

Calling Planet Marx: Nicolae Ceaușescu's Cultural Revolution

In Andrei Ujica's remarkable documentary, *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu* (2010), there is footage of the Romanian 'red bourgeoisie' getting down to the Bobby Fuller Four's 'I Fought the Law'. The montage cuts to choreographed hysteria in China and North Korea, where adoring crowds of factory and shipyard workers greet Ceaușescu. This brings home the shock felt by many Romanians, especially intellectuals, after the 'July Theses' of 1971 announced by the leader on his return from the Far East. If, in the capitalist west, the 'cultural turn' in marxism meant both a search for new forms of resistance and a 'retreat from class' into postmodernist pessimism, in Romania it meant a re-assertion of the iron law of one-party rule, propelling Romanian communism further along a trajectory which cut it off increasingly from the outside world and from marxism itself. At first, Ceaușescu's cultural revolution was paradoxically compatible with openness to foreign capital and created an internal coalition in favour of an increasingly 'dynastic' communism, but its overarching concern with autarky fatally weakened the regime, preparing the implosion of December 1989.

The re-assertion of ideological orthodoxy in July 1971 was all the more shocking as the previous years had seen increased openness to the west and internal liberalisation. In 1958, Soviet troops had been withdrawn and a programme of de-russification followed. The leadership of Gheorghiu-Dej refused to take Moscow's side in the Sino-Soviet split and, in April 1964, the Partidul comunist român (Romanian Communist Party or PCR) asserted its 'independence'. After Gheorghiu-Dej's death in 1965, Nicolae Ceaușescu continued this journey from 'minion' to 'maverick': receiving a state visit by Charles de Gaulle during the events of May 1968, condemning the Warsaw Pact intervention in Czechoslovakia, then receiving a visit by Richard Nixon the following year.

By the mid-1960s, all political prisoners had been released. Freedom of travel and expression improved considerably, and Ceausescu seemed to have found cultural allies in young 'oppositional' intellectuals who emerged in that period, notably the poets Ana Blandiana, Adrian Păunescu and Nichita Stănescu. Liberalisation also manifested itself in popular culture: in 1961, Cliff Richard's 'The Young Ones' was released in Romania, inspiring the formation of one of the nation's premier rock bands, Phoenix. Radios Belgrade, Monte Carlo, RFE, Beirut and Luxemburg were freely listened to and encouraged the penetration of pop music. There were, however, ominous limits: in 1969, the popular music programme *Metronom*, presented by Cornel Chiriac, was shut down after broadcasting 'Back

in the USSR'. Already at the end of the 1960s, there began a powerful campaign against hippie groups, and other 'exponents of capitalist decadence'¹. Nevertheless, 1969 saw the opening of a Pepsi-Cola factory and an exhibition of American art that included the previously 'degenerate' Jackson Pollock. The dead hand of the party did not seem to intrude too far into the living rooms of ordinary Romanians: in September 1968, it is calculated that 78% of Romanian TV programmes were 'variety' ones, 11.5% News, and 6% devoted to economic questions.²

The years preceding July 1971 were, recalled Blandiana, a period of 'unprecedented flourishing of literary life'³. This is illustrated in *Romania literară*, weekly journal of the Writers' Union, founded in October 1968 to break with previous Soviet cultural influence. The issues of 1970-1971 show the daring diversity on offer. On 1 January 1970, N. Tertulian declared: 'It is easy to observe that the thought of Marcuse concentrates fundamentally on a reinterpretation of the Freudian problematic in the light of Marx's famous thesis concerning the leap from the domain of necessity to the domain of freedom'⁴. Other articles featured Norman Mailer, Noam Chomsky, Roland Barthes and Marshall MacLuhan, while valorising exiled Romanian figures of the avant-garde such as Gella Naum, Victor Brauner and Eugène Ionesco. These were accompanied by works by the new generation: Blandiana and Păunescu, as well as 'onirist' poet Dumitru Țepeneag and playwright Virgil Tănase.

However, if Ceaușescu had expressed solidarity with the Prague Spring, it was through anti-sovietism rather than any shared critique of stalinism. The nationalist' turn in the PCR leadership, which arguably began with the 1952 purge of the 'Muscovites' around Ana Pauker, did not imply liberalisation: the Soviet troop withdrawal of 1958 was followed by a 'mini-terror' to prevent any destalinising contagion from elsewhere in the bloc. The intentions of Ceaușescu and his cohorts became clearer after his visit to China, North Korea and Vietnam in June 1971.

