

Calin Goina,

The role of the urban legends in the Romanian collectivization process: 1949-1962

Research report.

My research aimed to inventory of the narratives recorded by the Romanian section of the Radio Free Europe archives that were used to oppose the collectivization process during the 1949 and 1962. I surveyed the text-based data from the following collections: 200 Agriculture: Collectivization, 1959, 202 Agriculture: Collectivization: Annexed farms, 1952 – 1957, 202 Agriculture: Collectivization: Forced collectivization, 1951 – 1961, 202 Agriculture: Collectivization: Forced collectivization, 1960, 202 Agriculture: Collectivization: Propaganda, 1951 – 1957, 202 Agriculture: Collectivization: Resistance to collectivization, 1951 – 1961, 202 Agriculture: Collectivization: Resistance to collectivization, 1957 – 1963, 202 Agriculture: Collectivization: Simple associations: IAS [Intreprinderea Agricola de Stat: State Agricultural Industrial Unit], 1955 – 1960, 202 Agriculture: Collectivization: Zootechnical farms, 1952 – 195, 214 Agriculture: Kulaks, 1951 – 1962, 812 Culture: People's education: Cultural centers, 1948 – 1977, 1100 Ethnic minorities: Germans, 1951 – 1962, 1901 Labor: Brigades, 1951 – 1964, 1909 Labor: Stakhanovism, 1951 – 1970, 1911 Labor: Women, 1951 – 1967. I also used the items that are already on line, for the period previous to 1957.

I build on Somers' (1997) concept of "narrative," situating her approach in the tradition of symbolic interactionism, in the context of Goffman's frame analysis (1974). I see the accounts shared by the social actors as the main elements through which "we come to know, understand and make sense of the social world and through which we constitute our identities" (1997: 82). Thus, according to Somers, narratives "are constellations of relationships (connected parts) embedded in time and space and characterized by (...) causal emplotment" (1997: 82). Somers addresses a social actor who is embedded in temporally and spatially shifting configurations. The narratives used by subjects (or the narratives available to them) are not their invention *ex nihilo*: rather, they are chosen from the panoply of already available stories (Somers 1997: 86). In

order to situate the ‘available’ narratives used to describe and make sense of the process of collectivization I also build on Kligman and Verdery’s (2011) groundbreaking analysis of rural Romanian between 1949 and 1962, and on the case-studies offered by Dobrinicu and Iordachi (2009).

I built also on my previous involvement in studies of Romania’s collectivization. As a graduate student in sociology at UCLA I was a part of the team gathered in 2000 by Gail Kligman and Katherine Verdery to study the Romanian collectivization. I did fieldwork in Western Transylvania, explored the National Archives of Arad County, and published a case-study on this issue (Goina 2009).

For my current project I start from the question:” How was the process narrated at the time of its unfolding, by informers who had the chance to talk about it on the other side of the Iron Curtain?”

In my view there are two opposite meta-frames the way collectivization is being narrated. The first is the anti-collectivization discourse that states that the process meant enslaving the peasant. As the collectivization was achieved, there remained no hope for the peasant: Romanian villagers were already populated by alarm clocks that woke the collective farmers at dawn for their daily toil.” (Oprea, 2009: 75). The opposite position states that we cannot understand the story of collectivization if we lose from sight the neglected dimension that the Communist policies had upon the peasantries in Eastern Europe: “very significant changes took place in the socialist period, which led to major improvements in the material conditions of large sections of the population.” (Hann, 1995: 29). I think that the opposition of the two position is superseded by the stance of Kligman and Verdery that I will use in my approach: “Collectivization brought undeniable benefits to some rural inhabitants, especially those who had owned little or no land. It freed them on the laboring on the fields of others, and it increased their control over wages lending to their daily existence a stability previously unknown to them. For many, however, collectivization was the major trauma of the socialist period” (Kligman and Verdery, 2011: 3).

Without denying the trauma of the collectivization, I leave from the assessment that there is an modernizing trait of the process of the collectivization of the agriculture for the lives of a multitude of peasants. This attribute of the process is neglected in many studies of the era and it is worth exploring. Therefore I was especially interested in establishing whether in the Radio

Free Europe collections there are interviews that cover this aspect of the collectivization process, especially as in the era, the Radio Free Europe was an ardent critique of any idea that the communist regime can do anything positive for Romanian society. Thus, I discovered the transcript of a broadcast that is highly suggestive of the Cold War type of discourse of the radio in June, 1952. The broadcast ends addressing the dismissal of an important Communist official as a “right wing opportunistic deviationist:” “However, some among the criminals of today [namely, the leaders of Romania’s Communist Party, CG] are being liquidated by their very masters, thus making easier the task of those who will have to distribute justice after the liberation. (...) They do forget, the manic criminals from Kremlin, that in 1930s the mankind allowed them to assassinate millions of peasants. Given the current international tension, it is very unlikely that Stalin could risk famine and civil war in Romania. If he does it, it may well be that this will be the straw that will break the camel’s back” (Radio Free Europe, 1952). Given the tone of this type of broadcasts, I expect that the ‘criminals’ of the day were not framed in interviews addressed to the Radio as modernizers. However, modernizing dimensions of the collectivization process do surface in the interviews I read.

