



CSAC Monographs 14

Power and Institutional Change

in

Post-Communist Eastern Europe

Edited by Birgit Müller

**Centre for Social Anthropology and Computing
University of Kent at Canterbury**

1999



CSAC Monographs 14

Power and Institutional Change

in

Post-Communist Eastern Europe

Edited by Birgit Müller

**Centre for Social Anthropology and Computing
University of Kent at Canterbury**

1999

13. Symbolic Construction of Urban Spaces – Symbolic Construction of Enemies

Margit Feischmidt

Reading Romanian newspapers, one can immediately find articles reporting on similar events in Cluj, a town in Transylvania such as:

'The town council voted for the statue, for the archeological excavation.'

'The Democratic Organization of the Hungarians in Romania protested against the modification of the traditional profile of the town.'

'The workers of the town council took down the Hungarian inscriptions from the facade of the Hungarian Theatre.'

'The leaders of the Hungarian Theatre and the Hungarian cultural organizations protested and put the Hungarian inscriptions back during the night.'

I do fieldwork in Cluj on phenomena of nationalism and ethnicity. Today's inhabitants are 75 percent Romanians and 25 percent Hungarians. The ethnic composition of the population has changed in the last seventy years owing to industrialisation and the political motivated national homogenization, the so called Romanization of the cities in Transylvania. In 1910 about seven times more Hungarians than Romanians lived there.

After 1989 Cluj has become both the centre of the most popular Romanian national organization and party, called the Party of the National Unity of the Romanians (PUNR) and the centre of the political organisation of the Hungarian minority and its cultural organizations. The first freely elected mayor of the town is the leader of the Party of National Unity.

As soon as the communist regime was overthrown, Cluj became a symbolic battlefield between the elites of the Romanian majority and the Hungarian minority. How has it happened? What have been the strategies used by the elite for acquiring and legitimizing their political and even their economic power? What have been the means through which the inhabitants of the town have been separated into two distinct and rig-

idly divided communities? How did these situations influence the cultural patterns organizing the relationship between citizens and power.

A statue of a national hero, Matthias Corvinus – a king of Hungary in the 15th century – stands in the centre of the town. The statue was unveiled in 1902 in the midst of one of the most spectacular ceremonies of the Hungarian Millennium celebration, attending to symbolize the idea of the Hungarian national state and to demonstrate the Hungarian character of the largest city in Transylvania. The region however was soon inhabited by more Romanians than Hungarians. After 1918, when Transylvania became part of Romania, in the dominant Romanian discourses the statue became the objectification of the national injuries that the Romanians had suffered from the Hungarians over the centuries. The idea of its removal or its rectification in the name of the 'historical truth' returned periodically in the local newspapers. Although the public debate between Hungarian and Romanian leaders and institutions on this topic went on with varying intensity, the statue with some modifications stayed in its place. During socialism however public debate about the statue ceased.

After 1989 the topic of the statue has come to be controversial again. In 1992 the newly elected mayor of the town ordered to put an inscription on the statue which emphasised – in the spirit of the Romanian historiography – the Romanian origin of Matthias. It stated that after he had become king of Hungary, he 'betrayed' his own nation by fighting against the Romanian neighbourlands. The unveiling of this inscription took place on a national holiday, which was the day of the Unification of Transylvania with the Romanian Kingdom in 1918. The unveiling was conducted as a national ritual by the mayor of the town with the assistance of clergy and military leaders. The participants, several thousand people, encircled the statue and they were surrounded by the police and the army. At the same time people, who didn't belong to that imagined community, were standing outside of the ring, on the peripheries of the square.

The reaction to the 'Romanisation' ritual was the restauration of the Hungarian meaning of the symbol. Some days after the above mentioned event the Democratic Union of the Hungarians in Romania protested with the symbolical 'reoccupation' of the statue. First the demonstrators took part in a religious service in the catholic church standing on the same square, then they walked around the statue in a silence procession. The participants of the protesting national ritual, the Hungarians, were

surrounded by the police and the army in greater numbers than in the earlier case, by which the 'others' standing on the periphery were more separated from them.

In 1994 on the same National Holiday a new statue was unveiled in the town, again with similar festivity. It represents Avram Iancu, a Romanian national hero, who was the leader of the Transylvanian Romanians during the revolution of 1848, when he fought against the leaders of the Hungarian Revolution and their national oppression. However, putting up a statue of this hero in Cluj wasn't a new idea. The issue appeared in the local media between the two world wars and was put in opposition to Matthias, who was then seen as a Hungarian statue.

The statue of Avram Iancu stands on a large square in front of the central orthodox cathedral built in the '20's, a place which was imagined as the second main square of the town. Since 1994 every important official event, ceremony, feast has been organized on this square, which was renamed after Avram.

The town has two symbolic centers now, which does not mean that the story of the old square has ceased. About a year ago, an archeological excavation was started very near the Matthias statue initiated by the mayor and his councillor. The 'Hungarian' interpretation of this action was that they wanted to remove the statue for good. In the protest organised by the minority organisation a shift of strategy within their politics was defined. Their leaders announced a new program of 'national radicalisation' with the pretext to save the national heritage.

Meanwhile the experts of the mayor said that the ruins of the Roman town, Napoca, were discovered there. They plan to establish an archeological park in front of the statue, representing the Daco-Roman continuity of the town and its inhabitants.

