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Identities in Transition: Gendered Representations of the Self in Post-Communist Romania

Most anyone who has visited post-communist Eastern Europe is immediately struck by the ubiquity of female sexual imagery, apparent not only on billboards and television advertisements but also in the form of actual women strolling down the streets of urban centers and provincial roads alike. In contemporary Romania the new ideal of feminine beauty is a heavily made up, perfectly coiffed, sensually clad, and invariably slim young woman—what many Western feminists might refer to as the post-socialist Barbie doll, her overarching message being “beauty is the most valuable female asset and...every woman should try to herself sexually attractive to men and become a source of men’s pleasure.”¹ Yet, while such imagery reflects its Western counterpart, the Romanian media, with its almost complete absence of censorship, pushes objectification one step further. Evidence of this is readily apparent and easily accessible on prime-time stations—some of which go purely pornographic after certain hours—as well as on the pages of the seemingly unending pornographic magazines which are sold at virtually every store and street kiosk in Romania. At times this imagery takes on an especially violent character, as in the April 2000 issue of Romanian *Playboy*, which featured an article instructing husbands on how to beat their wives without leaving marks.² (The article was later casually dismissed by *Playboy’s* Romanian editor as an April Fools Day joke.) Yet, because these images are in fact unrepresentative of the vast majority of women they obscure rather than reflect the realities of women’s lives. Women are thus at once ubiquitous in Romanian popular culture and at the same time invisible.

Such uniform and often demeaning representations of women in the media have been attributed to a variety of factors, among them a resistance to the sexual Puritanism of socialism and embrace of Western styles to the masculinization of the public sphere and return of traditional gender identities under the present neo-liberal system. Yet while scholars have critiqued such representations, they have not adequately explored how women have responded to or resisted them; nor have they specifically explored how actual women have sought to represent the self in the postsocialist context. Just as the media has presented a homogenized and objectified picture of women in post socialist countries, so too scholarly investigations on women and post-socialism have presented a simplistic, predominately negative view of women’s lives during the transition.³

¹ Krassimira Dashkalova, 2001, p. 249

² For a detailed analysis of this article see Jill Massino, “How to Beat Your Wife without Leaving Marks: An Inquiry into Gender Relations in Post-Communist Romania,” conference paper, presented March 2001, Indiana University.

Arguing that the embrace of neo-liberalism and shift to a market economy has resulted in the return to traditional gender roles, including women's return to the home, scholars have tended to present women as powerless victims of the transition. Some women's NGOs, by constructing a narrow definition of women based on need, have in turn reinforced and further perpetuated such discourses.⁴ Essentially, then, the representation of East European women--in the cultural, political, scholarly, and non-governmental spheres—have presented a limited and relatively powerless view of female identity in which women appear as objects of male sexual fantasy or victims of economic and social change. In both cases women's complex experiences of the transition and active responses to it are obscured.

But there is gender as it is lived by individuals and gender as it is represented by institutions and other discourses. Thus, in order to fully understand how women have been represented during the transition, women's self-representation must also be explored. For example, while most women play little role in media constructions of women—other than posing for a photograph or starring in a commercial--some women play a role in appropriating these images for personal gain or need. Imitating what they perceive as the glamorous and carefree lifestyle of the modern Western woman, some women conform to idealized notions of female beauty and behavior as a means of attracting suitors or securing work and supporting their families.⁵ Women are thus using the very mass cultural symbols which ostensibly disempower and objectify them as tools for career advancement and as a basic strategy for survival. This is a representational strategy employed by women; a means by which they are negotiating the difficulties of the transition by utilizing a type of gender identity for a particular end.

Yet while such identities resonate within and have been successfully mobilized by a minority of women, these models are far from the prevailing cultural model for most women. Instead, as my talk will illustrate, in contemporary Romania, many women also identify closely with socialist and traditional notions of gender identity—one reason why their experiences of the transition have been so personally and psychologically taxing. In particular, work, in conjunction with motherhood, continues to be a strong source of identity for many women I interviewed. Thus, rather than having simply vanished as some scholars have argued, “traditional notions of gender have been combined with more modern ones, and communist ones have been utilized to claim access to certain resources, and rights.”⁶ In essence, post-socialist societies have witnessed what Jean Robinson and Janet Johnson refer to as a “multiplication of gender identities.” This gender multiplication is a response both to challenges faced by women and the opportunities offered to them as a result of the transition. In this sense, gender multiplication can be either constraining or empowering.

