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Shrinking Worlds, Disconnected Lives. The Post-communist Saga of Romanian Grains

Sabina Stan

The demise of socialism at end of the 80s put Eastern European countries on the track of a thorough transformation of their economic structures. Furthermore, the swift opening of their economies vis-à-vis the global market led to an influx of foreign commodities which triggered a still ongoing change in consumption patterns. But while these processes have already begun to be accounted for by social scientists, the parallel phenomenon of the return of locally produced goods into national circuits of exchange was far less documented. This paper aims to deepen our understanding of this return by focusing on the case of the Romanian wheat, one of the main agricultural products of this East European country.

It will do so by adopting the ‘social lives of things’ approach proposed by Appadurai in its seminal article on commodities (Appadurai, 1986). But while Appadurai saw histories and trajectories of objects as methodological devices that help us apprehend the mechanisms through which people get connected through objects (see also Howes, 1996), I will examine here the opposite process: the disconnection brought about by broken, interrupted circuits of goods.

I will analyse the post-communist saga of the Romanian wheat starting from the concrete case of Buna, the village where I conducted my PhD fieldwork in 1998-1999. Presently a medium-size village of 2000 inhabitants, Buna is situated in

the southern part of Romania sixty kilometres from the capital (Bucharest), at the western extremity of the Great Romanian Plain.

Even if wheat has a seemingly long story in southern Romania, its modern saga starts only two centuries ago. During the XIXth century, the region switched from an economy centred on animal breeding to an economy largely geared towards cereal cultivation. At the beginning of the XXth century (1930), more than 60% of the Romanian territory was dedicated to agriculture, while 83% of the agricultural surface was cultivated with cereals. That gained Romania, at the time, a place among the five most important producers of cereals in the world (Georgescu, 1991: 198).

Between the two world wars, the two main cereals produced by the Romania (maize and wheat) had divergent trajectories. While wheat constituted the main export cereal of Romania, maize remained mainly confined to local circuits of exchange. Maize was the main subsistence crop of Romanian peasantry, and constituted the basic staple of peasant meals (in the form of *mămăligă*, the Romanian *polenta*) and feed for animals. As wheat was the main cash crop of the Romanian peasants, their own use of wheat was rather restricted. In Buna, bread was made at home once or twice a month, occasions marked by conspicuous display and offerings in front of the entrance gate of the household’s yard. Wheat

was also an ingredient in the confection of bagels (*colaci*) used in the numerous ceremonial offerings for the dead (*pomeni*), that the peasants were careful to observe following the death of a household member. In the Romanian countryside, wheat was used for the local crafting of bread and pastries, but did not appear in the commodified form of bread for sale.

With the arrival of the communist regime in 1945, agriculture was relegated to a second voice in the choir of the Romanian economy (behind industry). At the same time, agriculture underwent important transformations. After the nationalisation of Crown and Church lands and the collectivisation of peasant lands, completed by the beginning of the 60s, Romanian agriculture came to be characterised by two large-scale units of production: state farms and cooperatives. State farms were huge units of production covering several thousands of hectares each (7.000 ha on average in 1989). They were geared towards industrial type agriculture, cultivating large plots of lands with a diversity of cultures, but mostly with cereals (and especially wheat). Their crops were used mainly for export and for feeding the growing industrial husbandry sector. Cooperatives were less impressive units, in respect to both dimensions (4.600 ha on average) and mechanical equipment. They relied in large part on the labour of their rather considerable membership, which they rewarded with in-nature payment and by allowing them to dispose of small „personal plots“ of land. Cooperatives cultivated the same variety of crops as state farms, but were less integrated with animal production. Their crops took to a larger extend the road of the Romanian domestic market.

While collectivisation affected fully the villagers of Buna¹, industrialisation contributed importantly to the transformation of the village. By the middle of the 70s, Buna became a village of *navetiști* – a village which comprised, besides cooperative members engaged in agriculture, an important contingent of *navetiști*, that is daily commuters employed in nearby industrial centres. These changes combined to later changes

in distribution structures so that to place villagers in, I argue, a particularly advantageous position vis-à-vis paths of circulation of consumer goods, and especially of foodstuffs.

In fact, especially during the 80s, as a result of the ‘socialist market’s’ incapacity to supply consumers with adequate quantities of goods, informal networks of exchange and a black market developed and came to constitute important avenues for the circulation of a whole range of consumer goods as well as services. For their part, rural households came to have a hold on the circulation of the goods which were amongst the most valued at the time, as their scarcity was affecting most constantly and most painfully the whole population: foodstuffs. By using foodstuffs produced on personal plots in a diversity of exchanges for goods and services (and especially bureaucratic services), villagers came to occupying a rather advantageous position in the consumer goods market, and to control at least some commodification processes.