We are confronted with typical examples of 'inventing traditions'. Archeology is a classical instrument in the 'international cultural grammar of nationhood' (Löfgren 1989) for uncovering and recovering an authentic and ancient definition of the national community as a distinct people (Foster 1991: 241). Furthermore, there are rituals which contribute to the emotionalization and heroization of the past, and to the construction of a historical memory based on existing fears and injuries. There are performances of history which create an imagined reality of community-experiences (Kaschuba 1993: 245).

The ceremonies of the unveiling were not just Romanian national rituals, but also public events of Romanian people living in this town, while the demonstration was an exclusive action of the Hungarian people. Though in both cases we find people from both ethnic group present on the square. The regulative rules concerning the division and the use of the ritual space gave physical reality to the symbolic border between the two ethnic groups. The *communitas* homogenized by means of national symbols and the performance of the ritual was defined in its relation to the 'others', who were standing in fact or virtually outside of their ring, on the periphery. The ceremonies through the organisation of the ritual space have constructed and dramatized a representation of the social space. That is what Connerton (Connerton 1989) called representing or reacting the events or the habituated character of ritual performance.

If we step beyond Connerton and ask: What are the effects of these rituals after or out of ritual time, we will find that places and objects play a very important role in the mediation of meanings. The statues and the archeological park function in the same way. Through them past becomes present in the everyday environment.

Edmund Leach said that places do not just remind people of stories, which are linked to them, but where a close connection between the place and the story has occurred, the places gain the power to tell the story by themselves. A story enforces mythical validity and functions as a fundamental rule of the social behaviour and as a moral order only then, when it's closely linked to a place.

The two statues and the two squares became objectifications of two nations and two conceptions of the national past. They are embodiments of strategies incorporated in periodically repeated ritual performances, which define the one nation against the other. It isn't an abstract statement: in the center of Cluj there is a hole, an archeological ditch, where soldiers and workers begin to dig from time to time. This is always followed by the same discussion about how far and for what they dig. Next year there will be local elections in Romania. People have already begun suggesting in the local newspapers: the present mayor will finish the Daco-Roman archeological-park and he will inaugurate it.

What do the people think and say about these happenings in their town? Hungarians talk about what Romanians do or have done, that Romanians destroy the town and that they like to take what belongs to Hungarians and to erect new statues which symbolize the fight against

them. In contrast Romanians talk about what Hungarians do or have done, that Hungarians protest against everything, because they used to dominate this town and they would like to be still in power.

I stop here with my case study and I would like to make some final connections with the proposed topic of this conference: Continuities and Discontinuities of Power.

If somebody asked me, who is in leading positions in this town today, my answer would be short: The Party of National Unity of the Romanians play the main political role. At the head of the formerly state-owned large enterprises, which produce very little, but keep employing the majority of the active population, stand either old people or a new generation supported by the political elite, but both of them loyal to the present political leadership. Though their influence on economy is very little, the political power of the Hungarian minority organisation, which is also a parliamentary party, is significant, they have 25 percent of the votes in the town, while the Romanian National Party has about 50 percent.

As an anthropologist I am rather interested in a more hidden level, the cultural patterns of events which define power and organize the relationship between people and their leaders.

Since Foucault it is well-known, that classification, separation or even segregation of social categories are technologies of power. In this sense nationalism also demarcates and maintains classificatory boundaries, produces and reproduces ethnic differentiation (Williams, criticised by Foster 1991: 241). The case described above shows how rituals strengthen and institutionalize existing social or cultural differences. The categories performed have become the dominant way of representing society through public discourses, based on the debates on national heritage. Therefore, from this point of view there is no reason to speak about a dominant nation and an oppressed minority. I would like to show, that both of them are components of the same function, they produce the same categories and they use the same techniques of symbolic power. So from my perspective I see dominant techniques, which legitimize themselves and reproduce each other through dominant categories, in a continuous symbolic fight against each other.

Most of the studies analysing contemporary nationalism in Eastern Europe give the explanation that national identity and the belonging to an imagined community and order are answers to the situation of

'anomic' (Hobsbawm 1992). Peter Niedermüller sees the nation as a symbolic concept with the help of which social disintegration is abridgable. In the case of the ethnical mixed town studied by me the situation is a little different, and in this sense my experience and interpretation is near to what Katherine Verdery said about the whole country, Romania (Verdery 1992). Using the metaphor of Niedermüller, the bridge seems to be the nation not in the sense of belonging but of being constituted against the Other. In the focus of both the public and private discourses stands the concept of 'they', not the imagined 'we'. This kind of nationalism doesn't concentrate on producing horizontal solidarity, but on constructing and articulating the enemy images.

Through the bipolarity constituting the social being in the shadow of postsocialist nationalisms a strategy for creating identity survives, which was characteristic of the communist era. Katherine Verdery said: 'We might expect a transformation of communism's us-them into that other dichotomous social organization, ethnic distinction.' (Verdery 1992: 10) During the communist era the Other was constructed first as the Capitalist enemy according to the communist ideology, then as the Communist regime itself. After the fall of Communism the Other was turned to be the ethnic one. Together with this dichotomized categorical and moral order paternalism goes on existing, which was characteristic of the relationship between the social being and leadership during state socialism. Paternalism produces the disposition of dependency, which works against the real political participation, and against the freedom of the citizen to articulate his/ her interests.