

DOINA

# PETRESCU How to reclaim the common?

## The destruction of public property

Cities in Eastern Europe faced spectacular transformations during the last decade. We have witnessed there, more than in other parts of the world, a dramatic devaluation of the idea of 'common' and 'public' and a violent destruction of the existing public property. If during the socialist regime, the social crisis was mainly related to the lack of individual freedom, during the transition period<sup>1</sup> the crisis is more that of the public, the collective and the common.

In Romania, the devaluation of the notion of 'public' has started during the years of the communist regime. During this regime, public property was continually violated and abused and ordinary citizens have lost trust in a state governed by a corrupted unique party. That state was not anymore a guarantor of their public rights.; for the party apparatchiks, public property meant a property they can dispose of at their wish by means of power and without accounts to give; for ordinary citizen, public property did not mean anymore 'common property' 'the property of all' (as stated by the Marxist doctrine), but 'nobody's property'. In the socialist Romania, everyone was used to subvert or steal from the public property: workers were stealing goods and technical equipment from the factories, peasants were stealing products from the state own agro-industrial complexes or the agricultural cooperatives, commercial workers were stealing the merchandise they were supposed to sell, intellectuals were stealing time and cognitive values from their institutions, etc... The public property was subversively doubled by a stealth property, which recycled and traded what was subtracted from the public property. In a society whose rules were opaque and perverted,

notions like that of 'citizen' or 'civic rights' were empty of meaning. They were abstract notions in the Party discourse but not in reality.

It is in this context that the destruction of public property has been accomplished with the political changes and the transition to market economy. After 1990, important parts of public property including the main economic agencies (ie. factories, land, resources, transport, energy and communication infrastructure) were privatised.<sup>2</sup> Numerous public properties were retroceded by low to the former private owners that were dispossessed of in the first years of the communist regime: buildings, lands, forests, etc...

Parallely, most of the social housing estates that were publicly own were sold for symbolic amounts to their occupants in order to release public responsibility over buildings in bad conditions. In 18 years time, 70 percents of the state economy was privatised in Romania, from which only 18% involved the transfer of shares in companies to citizens, as part of the so called Mass Privatisation. These shares were quickly sold further by the poor citizen who needed survival money. They became neither public nor private owners anymore.

## The destruction of community

The destruction of public property has been paralleled by the destruction of the idea of community, at all levels. In the communist regime belonging to 'the community' was compulsory, and for this reason, as a counter reaction, the notion of 'community' was implicitly subverted and devalued. Also, in the last years of the communist regime, all forms of community were alienated by the paranoiac obsession of being surveyed and denounced for the smallest protest expression or comment against the regime.

People were struggling for survival, and all social and professional relations were dominated by this preoccupation. The only form of community which prospered during this period was the family and the close circle of friends which

was the only space one felt socially and psychologically safe.<sup>3</sup> This micro scaled community was a community of resilience and survival.

## The destruction of the city

In addition, and unlike other socialist countries, in Romania the sense of publicness and community has been consciously and programmatically destroyed by Ceausescu's dictatorial regime. Parts of cities, including historic centres and important monuments, were erased to leave place to megalomaniac constructions or mass housing estates (ie. it was the case with Bucharest) and villages were destroyed by 'systematic planning'. In Ceausescu's totalitarian regime, the top down decision making in the planning process emanated directly from the Conducator himself, which made very difficult any type of contest.<sup>4</sup> In the socialist regimes, there was no veritable tradition of civic disobedience. The passive, obedient position was part of the normality.

With few exceptions, most of the Romanians became used during the communist totalitarian regime with being careless about their cities, with the abuse of civic rights and the non respect of law. They internalised the fact that the city has no value and no memory to preserve. The violent process of privatisation of the common property during the transition period of the 1990s went almost without reaction and was encouraged by all different governments that were in power. Parks, rivers, streets were privatised as a result of the retroceding of former private properties to their original owners or through new spellings and transactions with the new developers.

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housing estate. The public budget was maigre and continued to be abused and badly managed by the different governments.