Commuters villages like Buna were particularly advantaged in this regard. As they were usually well connected with nearby cities, they had good access to urban goods, as well as benefiting, through the *navetiști*, from higher revenues than villages composed solely of agricultural employees, and a better insertion into informal and black market networks. In addition, the mix of industrial employment with membership in the local cooperative also led to the development of quite flourishing family exploitations around personal plots. Apart from plots, cultivated usually with corn, these exploitations comprised a vegetable garden, a dozen or two poultry, one or two pigs and sometimes a cow. The most cherished element of these exploitations were the pigs, the possession of which became the mark of the minimal social decency in the Romanian countryside. In fact, in addition to supplying the most appreciated meat, pigs also supplied products (such as meat, sausages) valuable in keeping afloat in the ‘real socialist society’, that is in participating in the informal exchanges that connected rural people with their urban descen-

dants, friends or, most importantly, with powerful bureaucrats.

The *navetiști* contributed in a particular way to the flourishing of their family exploitation, and particularly to raising its beloved pigs. In fact, even if the members of the family working in the cooperative were able to furnish a significant part of the animal feed (by using corn produced on the personal plot, or the one they received in payment or simply stole from the cooperative), during the 80s, with the decrease in the quantities of goods distributed by the cooperatives to their members, the use of goods bought on the socialist market increased in importance. In this context, wheat, in the form of bread, came to occupy a particularly important place. While villagers did not cultivate themselves wheat on their personal plots of land, and only received minuscule quantities of this cereal as in-nature payment for their work from the cooperative, they gained a particular control on its use. In fact, during the 80s, the *navetiști* had increasingly recourse to buying bread for feeding their pigs. At the end of a long day of work in nearby industrial centres, the *navetiști* bought in urban bakeries low priced bread that they then brought into the village by commuter buses². A habitual image capturing well the particular meshing of industrial employment and urban goods markets with local family agriculture were the returning commuter buses unloading at the village bus station busy *navetiști* carrying huge bags full of bread. The pig, the bag of bread, and the bus were the icons of socialist 'prosperity' in Buna as well as the measure of their control of the market.

This use of bread as animal feed took place in the context of important changes in consumption patterns. Beginning in the 70s, as the *navetiști* gained access to urban markets and higher revenues, and began to emulate urban models of consumption, they became an important channel for the local transformation of consumption patterns. In addition, the communist regime ambition to control the circulation of goods resulted locally in the construction in the

70s of a 'universal store' selling industrially manufactured consumer goods, and... bread manufactured by the cooperative's bakery. Bought locally or in nearby towns, bread begun to be consumed more widely and more intensively in the village. At the end of the 80s, all village families included white bread in their menu on an almost daily basis, and occasionally fed their pigs with low priced black (rye) and white (wheat) bread. While maize *mămăligă* was still consumed, the frequent consumption of white wheat bread served as an indicator of the minimal level of respectability and modernity aimed to by all village households.

After the fall of the communist regime, the populist policies of the newly installed government tried to fight the dark legacy of deep consumer scarcity left by the Ceausescu regime. This led to a thorough transformation of the place and value foodstuffs had in market and non market exchanges. Thus, while the state groceries filled their shelves with more foodstuffs, these goods were exiting in a fairly swift way in formal exchanges and the black market, while their market and 'network' value were also dropping drastically. In fact, access to services furnished by the large bureaucratic state organisations were passing now more and more through money rather than goods that villagers could produce themselves (such as foodstuffs). From owners of goods sought after by all the society, the villagers came to be only owners of basic goods, of course necessary to their households survival, but of little utility as to obtaining money, other goods or again services.

The dismembering of socialist agricultural cooperatives led an important multiplication of family farms, as well as to the increase in their average dimensions (from 0.25 ha to 2.5 ha.). These farms cultivate now a more diverse variety of crops, including, besides vegetables and maize, wheat and potatoes. As maize continued to be used in the internal economy of family exploitations (for animal feed and human food), wheat came to be seen as the marketable crop of villagers, and to serve as an indicator of their po-

sition in the market of foodstuffs and more generally of consumer goods.

