aldine Publishing Company).

or any field research, to present this period fragmentarily, with colours, tones or accents of the passage that appear or disappear.

Firstly, Romanians that went into the streets experienced the unbelievable feeling of freedom and of power, believing that they could become writers of history and not slaves. Endless television transmissions gave the possibility to participate in provisional parliamentary debates, which provided full transparency of the political act. However simultaneously with the appearance of trust, suspicion is created. The assassinating snipers that are called terrorists are in the collective memory exotic beings with multiple identities, masters of subterranean areas which are thought to be spread all over Bucharest. Below the visible surface exists a hidden reality. Nothing is anymore what it seemed to be. The Romanian citizen becomes hermeneutic in the market, in the media, in the family; he sees hidden meanings everywhere. He won't let himself being manipulated. He knows that everybody conspires against him. Nothing is pure, nothing is clear. We are lied to and sold out, says the man in the street when he faces surprises. He invents hidden enemies, just as the communists, obsessed with conspiracies did. It is just that now the enemy, the foreign agent, the capitalist or the informant cannot be punished.

The forms of protest vary from the threat with suicide through hunger strikes to playful demonstrations. He protests playing, singing, yelling, saying a prayer, drawing and marching. Piața Universității has become a sacred place, isolated, of those that are pure and free. It has become an island of solidarity in a hostile world, a place for confession and of spontaneous speech. The intensity of those days had something of a religious eruption of free politics, of initiation and salvation in opposition with rational practices.

Communism spoke of social homogeneity, the indestructible unity of people around the communist party without ever taking it further



than this so-called ritual language. An extraordinary communion of freedom and victory established itself in the days following the Revolution followed immediately by deterioration and foreseeable ruptures in a free society which reflects differences. Political ruptures frequently oppose different generations in a family. Social fragmentation disturbs those used to uniform values. The ritual show of power in the communist times did not permit even the shadow of a conflict. The perfectly directed unique will constructed history through unanimous applause. The suddenly opened possibility of competition between different political groups paralyzed those not used to the notion of option. The result is that many believe in all forms of power; those political leaders fighting as animals in a

zoo for a bone are actually all aligned against the people no matter their doctrine. In a world dominated by show, extreme poverty and wealth, instead of being discrete, are being shown in broad daylight.

Opinion polls show that Romanians only have trust in two solid institutions: the church and the army. Despite the continuous and well-known human degradation existing in military life, this institution impresses because of its apparent equality and discipline, while the rest of society shows signs of anarchy and wounded mobility. The time and space of cult acts do not listen to the rhythm of the social changes. The same goes for the exact number of days and nights spent in the army, which forces the body into an exact and cadenced rhythm. They provide fixed and steady points in a chaotic society.

Orthodoxy, even fundamentalism, gains ground. Filocalia appears again. In religious printing houses theological studies and patristic works are printed. In busses or trams, people make the sign of cross every time they pass a church or monastery. They say frequently “God help me” and they repopulate the churches. Charismatic priests are in the centre of much listened to intellectual groups. A known painter oversees evening meetings of Christian reflection. Well-known monks are assaulted by the crowd. Holy remains attract pilgrims that look for healing and celestial protection. A Cathedral of National Salvation is in projection. It is supposed to stand up against the monster that is called the House of the People.

The billboards all across the city promise initiations in Greek and oriental mysteries, the supreme knowledge of metaphysical secrets and physical equilibration through yoga. A guru, now arrested, places the foundations of ashrams in Ferentari, an area of Bucharest with a bad reputation, and convinces his followers to drink their urine for therapeutic purposes, to meditate on

the ruins of Dacians<sup>2</sup>, and to practice tantric sexuality. Mysterious Dacian writings find their so-called deciphers. Isis, Osiris, Zamolxe, Graal have a threatening place in people’s mind.

The science-fiction literature feeds into people’s desire for fantasies. Sorceresses that are self proclaimed princesses and queens of white witchcraft, cure impotence, heal alcoholism and assure the success in exams and business. Books with recipes for success and happiness welcome you in bookshops. They propose fast and sure methods to become slim, to improve sexual performance and success in communication. One can apparently learn anything as long as you use easy and fast, at hand relational strategies.

Pedestrians move quickly on skates or skateboards, eating in fast food restaurants standing or eating snacks made in small pastry shops that have appeared almost overnight.

You can rely on matrimonial agencies to find your partner. Specialized agency “Bon Mariage” prepares weddings into the smallest details, while other companies supply you with complete funeral services. Entrepreneurs in funeral furniture make mortality a flourishing business. Dead or alive certain institutions are taking and guiding you comfortably, rapidly, without any mistake and any pain.