I begin with an instance in which the new emphasize put on consumption goods is missed. As the peasants could not invest in land any longer, they turned toward improving their houses and toward consumption. However, addressing the hopes for the future of the Romanian peasants, for instance, one interviewee declares in 1960: “of course anyone can understand that it is impossible that the Romanian peasant is better off under the communist regime that, instead of the polenta and ‘opinci’ [the traditional peasant shoes] gives him pretentious empty promises” Item No. 4450/60, Box 31, 300-60-1, Agriculture. While things were difficult for the Romanian peasants in 1960, it is still hard to imagine that the person who gave the interview did not realize how quaint he sounded in talking about polenta and ‘opinci’ in a decade in which Romanian peasants gave up those traditional shoes in favor of the mass produced shoes and boots.

The same emphasize in the ‘modernizing’ trend in which peasants bought superfluous consumption goods is highlighted in another interview, this time from 1962: “the value of a work day is 27-28 lei in average, out of which 8 lei cash and the rest are paid in kind. Out of the money that peasants are supposed to receive, a large part is used for objects that they do not need, but the consumption of which is compulsory. Such as, radio sets, which are not available

in Constanta, furniture, and quotas for gathering construction materials for their future houses. (Item No 632/62, 300-60-1, Box 31)”

As they lost the land, the peasants could not use their children any longer as agricultural hands, and allowed them to go to school (hand in hand with the new regime’s policies of alphabetization and education.) The increase in the level of education that is adjacent to the collectivization process is present in the following interview: “As about [educating] the youth, things are going rather easy as the youngsters are seduced by various conferences followed by dance evenings. Also, the young offspring of collective farm members are sent to schools in towns, or even to the university, and sometimes one returns to the village as an agronomist, doctor or teacher, as a bait to lure thousands of young workers (...) in the political trap of the enslaving communism. Item No. 4450/60, Box 31, 300-60-1, Agriculture. New agricultural technologies were brought to the Romanian village as the land was labored on large areas and under the guidance of college educated agronomists who began to be recruited by the kolkhozes. This element of modernization is reflected in some of the discourses recorded by the same interview: “Some older peasants are against the [new] methods of irrational land cultivation (such as seeding ‘in cross’ (...) or using hybrids). (...) However, the great specialists in agronomy of the [Communist] regime keep using these so-called advanced Soviet methods although they realize that the flour is not as good as it once was, and that the corn sticks to the cooking pot.” Item No. 4450/60, Box 31, 300-60-1, Agriculture.

Another view that the face of the Romanian village was changed as a result of the collectivization is transparent in a record that links collectivization with a rise in the chances of being unemployed in the socialist village: “As the collectivized lands are cultivated using tractors and thresher-harvesters the chances to find work for those who are able to do it are reduced with 50%, as compared with the total of the available working-force. (...) Is it very true that culture houses, schools, crèche, maternity houses are being built in the villages but the chance to find a work place is not available for the majority of the peasants.” Item No. 454/62 300-60-1. Box 31, 202 Agriculture .

Last but not least, there is a longing for the ‘traditional’ village that is being shattered by the new ‘socialist’ village re-created by collectivization, as clearly illustrated by this interview:

“Before communism, the village life was calm and plentiful. (...) Every Sunday people dances in national costumes and they were celebrating the various feasts respecting the traditions. (...) The village has been transformed. People are poor, they do not plan for the future, they do not care about the way they dress, they don’t care any longer for their houses, or for the future of their children. Mirth lacks even from the occasional weddings, that take place in miserable conditions.” Item No. 3170/60, 300-60-1, Box 31, 202 Agriculture

In conclusion, my survey of the collectivization records of the Radio Free Europe Archives stresses that the collectivization voices ‘recorded’ by the analysts of Radio Free Europe engaged in a dialogue with the communist regime’s claims. The specific trait of the narratives archived at Radio Free Europe illustrates a ‘gaze’ that positions the informant on the mid to higher status of the stratification system of the pre-communist regime. The narratives reveal the major disparities between the rural and non-rural areas in Romania: lack of communication between urban elite and the village world. The dominant line of these narratives position the peasant in an fabricated rural arcadia, happy with his fate and desiring only to ‘upheld’ the tradition.

The modernizing trait of the collectivization process is mentioned in several instances in these accounts. Not denying that the modernization took place, the records frame it in a negative light, confirming however that this attribute of the collectivization is an irreducible component of the process.

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