But, for villagers, wheat was doomed to have the same fate as the other agricultural products and to be confined to the 'subsistence' sphere of circulation. Up until 1996, Romanian agriculture was relatively insulated from the world market, as a result of the left wing government's will to save, and to control, though its protectionist policies, the lingering state and cooperative agriculture. From the 1989 to 1996, Romania presented a fairly good degree of self-sufficiency in respect to basic food staples (wheat included), while reducing their export to minimal levels. Moreover, what got to be exported from the national cereal production originated mainly in state farms and associations' crops, leaving small farm production largely outside transnational circuits of exchange. With the arrival of a right-wing government at the end of 1996, Romania engaged in a swift opening of its economy to world market influences, which deeply affected its agriculture. Trade barriers were lowered, and Hungarian chicken and wheat invaded Romanian domestic market. Suddenly, state and cooperative farms as well as family exploitations could not find any market for their products. Wheat, in particular, got stuck in state silos and, in the village, reintegrated, together with maize, villagers' barns.

Instead of praising this unexpected overflow of cereals, which, as such, constituted an image of prosperity before the second world war, villagers see it nowadays as an icon of their eviction from the market of foodstuffs and more generally of consumer goods. In fact, as the time went by, due to the decrease of their revenues (following the general decrease of the industrial wages' buying power), the villagers were marginalised vis-à-vis food as well as non food consumer markets. Having to deal with an agricultural production demanding increasing monetary revenues and producing diminishing profits, the villagers came to see their access to consumer goods obstructed. Wheat production served as the basis of the calculus that they were

using to measure this eviction. As one villager told me, bringing simple mathematics in support of his argument, 'I cannot buy anything for what I sell. I sell one basket of wheat for ten thousand lei (the national currency), but I buy a pair of trousers for one hundred thousand lei! How many baskets must I sell for buying a pair of trousers?' And he finishes philosophically: 'Why all your goods are expensive and all my goods are cheap?'

The eviction of villagers from the consumer market was seen as a loss of control over the commodification process and not as a simple refusal of the market per se. In fact, many times, foodstuffs and agricultural products produced by the villagers were compared to other goods on the market. For example, the price of wheat was compared with those of cigarettes, alcoholic beverages, or again Coca Cola. These were considered locally as luxury goods, related to social occasions, thus not intrinsically related to the vitality of one's households. From villagers' point of view, foodstuffs, being linked to the very vitality of persons and thus the nation, should circulate so that to profit to its legitimate producers which are themselves.

For villagers, wheat is indicative of urban-rural connections and, as such, of a world in which they came to have their access to modernity. This world was based on villagers' access to both industrial employment and agricultural non-monetary labour, to both locally produced agricultural goods and consumption goods circulating on the socialist urban market, to both 'modern' urban modes of consumption and ceremonial consumption of goods in local rituals. The present quietness of the central village square, largely deserted by the busy buses of the socialist era, the meagre load of goods carried by the few passengers returning from nearby towns are lived as an experience of loss by the villagers. These images indicate that, while they may no longer need, and even afford to, feed bread to their pigs, they have been rejected out of the circuits of exchange that have helped them connect to the outer world during socialist times.

Building on the symbolic connection between food and life, villagers construct wheat as a good that is indicative of Romania's place in and connectedness to the outer world. Thus, Romania is seen as having been before the advent of communism 'the breadbasket of Europe', while, during the communist time, as 'having fed Russians with its wheat'. Paradoxically, the global fate of Romanian wheat was better off before 1989, as the 'transition to a market economy' brought a halt to Romanian exports of wheat. Seeing themselves as 'producers of the country's wheat', Romanian rural people experience the return of the wheat in their granaries as a shrinking of their universe and a disconnection from the larger world. The pain is brought to cosmic dimensions, as, through the return of the wheat, Romania is outcast from the 'concert of nations' to an invisible, silent, almost non-existent role.

The return of wheat in local granaries is indicative, for villagers, of the larger decay and de-

struction of the Romanian economy, and, more generally, of the country as a whole. The ultimate cause of this destruction is seen by many villagers and urbanites as residing in the 'foreign interests' desire to ruin Romania. As one villager told me, 'With Ceausescu we were producing more [than now]. They have annihilated him, because he was selling cheaper than the others. Romania is alone [now, it has no more allies]'. The experience villagers have of the return of wheat in their granaries indicates perhaps the social apprehension of novel processes that confront the country in the post-socialist period. Through their reading of present developments, and echoing the inhabitants of the 'copper belt' of Zambia studied by James Ferguson, the Romanian villagers try to make sense of the experience of 'abjection' (Ferguson 2002) they are living following the disconnection of entire sectors of the Romanian economy from international economic circuits.

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Notes:

¹ As a village of the plains, Buna was fully cooperativised. Hill and mountain villages were, by comparison, much less affected by collectivisation.

² The bread used as a feed for the pigs was at the beginning mainly rye (dark) bread, but later the navetiști also included low price whole wheat bread.