On 25 June 1971, Ceaușescu recounted his impressions of this tour at a meeting of the executive of the central committee of the PCR:

¹ Bogdan Barbu, *Vin Americanii! Prezența simbolică a statelor unite în România războiului rece 1945-1971*, Bucharest: Humanitas, 2006, p311.

² Adrian Cioroianu, *Pe umerii lui Marx. O introducere în istoria comunismului românesc*, Bucharest: Curtea Veche, 2005, p452.

³ Romulus Rusan, *Școala Memoriei 2005*, Bucharest: Fundația Academia Civica, 2006, p86.

⁴ *Romania literară*, 1 January 1971.

We were met by hundreds and hundreds of thousands of people, however not in thick crowds – as is the custom in our country – but in an organised manner: with schools, brass bands, sport games, and dances. The reception we were given in Korea was similar. I think we have to learn something from this, since everything was in good order. (...) There is an overall mobilisation of the people, from children to old people, all are mobilized, and tasks are assigned to them – to learn, to work, no one idles. (...) All of their cultural activity (ballet, theatre) was set on revolutionary bases. They said: we do not want any bourgeois concepts to get in here.

Ceaușescu contrasted this with the cultural situation in Romania: ‘Our cinematography is crammed with adventure films, and the theatre with western plays. We have taken out the revolutionary plays and introduced plays without any content whatsoever. We do likewise in television, where we discuss a lot, but do not do anything’. If Romania had made great leaps forward in the development of a ‘multilateral socialist society’, the party had to address the unsatisfactory nature of its propaganda:

What I have seen in China and Korea is living proof that the conclusion we have reached is just. Consequently, from this point of view as well, it is a very serious preoccupation with educating the people in a revolutionary, communist spirit.(...) Certainly we have state relationships, but what capitalism means must be shown. Otherwise, young people will turn up who will want to leave the country, believing they will live better abroad.⁵

It was therefore necessary to import maoist indoctrination tactics to limit intellectual unrest and prevent students from following other East Europeans along the path of rebellion. Propaganda would be expanded, tenets of socialist realism re-asserted in the arts, and the humanities and social sciences brought to heel.

The party leadership was not unanimously enamoured with what they saw in the Far East. Ion Iliescu, then an up-and-coming central committee member, later made a withering assessment of the man whom he would have executed in December 1989:

⁵ Central Historical National Archives, Bucharest,: central committee of the PCR, chancellery, 72/1971.

Ceaușescu did not speak any foreign languages. In fact, he didn't even speak Romanian! His qualifications were four years at school. He was a worker. An error of the Party. Almost illiterate... After the success of 1968, he is interested in no one else. The turning-point was in 1971, and the visit to China and North Korea. There, he finds his model. He can impose his personal control. He's afraid of being overthrown by the Soviets. So he decides to launch his own cultural revolution.⁶

At the time, another member of the delegation, George Macovescu, noted in his journal : 'Kim il Sung is extremely satisfied. But is this the future of mankind? North Korea seemed to me a well-organised barracks. But what has that got to do with socialism?'⁷ However, Macovescu kept such misgivings quiet and was soon appointed minister of foreign affairs.

The 'proposals to improve ideological activity' were a shock to writers. According to Blandiana, the July theses reminded them that 'we could not imagine freedom outside the class struggle, we must not forget that we are living under communism, that we are inside the system'⁸. The effect of the 'cultural turn' can be seen immediately in *Romania literară*. Certainly, there was still space for the centenary of Marcel Proust, but the front page frequently featured Ceaușescu, and, already at the end of September 1971, Aurel Baranga was calling for a 'True Art' that was 'militant and mobilising', attacking 'the philosophy of defeat and resignation, confected improvisations, poetry under the sign of moral somnambulism, theatre of savage violence': 'combatants in the service of a great epoch, we are called upon to create a great literature'⁹.

The liberalisation of previous years began to go into reverse: an Index of prohibited works was re-established and censorship of the press tightened up. The number of western musical artists visiting Romania declined sharply. Paradoxically or not, economic openness to the west continued to develop: by 1974, Romania's trade with the West exceeded that with the bloc; in 1975 it received US Most Favored Nation status.