Operating from this theoretical frame, this paper shifts the focus from cultural, political and international representations of women to personal self-representations. By

⁴ See Kristen Ghodsee, “Feminism-by-Design: Emerging Capitalisms, Cultural Feminism, and Women's Nongovernmental Organizations in Postsocialist Eastern Europe. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 2004 vol 29, no 31.

⁵ This strategy has also been employed by young women at the university in order to receive passing grades on their entrance exams and other assignments and, according to a number of sources, is also evident on the high school level.

⁶ Quoted in Janet Elise Johnson and Jean C. Robinson, *Living with Gender and Post-communism in Central and Eastern Europe*. forthcoming from Indiana University Press, p. 1

examining, through oral histories, how women constitute their roles and identities, I hope to shed light on the diverse way in which women are representing themselves during the transition. Like Robinson and Johnson I agree that gender multiplication has been dangerous for some women, evident most visibly in the feminization of poverty, valorization of traditional gender ideology and the exclusion of women from the political, and to a lesser degree, the economic sphere. However, I also agree that for some women, gender multiplication has had positive implications, increasing their ability to negotiate the system and mobilize their gender identities in order to increase the options and choices in their lives.⁷

Women's Perceptions of the Transition

Among my female subjects, perceptions of the transition varied considerably. Although some felt that the transition has been particularly difficult for women as a result of increased unemployment, the curtailment of social services, and rise in violent crime, others argued that, despite these difficulties, the transition has been empowering by providing women with more opportunities for realizing their goals and improving their lives. Similarly, while many blamed the system and corrupt politicians for the rise in female unemployment and poverty, others claimed these were simply excuses based on the outmoded belief that the government—rather than the individual—should be responsible for guaranteeing the individual's well-being. I will begin by examining the recollections of women who consider themselves victims of the transition, analyzing their self-identities within the broader frame of communism and post-communism. I will then address the recollections of women who consider the transition as a platform for increased social, professional and personal mobility.

Attitudes toward the transition were, to some degree, a function of age and social position. Women laborers in their 40s and 50s were by far the most apprehensive about the transition, associating it with hyper-inflation, the privatization of industry and increased female unemployment, and the loss of community and a respected value system.⁸ Although some women more generally blamed the shift to a market economy for their problems others specifically cited corrupt politicians and wealthy businessmen, “the big fish,” as they referred to them, “who have taken everything for themselves.” Since many of the women in this age group had lost their jobs--or feared they were on the verge of losing them—due to the closure of factories, one of their biggest concerns was their ability to adequately support their family. However, their notion of support included not just material support but also emotional support. The comments of Irina, a former

⁷ Johnson and Robinson, *Living Gender*, p. 2

⁸ A commonality among the respondents who viewed themselves as victims of the transition is that, while poor by American standards, they have not yet sunk into desperate poverty in Romania. Because such women do not typically appeal to NGOs for support they constitute a silent majority that is simply getting by. Yet at the same time these women do not feel empowered to speak out. The cult of silent suffering remains strong in Romania, even if it is no longer ennobling.

seamstress, who lost her job at the Red Flag factory shortly after the fall of communism is a case in point.

I hoped that it would be better, but, sincerely, I am not satisfied...I have the impression that they destroyed everything that was good. It wasn't better then? To work from 8 to 3, cook dinner, read, look after my kids...Now I come home at 5 or 6, deathly tired, unable to do anything...I just want to be healthy and to be able to live a decent life.⁹

In 1993 Irina and her husband, formerly a mid-level manager at the Red Flag factory, began a small business selling trinkets and mass produced clothing. The couple rises at three or four o'clock in the morning to drive to neighboring tourist sites where they sell their wares and return home later in the evening. They work six days a week. Though from a material standpoint Irina has succeeded in adapting to the constraints imposed upon her by the market economy, her reinvention of herself has come at a price: her time and health. Arriving home, deathly tired, she no longer has time for reading or needlepoint, let alone cooking herself a decent meal. However, she is also distressed about the lack of time available for her family, since in order to provide for them materially she must sacrifice her traditional role as nurturer. Because Irina's self-identity is highly relational and rooted in a strong sense of obligation to others, namely her family, it is unsurprising that she longs for the stability and regularity of life under communism. By offering her a stable income and ordered schedule, her job under communism allowed her to fulfill the dual role of economic provider and caretaker—which she, incidentally, never referred to as the double burden—while providing her the time and space for personal growth. The loss of that job has resulted not only in loss of entitlements--such as subsidized vacations and housing—but has hampered her ability to fulfill her multiple duties, duties which are central to her identity as a woman.