TV commercials promise perfect protection of the dry but happy body. Menstrual blood and babies’ urine are absorbed better and better. It is sufficient to stick a plaster on your bare foot or a belt around your waist to become a fit person, or to obtain wonderful buttocks and covet breasts. A pierced and tattooed body reminds of tribal practices, but this analogy remains superficial as long as we do not know what is actually encrypted on our body, as the so-called “savages” did know.

The herbs and the flowers, the roots and the seeds used in teas and macerated or transformed into powders show the increased trust in the

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<sup>2</sup> Dacians are inhabitants of the antique province of Dacia, conquered by the Romans in 106 A.C. It is said that they are the ancestors of nowadays Romanians.

healing capacity of nature, conquered by the pharmaceutical industry. Magic, homeopathy, naturism, occultism, initiating secrets, universal conspiracies all together form the desire for everything that opposes the visible, rational organized world and the hidden structures that saw daylight. Two naive notions coexist: that of extreme rationalism, which professes through adequate techniques health and prosperity, and invisible worlds, in which resides real power.

If in the 70's Bucharest's inhabitants bred minks for food and clothing, nowadays they surround themselves with „un-useful” pets that conquered sensible hearts. A new industry is born from a changed attitude towards our Earth's cotenants; you see birds, cats and exotic dogs, veterinary shops and ambulances, thousands of types of special food for delicate four legged pets, sophisticated cages and fake bones. We learned to love dinosaurs, mongooses, caimans. Due to television and cinematography we discover a fascinating alterity in our furry, scaly, winged neighbours. We make them human. On the opposite, you see packs of dogs that belong to nobody and in the same time to everybody, which attack or lick you and make city authorities to face serious moral issues. Should we kill them kindly, feed them, or adopt them? Fighting dogs are instruments of their master's unrestrained aggression. Guardian dogs defend their masters possessions.

We do not live in a beleaguered society, but lattices protect ground floor windows, the number of metal doors equipped with advanced locking systems rises and security systems are widely abundant. However, the fear is justified, as the thief or the burglar knows exactly the clues of the protected values. Windows of wood disappear. Window frames that close themselves hermetically and isolate sound and tiles and marble define new or renovated houses. The colours of the walls; red, orange or lemon yellow contrasts with the general grey which is applied on the outside of buildings.

The newly appeared huge shops, super or hy-

permarkets, are like everywhere in the world: cold, over-luminous and populated with a greedy magma. The individual disappears under the pressure of his bustling fellows and is under the threat of the thousands of objects that dominate his life. One supermarket is enough to find out almost everything about one human kind and its newly created civilization. Small neighbourhood shops with strange American names or names derived from abbreviations of their owners' names appear. The shops clients know personally the owner of the shop, and the owner, at his turn, knows the clients' families. In the shop you can buy things on credit and you can drink a beer on the sidewalk, even if law forbids this.

Bucharest citizens that live in this transition find out about their fortunes in the newspaper each morning through astrology articles, the weather report, the exchange rate, stock exchange news and the rapes and the arsons that happened the day before. At the same time, the citizen is prepared to navigate through the world, knowing his place under the stars, hostile clouds or the friendly sun and the atrocious bare facts, the anomaly that lights the monotony of the quotidian and gives him shivers.

Public memory modifies itself with each major social change. The first movement is destructive: the emblematic monuments of the communist époque fall down. Statues of Lenin and Petru Groza are lying together in the backyard of Mogoşoaia Palace. The second movement is self-recuperating: not only the history that was disfigured or forbidden by the communist regime recurs, but the real history of communism shows-up for the first time. The masters of memory are the masters of society.

Finally, let us reflect on 80 years old individuals who lived an exceptional experience. Their world overturned twice, not taking in account their personal lives. White turned to black and then back to white again. In the name of human dignity and democracy, the communists have suppressed private property and elementary human rights. In the name of this same human

dignity, tens of year's later, property has been restored, but the amazing cancellation of communism and the peaceful continuation of the broken history seem to be impossible.

Even if we would consider against all reasons that Romanian people lived a nightmare from which they awakened suddenly, they could not resume overnight their anterior state of being. They remain the masters of that long nightmare and, consequently, remain different from all those who did not live in it. The liberated victim

does not lose immediately its deep distinction of victim. Probably, transition will end together with the disappearance of mentally composite human beings taught in the first place to live schizoid in the totalitarian regime and then to reconcile a life of imprisonment with a life of freedom and astonishment.

*Translated by Gabriela Cristea  
and Dennis Van Peppen*