The 'back to basics' line was hardly a return to or even a renewal of marxism-leninism. This period sees the sidelining of 'barons' associated with Gheorghiu-Dej and the beginnings of a personality cult and creation of a 'dynastic communism': the National Conference of 1972 saw the start of the irresistible rise of Elena Ceaușescu, whose son Nicu would eventually join the central committee at the Twelfth Congress in 1979. The 'cultural

⁶ Interview with the author, 27 March 2007.

⁷ George Macovescu, *Jurnal, 1, (1952-1982)*, Bucharest: Domino, 2006, p83.

⁸ Rușan, p86.

⁹ *România literară*, 30 September 1971.

turn' was very much an exacerbation of the nationalist tendencies in the PCR leadership. There were good reasons for this: Romanian communism had been traditionally very weak and owed its seizure of power in 1947 to the presence of the Red Army. It was only by playing the national card – and delivering economic growth - that it was eventually able to form a 'contract' with the subjugated population. Radu Cinpoș rightly points out the use of nationalism as a 'legitimizing tool': 'Gheorghiu-Dej's break from Moscow resulted in increased popularity and national support for the regime which banked on the propaganda-enhanced anti-Russian sentiment felt by many Romanians'¹⁰. When it came to the 'cultural revolution' of the 1970s, contrasts with countries with significant communist traditions, for example Czechoslovakia, became glaring, as Katherine Verdery points out: 'Had communist and socialist ideas been more robust prior to the Party's accession to power, these might have had more weight in its consolidation of rule. In their absence, however, the exhortations that evoked answer and disagreement were those concerning the Nation'¹¹.

There had to be total unity between party, leader and nation: 'The Party, Ceaușescu, Romania' became an omnipresent slogan. In 1973, to mark his fifty-fifth birthday, an enormous volume of eulogies, *Homage*, was published; in following years, 26 January became the occasion for solemn and grandiose ceremonies. Also in that year, Ceaușescu was made Doctor Honoris Causa by the University of Bucharest. He told the assembled academics: 'I am a peasant's son. I have now become an intellectual'. The Eleventh Congress of November 1974 approved the new programme of the PCR, which began with a thirty-five page history of Romania: the emphasis was less on class struggle than on the ideas of the territorial continuity of the Romanians from the most distant times and of the unity of the Romanian people. The party placed Ceaușescu in a pantheon of heroes that still included Marx, Engels and Lenin, but also Burebista and Decebalus, Kings of ancient Dacia (which had eventually been vanquished by the Romans), as well as later Romanian heroes Stephen the Great and prince Alexandru Cuza. It was the latter that are in the background of Constantin Piliuța's notorious composition, *The First President*, where Ceaușescu appears with sceptre in hand. As Lucian Boia points out, although the party emblem is on his sash, 'only sovereigns are present!'¹²

¹⁰ Radu Cinpoș, *Nationalism and Identity in Romania*, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010, p57.

¹¹ Katherine Verdery, *National Ideology Under Socialism. Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceaușescu's Romania*, Berkeley: University of California Press, p101.

¹² Lucian Boia, *History and Myth in Romanian Consciousness*, Budapest: Central European University Press, 2001, p223.

1974 also saw the launch of the vogue for ‘proto-chronism’. In an article for the review *Twentieth Century*, Edgar Papu argued that the national literary tradition was not largely inspired by western forms but, instead, was highly original. Moreover, Romanian literary creations had often anticipated creative developments in the West, such as dadaism and surrealism. This inspired attempts to valorise Romania’s ‘Dacian’ roots, as well as to show how Romania anticipated historical achievements in the rest of supposedly more developed Europe. For example, the bicentennial of the uprising led by Transylvanian peasant Horia was seized upon to show how Romania had done its ‘Revolution’ before the so-called ‘home of the rights of man’, France. Proto-chronism tapped into a national inferiority complex, vis-à-vis both the west and the Soviet Union, as well reassuring a regime that felt increasingly on the defensive after the Helsinki Agreement. In June 1976, Pierre Delaye, France’s new ambassador to Bucharest, reported on Ceaușescu’s closing speech at the Congress of Socialist Culture, where the Romanian leader had expressed clearly the cultural conservatism of his national communism, which the ambassador summed up, with a wink to the Vichy regime, as ‘Travail, famille, parti’:

The passionate tone which he used to denounce the immorality of Western civilisation confirmed, if this was needed, the extreme nervousness provoked here by ‘human relations’ with the western world. Put on the defensive, the regime has gone on the attack, perhaps imprudently. (...) The president recalled that the great national poet Eminescu had always attacked ‘those who wasted their time in Paris cafés’ and vilified ‘those who believe that today they can create better abroad than in the country where they were born’. The speech attacked the alarming state of affairs in the capitalist world where cinema and television had a pernicious influence on a youth intoxicated by spectacles of violence and drug-taking.¹³

If the ‘capitalist world’ was indeed attacked in official discourse – rather hypocritically, given flourishing trade – planet Marx seemed to be more and more light years away. Florin Constantiniu, who had been one of the many young intellectuals to join the PCR in August 1968, recalled :

¹³ Archives of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, La Courneuve: Series Europe-Romania, box 3649, 5 June 1976.