As with Irina, this feeling of sacrifice was common to many unemployed or marginally employed women laborers in their 40s and 50s. However, because this sacrifice involved forsaking or at least compromising the role of caretaker, it was not construed as the typically ennobling type of sacrifice which is central to traditional female identity in Romania. Rather, it was a sacrifice born of the transition to democracy, which, with the dramatic inflation since 1989, had necessitated taking on additional work. Such sacrifice had not only negatively affected women's physical and psychological health, but also the nature of family relationships, as is evident in one woman's comment:

Relations have changed very much. I think they took from the West influences which are not to our advantage. People work until five, come home, eat, and at eight, go to bed. A husband doesn't even have time to court his wife anymore.¹⁰

For this woman, lack of time is part of the larger systemic import of the West. By adopting the political model of the West, democracy and a market economy, Romania has adopted something foreign and disadvantageous to its people. The result has been a weakening not only of social relations but intimate relations between husbands and wives. Interestingly, however, this respondent, although female, conceives of the loss in

⁹ Interview I.10.a, Summer 2003.

¹⁰ Interview I. 39. a, Summer 2003.

terms of male loss (men no longer have time to court their wives) and fails to acknowledge that women also suffer from this loss of intimacy. More generally, it also obscures the fact that intimacy is only one aspect in which women have made sacrifices. Nonetheless, it offers a vivid commentary on how the transition has affected everyday life and gender relations.

Although, for many, a common frustration since the fall of communism has been the lack of time, for the unemployed it is the reverse—surplus time—which they found unsettling. Such was the case for Maria, an unemployed electrician,

In the communist period they guaranteed work...It didn't matter if you were well paid or just sufficiently paid, each person was important in their own way. We led a very industrious life, I came home from work, I washed, I ironed, I made food...and with all this I embroidered and knit, I had a very active life. Now I feel awful because it's very difficult to pass from a period full of activity to a period where time is dead. Now I'm looking for work, so that I won't go crazy.¹¹

Accustomed to constant activity during the communist period, Maria is resentful of what appears to her as seemingly endless time since it only serves to further accentuate the massive void in her life left by her loss of work. By providing her with economic self-sufficiency, freedom from strict, patriarchal codes of behavior, career advancement, and intellectual fulfillment, her job as an electrician had decisively shaped her sense of self. Her inability to practice her talent is thus not only demoralizing, but signifies a crisis in identity which is manifested in her feelings of depression, frustration and loneliness. These sentiments stem from her inability to contribute to the family budget and to engage in her trade and express herself professionally.

For both Irina and Maria self-identity is intimately bound up with their lives under communism. Although the state represented them uniformly as producers, reproducers and equal social citizens, it was through their experiences of working at the factory, living in an industrial city, raising a family, and vacationing at the seaside, that their self-identities developed. More broadly, work allowed them to participate actively in society, to contribute to their family's well-being, to interact socially with other women and men, and to apply their skills and talents. In their view, work is associated not only with increased self-confidence and personal autonomy, but a host of other developments which dramatically shaped the course of their lives. In their minds, the socialist state, though not necessarily pro-woman, was at least sensitive to women's needs both as workers and mothers. Additionally, by guaranteeing individuals employment, the socialist state accorded each individual with an identity.

As Lynne Haney found with her Hungarian subjects, Irina and Maria's world view is state-centered in that they were accustomed and expected the state to ensure their family's basic well being.¹² By curtailing social services and female employment, the new democratic system had stripped Irina and Maria of their "contributory identities," while at the same time rupturing other aspects of their identity. The framework which had allowed them to adequately attend to their families had thus essentially evaporated. From

¹¹ Interview, I.11.a, Summer, 2003.

¹² Lynne Haney, *Inventing the Needy: Gender and the Politics of Welfare in Hungary*. Berkeley, 2002, p. 223.

their perspective, then, the neo-liberal state is much less woman-friendly than its socialist predecessor—a view that is somewhat understandable considering the great lengths to which the government has coddled male industrial workers at the expense of female ones.¹³

Although none of my respondents referred to the new “democratic” state as explicitly anti-woman, from our conversations it was clear that, in their minds, the contractual relationship between state and citizen had been broken. Whether aware of the fact that the state has maintained this contractual relationship with men—by continuing to support male factory workers at the expense of female economic security is unknown. However, their general views of the state were, quite validly, negative.¹⁴ The new identities offered up by democracy, be they the sexualized office worker or submissive housewife appear foreign to them, lacking substance and resonance. Consequently, Irina and Maria, like many others who worked in factories during the entire communist period and perfected a particular skill, view themselves as victims of the transition.