In a country where frustration has been accumulated over years, acquisition, possession and consumption became the new imperatives. Everybody's dream is today to have a prosperous household, to possess a flat in a private development or an individual house in a city healthy suburb. The sense of ownership has become exclusively private.

## Reclaiming a new collective subjectivity

What will happen with the derelict neighbourhoods made out of prefabricated units that were never renovated since their construction? What will happen with their poor inhabitants who have acquired their flats for symbolic amounts and became now unemployed and without means to renovate and maintain them? What are the rights of these 'property owners'? How do they face the future - the economic crisis, the energy restrictions, the shortage of resources, the climate change? How these atomised city dwellers could ever become engaged citizen? How could they become interested in defending collective and common property if there is none left? How could they still do something about a city which was never taken care of? How will these cities look like when the privatization process is completed?

What will happen with the green space in the city which is constantly under threat to be privatised and transformed into shopping Malls or gated estates? What will happen with the public squares which are more and more occupied by private businesses?<sup>5</sup> What will happen with the cultural centres and the youth houses, which were empty during the socialist regime and are now transformed into bars and night clubs?

How to engage people in a struggle they never had? How to deal with their long term passivi-

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PHOTO BY Emma Věšjić

Nemanja Cvijanović  
Applause! [action/video]



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Applause! [action/video]

ty and frustration and how to reconstruct their desire and motivation to act?

Reclaiming the city should start with reclaiming a new collective subjectivity.

We need to contribute to the reconstruction of collective subjects, initiate cultures of cooperation and collective use, create moments of collective enunciation... A starting point could be the networks of resilience that were functioning during the communist regime: the activation of friendship relations and neighbourhood solidarities, the occupations of interstices and derelict estates for urban agriculture and alternative production, culture and education, the collective renovation of social housing estates, the claiming back of the streets and squares for parties and demonstrations. We need to learn how to be, to think and to do together in our cities... We need to reconstruct the common again (and again), in numerous attempts, in many ways, in time, in movement.

As Toni Negri has stated “the production of subjectivity is not an act of innovation, or a flash of genius, it is an accumulation, a sedimentation that is, however, always in movement; it is the construction of the common by constituting collectivities”<sup>06</sup>. ■

“How to engage people in a struggle they never had?”

01 “Transition” is the keyword in talking about the radical transformation of the political and economic structures in the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe over the last 18 years. This period of post-communist transition is an experience which is neither yet completely defined theoretically or politically, nor indeed predictable from a sociological point of view. A part of these countries, including Romania, managed to accomplish two of the major aspects of the transition: the transition to a market economy and the transition to Europe, basically the inclusion in the European Union.

02 With small differences, this privatisation was encouraged by all political parties for different reasons: first, this was the condition imposed by the international institutions for the EU integration and second, all political parties which have participated in the transition governments were composed by recycled former apparatchiks and representatives of the political and economic oligarchy of the socialist times (ie. government representatives, factory directors, ministry functionaries, political police and military leaders,) who were interested in privatisation because they were at that time in the best position to privately acquire public properties: they were those having access to information, having the money and the connections for, etc...

03 The family as social unit got reinforced and became the social activator in the regime of transition. Private property was restructured around family, and the social and economic familial networks were reinforced. If there is a type of community surviving in the period of transition, this is one reorganised around family interests and conducting somehow to a regressive type of sociality, regulated by and limited to family relationships.

04 In the case of the destruction of the historic center of Bucharest some protests were organised by the order of architects but were very soon silenced. As students in Bucharest in the 80s, we have found our own form of protest, documenting loss and memory of demolished areas, exhibiting images of destruction, engaging in different forms of dissidence)

05 For example, in Iasi, a 350000 inhabitants city in the North East of the country, a business center will be developed on the location of a historic park by the owner of the main Mall in the city. In Rm Vilcea, a 100000 inhabitants city, a shopping centre has been built on the location of a central park and a mega store on the civic square.

06 Antonio Negri, Constantin Petcou, Doina Petrescu, Anne Querrien, What makes a biopolitical space? A discussion with Toni Negri, in *Eurozine* 2008 (<http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2008-01-21-negri-en.html>)

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