The Centre for Marxist Studies in Paris was barely known in Romania because we had lost interest in Marx. In 1975, the Nicolae Iorga Institute was to publish a manual on the history of Romania. I was asked to contribute a chapter on the creation of the feudal states. I began with a paragraph on the marxist thesis of the State. The director said to me: ‘Still going on about Marx?!’ Indeed, Romanian historiography was extremely nationalist.¹⁴

Certainly, there was a campaign to promote ‘amateur’ art: ‘worker-poets’, ‘miner-poets’, etc. But this 1970s form of ‘proletkult’ can be seen as a way of both brigading the population and pressurising a suspect intellectual elite. *The Autobiography of Ceausescu* shows how Chinese and North Korean massed choirs and dancers were transposed to Romania and a national setting. Of course, there were still luna parks and jazz clubs, but folklore and historical pageants promoted the cult of Nation and *Conducator*. It was dangerously symptomatic of this ideological drift that proto-chronist intellectuals found allies in two exiles, Iosif Drăgan and Mircea Eliade, both former members of the pre-war fascist Iron Guard. In 1980, when Ceaușescu made his second state visit to France, Eugène Ionesco wrote in *Le Monde* that *Conducator* was the Romanian equivalent of *Duce* and *Fuhrer*.

For some Romanian intellectuals, the cultural revolution meant that they did have to find the cafes of Paris and elsewhere to pursue their activities. Given the rapidly decreasing freedom enjoyed by independent rock artists and aficionados, Cornel Chiriac defected to the west. In March 1975, he was found dead in a Munich parking lot. Others travelled to Paris and chose to remain there: Dumitru Țepeneag, Paul Goma and Virgil Tănase, the latter incurring the regime’s wrath for ridiculing the Ceaușescu cult in the iconoclastic leftist magazine *Actuel*.

Not all those left behind in Bucharest, ‘le petit Paris’, suffered. Corneliu Vadim Tudor prospered as a poet of the ‘court’ of Ceausescu. Another dubious figure of this period is the erstwhile ‘oppositional’ poet Adrian Păunescu. Granted, his collection, *History of a Second* (1971), which dealt with the sensitive subject of his homeland of Bessarabia, now the Soviet Republic of Moldavia, was pulped by a vigilant regime. But Păunescu played a central role in the mass festivities extolling nation and leader. His *cenaclu Flacăra* (Flame circle) was, with the ‘Song of Romania’ festival, a form of mass cultural mobilisation, combining music, poetry and theatre. In 1968, Păunescu had received from Ceaușescu the country’s most

¹⁴ Interview with the author, 8 November 2011.

prestigious literary prize. Soon afterwards, he was writer-in-residence at the University of Iowa. He later recalled: ‘What I liked about America was the spirit of initiative. I realised that I too could become glorious in one night’. Back in Romania, Păunescu was instrumental in introducing the Beatles and Bob Dylan. Of the *cenaclu*, he declared: ‘Not even the Beatles can boast 1,600 shows with 12 million spectators’. Păunescu became one of the key cultural spokesmen for Romanian national communism, and, despite being vilified for his verse in praise of the ruling clan, and in particular for his close and public friendship with the dictator’s playboy son Nicu, he was later adamant that ‘Ceașescu was a complex man. He contained good and bad, like Nixon. He was not shot for his faults, but for the good things he did: resisting Russian colonialism, building the nation’¹⁵. The *cenaclu*’s extravaganzas were ambiguous events, interspersing pop music with folklore, eulogising the regime but also promoting a new generation of talented performers. Even for the outspokenly anti-communist literary critic Dan C Mihăilescu, Păunescu was ‘a tiny angel in a huge devil’¹⁶. For academician Eugen Simion, ‘the agitated and very inspirational Adrian Păunescu gave young people of the “blue-jean” generation the hope that all was not lost for them and that they did not have to feel shame or despair about being Romanian. Of course, it was not nice that he dedicated some verses to Ceașescu, but he was not the only one’¹⁷.