Just as the previous organizational and existential framework disappeared, so the rules for securing employment were refashioned so that women who lost their jobs faced great difficulties in finding work. Although their unemployment was in part a result of their limited skills—which in a high tech world are not in demand—they were also a result of their age and physical appearance, something which is wholly out of their control. As a former office worker recounted:

*After the revolution if you want to get a job you need to be 30 years old to ensure that you'll find a job. You can be very good with a lot of experience, but everybody wants young people...because you can pay them less; but of course they have less experience.*¹⁵

As previously noted, in post-communist Romania beauty and sexual appeal is as important—and in some cases more important than—skill and intelligence in securing employment and advancing professionally. Indeed, the fact that beauty and youth are often the necessary requirements for finding employment is evident by scanning the classifieds section of many newspapers. Meanwhile, advancing professionally often requires additional favors on the part of women. In a “society of survival,” as Mihaela Miroiu has asserted, “being young, beautiful, and sexually available carries a great deal of social and cultural capital.” In such a context, the ability of women in their 40s and 50s to negotiate the effects of the transition is severely limited

These new rules for finding employment created a great deal of frustration within women who had grown up in a society in which work was a natural right of all citizens regardless of age and appearance. Under communism, femininity and sexual availability did not constitute the basis upon which one typically secured work and advanced professionally. Instead, because men and women were conceived of as equal citizens and all citizens were entitled to a job, work was viewed as a basic right, regardless of sex. However, in the current context, gender, along with age, plays a central role in securing

¹³ Haney, *Inventing the Needy*, p. 236.

¹⁴ For an excellent analysis of women’s participation in the market see Mihalea Miroiu, “State Men, Market Women: The Effects of the Left Conservatism on Gender Politics in Romanian Transition,” paper presented at Indiana University, fall 2003.

¹⁵ Interview I.18.a., Summer 2003.

work. Many women's perceptions of the market economy and democracy are thus based on values with which they cannot readily identify. For some this has resulted in an unwillingness to adapt to the new system because, as one woman summed it up: "those who are doing well make many compromises, you can't advance in a profession without making compromises or [to be] very beautiful and intelligent."¹⁶ Meanwhile, for those with outmoded skills and nearing retirement, adaptability was not an option at all.

Though beauty and youth have helped some women secure employment, other attributes, such as social status, assertiveness, high educational level, business savvy and/or personal connections, have also been instrumental in women's success during the transition. Some women have proved highly adept in refashioning, or wholly discarding, their previous identities in order to negotiate within the new market economy. Although they acknowledge the sacrifices they made, such as a weakening of old friendships or less time for their family, this is tempered by what many referred to as access to new freedoms (freedom of speech, travel, association) as well as new educational and career opportunities. According to these women, by expanding women's possibilities, the transition has offered women new opportunities for personal and professional growth. As such, women's successful negotiation of the transition had more to do with individual drive and motivation than external factors.

*Things have changed slowly, but in a good direction... we have moved toward democracy, but with difficulties, sacrifices, but in general in a good way. Of course it depends on the woman, but in general women have the right to do what they want with their life. As in America and in France, if you're in a good state you can do what you want, to reach anything, it is important to want it and to fight.*¹⁷

Though this woman never explained what was meant by a "good state"--though possibly she meant "state of mind"--the belief that women's success in the transition depended solely or at least primarily on individual initiative was held by a number of women. Liana is a perfect example. Formerly a prolific historian and museum curator whose husband worked as a journalist at the city's communist daily, with the fall of communism she quickly reinvented herself as the owner and manager of a small printing press in Braşov, something she recognizes with little modesty:

I became an important person. I'm no longer 20 years old but still I am a busy person. I am an active person and I hope to be useful, that is I feel that I am doing things that bring me satisfaction. Before I wrote a lot, professionally I was very happy because the things I did, research, writing for instance, I did with passion. I thought like a specialist. Now I think like a manager. I have changed many positions but I say that any woman and any person if he wants, can change their life, and in a positive manner, and do something else.

¹⁶ Interview, II. 5.a., Summer 2003.