The fate of those still in Romania, but excluded from the ‘Court’, was less enviable, yet there was little opposition to Ceașescu’s cultural revolution. From Paris, Paul Goma expressed solidarity with the Czech dissidents of Charter 77, but intellectuals back home were cowed or divided, with the various sinecures, royalties and pensions offered by the regime sowing discord and rivalry. The combination of economic growth and appeals to national feeling kept the mass of the population on side and prevented any equivalent of the alliance between working class and intellectuals which had emerged in Poland. When miners of the Jiu Valley rose up in 1977, the intelligentsia’s silence was deafening.

At the Twelfth Congress of 1979, the Ceașescu regime could therefore feel assured of its power. When the veteran leader Constanin Pîrvelescu took the stand to denounce Ceașescu for turning the Party into his personal fiefdom, he was, as *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceașescu* shows, roundly booed. Pîrvelescu would spend the last years in extreme obscurity, which led some to believe he had been liquidated. However, despite the obstinate support of western powers, the writing was on the wall. The Polish crisis had shown the

¹⁵ Interview with the author, 31 August 1999.

¹⁶ Interview with the author, 26 January 2013.

¹⁷ Eugen Simion, ‘Portret neconvențional’, *Caiete critice*, 7, 2013, pp15-6.

vulnerability of a regime in debt, which encouraged a further move towards autarky. As Romania embarked on a breakneck repayment of its debt to western banks, particularly French ones, Ceaușescu summoned intellectuals to the Black Sea resort of Mangalia to exhort them towards further cultural orthodoxy.

Such voluntarism did not succeed in maintaining ‘hegemony’. Back in France, the botched assassination attempts by poisoned pen against Paul Goma and Virgil Tănase backfired spectacularly, leading François Mitterrand to cancel his planned state visit *sine die*. In Romania, the fact that the last Writers Union congress was in 1981 showed that the scribes could not be counted on, while, in 1985, after a spectacle where dozens died in a stampede, Păunescu’s *cenaclu Flacăra* was also suppressed. Another crucial cultural medium escaped the regime’s control: television. Ceaușescu proved, in the words of Adrian Cioroianu, to be ‘one of the leaders worst at using the potential of this propaganda vehicle’¹⁸. In the course of the 1980s especially, Ceaușescu and his family appeared on television too often, and for no good reason. The austerity drive also brought about the closure of studios and a drastic reduction in the number of channels and airtime. On the evening of 27 November 1970, six and a half hours of primetime TV had been devoted to the lottery draw, a cartoon, a Hungarian artistic film, and a programme on historian Nicolae Iorga. On 27 November 1987, a paltry two hours were devoted to the National Conference of the PCR, a visit by Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu to Egypt, a programme on ‘materialist-scientific education’, and, finally, a prize-giving at the ‘Song of Romania’ festival¹⁹. Perversely, the regime tried to distract the population by broadcasting *Dallas*, which may have shown a continued attachment to US ‘Most Favored Nation’ status (as well as, unconsciously, echoing the rampant dynastic communism at home). But by drastically reducing television air time, Ceaușescu only further undermined his own position and internal popularity. On 21 December 1989, he summoned the people to a rally at the central committee building. But instead of repeating the triumph of 21 August 1968, the crowd turned on him, and four days later he was dead, after singing the *International* to his firing squad.

However, it would be wrong to say that Ceaușescu’s ‘cultural revolution’ died with him. Proto-chronism still has its adepts. Corneliu Vadim Tudor effortlessly reinvented himself as a nationalist politician, leading the far right Greater Romania Party: in 2000, he reached the second round of the presidential election, losing to Ion Iliescu. Adrian Păunescu enjoyed a rich and enriching career as poet, TV presenter and politician: in November 2010,

¹⁸ Cioroianu, p444.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p464.

he was buried with full military honours, and his funeral broadcast live on all major channels. As for *Dallas*, the second series was broadcast on Romanian TV in January 2013. The film director Iulia Rugina observed with a certain melancholy : ‘The first episode had a big audience because viewers were nostalgic, nostalgic for the period in which they were young, the Communist period. But soon there was a loss of interest... They know the American Dream is lost forever’²⁰.

²⁰ *Adevărul*, 22 January 2013.