¹⁷ Interview, I.16.a, Summer, 2003.

With privatization and institutional restructuring, Liana might well have lost her position at the museum. Recognizing this, she chose to develop her skills in other areas and integrate herself into the market economy. Though the cultural capital she and her husband acquired under communism perhaps also contributed to her success in reinventing herself professionally, she also attributes this to her strength of character and perseverance. Under communism, her identity was based not only on her role as mother and homemaker but as an academic professional respected by the party and the community. Her success in the post-communist period, while drawing upon these attributes, has also required business savvy, and the successful negotiation of the market economy. A self-proclaimed feminist and leader of the Braşov Association of Business Women, Liana's commitment to female equality and women's issues is evident in the support of local businesswomen and contributions to a local domestic violence shelter. Her belief that all women have the strength to change their lives is connected to her liberal feminist principles. The only way to change the "sexist mentalities," in her view, is for women to participate more actively in business, government and the public sphere more generally.

Valeria, manager of a local printing company, like Liana, also felt that women had the capacity for change, if they so desired. However, unlike Liana she casts women's difficulty coping with the transition as a personal problem to be remedied by individual women.

those that say it was better before have adaptation problems because any person who had preparation and knows how to do something doesn't have any reason to be afraid of it [the transition].

In Valeria's view, women who have not managed to integrate themselves into the new economy have "adaptation problems." In conceiving of women's adaptation problem as rooted in nostalgia for the past, Valeria fails to recognize that the massive systemic changes which Romania has undergone have meant that the skills, talents—or as she phrases it, preparation—of countless women are all but obsolete. Though her implicit point that women need to take greater responsibility for their lives is well taken, it remains that her view of the transition and women's supposed adaptability is based on her own, very subjective experiences as a highly educated and assertive woman with a valuable skill. Additionally, Valeria and Liana, as entrepreneurs, participate in the new private business sector, an area which has, at least for small businesses, been relatively woman-friendly.¹⁸ As a result, highly educated women have been highly successful in reinventing themselves as modern Romanian business women and have thus tended to view the transition as empowering.

Although Valeria volunteered no examples of how women might or should adapt to the transition, a young entrepreneur, Oana, offered a solution.

Women need to be more united and not make a tragedy out of this [the transition]...there is this tendency to say that women are discriminated against but they are not as discriminated against as they say. Even if they are, it's because they accept it. If they put their fist down and if they said no, then there would no longer be discrimination.

¹⁸ See Miroiu, "State Men, Market Women"

Like Valeria, Oana cautioned that women's difficulties were not simply the result of sexism and ageism in hiring practices—though she previously acknowledged widespread reality of this phenomenon for women over 40--or even the transition more generally, but also of women's passivity and lack of unity. She believes that women should unify to fight discrimination. While not detailing how this fight should be initiated or what it should entail, Oana's response indicates a need for a unified front in the face of discrimination. As a member of the Braşov Association for Women in Business, her strategy for promoting equality is associational in nature, yet it is highly elitist, reserved for businesswomen. Although the organization currently supports a domestic violence shelter, to my knowledge it has no program for helping everyday women fight discrimination. The association offers no common platform for women of various social, ethnic, and generational backgrounds to form a unified feminist movement, and even if it did, how might it appeal to women more generally?

Conclusion

Though I have only focused on select examples of women's self-representation, they illustrate that while some women's opportunities under the transition have been circumscribed, their identities still play a powerful role in shaping their conception of the self, their social role, and their relationship to the state. Though powerful, these identities are now being threatened by a new economic, political and social system, with different values and codes of behavior. Although some women have refashioned their identities and essentially reinvented the self in order to adapt to these rapid changes, others, often as a result of factors outside of their control (age, skill, personal connections), have been less successful in this endeavor. The result for the broader post-socialist context is the multiplication but also splintering of gender identities. This is evident in women who have been forced to compromise or subvert their role of nurturer in favor of their role of provider. More positively, it is evident in women who have integrated the persona of savvy business woman into (socialist) notions of emancipation through work. Another consequence is a widening social, economic, and existential gap between the victims and victors of the transition. Though there is nothing to indicate that women are more or less divided today than they were under communism, the complex effects of the transition, along with the diverse manner in which women have experienced and responded to it, has done little to foster unity among various groups of women. It appears that, while the multiplication of gender identities has increased opportunities for some women, it has not necessarily done so for all, nor has it provided a common framework for addressing gender inequality in post-socialist Romania.