

"Everything you always wanted to know about Romanians, but we're afraid to ask".

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STRAINUL MUSTE PE ROMANUL "FOREIGNER BITES ROMANIAN"

1. "Sintem prieteni"

In journalism it is said that when a dog bites a man it's not news. When a man bites a dog, however, that is news. "Timp de 2050 ani", Romanians have been biting foreigners. As long as I myself have been coming to Romania, since 1974, I have rarely

escaped being that special thing known as "strainul", "americanule", "voi, occidentali". Whether I was doing anthropological research in a village in Transylvania, or talking with students at Stefan Gheorghiu; whether I was a tourist trying to get a waiter to serve me in a restaurant, or a consultant for PHARE in a ministry, or just listening to some engineer-cum-taxi driver complain about how Romania has gone to hell, no matter where I was or who I met, I was always this object. People could use me to simply take my money, to bring them things, to pour out their frustrations to me, or to make political scenarios.

Being an object is sometimes fun. People talk to you as if you are not there. A group of Romanians on a train would talk about me, about straini, and would discuss among themselves as if I was not there in real flesh and blood. Every foreigner I know has experienced the way Romanians insist that "you will never know us". This is because we foreigners are naive, or because Romanians assume that other Romanians will lie to us. And every foreigner I know has heard Romanians insist that "we know all about you". "Am fost 10 zile in Germania. Stiu cum stau lucrurile in vest. Iti spun jo.."

So being an object can be amusing. After a while, however, it gets irritating. Foreigners want to be subjects, too. They want

friends. In the old days this was hard. Making friends takes time, and foreigners and Romanians were not allowed to get together. Friendships between Romanians and foreigners, when they did occur, took on an intensity of conspiracy. Friendship in the old days had an air of authenticity to it. The days, hours, and nights spent talking together--when this happened--the time around the kitchent table (where else to go anyway?), all this made foreigners feel good. This is why so many foreigners, and so many East Europeans, have a kind of perverse nostalgia for friendships in the old days. And this is also why East Europeans in the West complain that relationships there are so superficial. For before 1989, friendships really meant something. Friendship in Eastern Europe was a conspiracy against the state.

Such friendships were based on loyalty, and they were constantly threatened by betrayal. Hence, friends in Eastern Europe, and especially in Romania, were always testing each other. The "tests" consisted of the ability to keep secrets, and the ability to help each other with material prestations. Friends needed each other to survive not just emotionally but physically. Seen from the foreigner's point of view--at least this one--"friends are people who can do things for you, if he can't do anything for you he's not your friend."

Now this sounds somewhat cynical. Romanians might say I am talking about pile or relatii, but not real friendship. I think the line is not so fixed. In Romania all friendships had some practical component simply because everyone was lacking something and needed help to survive. Some help could come from family, others from pile, others from cunostinte si relatii. Other aid from within the organization (hence, the two PCRs, the formal and the informal, were intimately related). And finally, there was the help of friends, both material and therapeutic help.

In the West, friendship and practical matters are supposed to be separate: "friendship and business don't mix". In the East friendship and money were always mixed. I suspect that today, as Romanians privatize their economy, friendship is now starting to take on a new character. Friends who start business ventures together are starting to get angry at each other. The disloyalty of the old days--prietenul meu s-a dus la securitate si a s-a spus...--is now replaced by am facut atita lucruri impreuna, sintem prieten de 20 ani si nu mi-a inselat cu bani.....

Where is the foreigner in all this? No matter whether it was an American in Romania or a Swede in Russia or a Frenchman in Poland, paradoxically, the same foreigners who were so excited about the intimacy of close relations with their Romanian or Russian or Polish friends, have also complained of being exploited. Romanians were always AFTER something. They did what Westerners try to avoid: they combined friendship and

business, money and sentiment. And they do it fast. I myself have been in taxis, where after just a few minutes the driver will say, "Sintem prieten. nu poti faci rost de o bursa in strainatate pentru fiul meu"...etc. In these rapid transitions between the authentic and the material, it is hard to keep such things balanced and the foreinger--often wealthier, less in need, and in the country a short time--found it difficult to figure out how to cash in on favors or loans or gifts. Foreigners helped get a special magazine, took them in a car, get medicine, buy powdered milk or gave baby clothes. They might carry letters or contact a relative abroad. How was the balance to be made up?

Here again is the paradox of social relations in Eastern Europe: the intensity of friendships gave a special sentimentality to social relations in the East, precisely because these regimes were so repressive. But at the same time the system fostered instrumental social relations in which freindship meant giving and taking material things. And the exchanges were never totally equal. With the foreigner the possibility to equalize these exchanges of practical help and sentiment were even less equal.

With all this talk of "transition", it is easy to say that now

with the market economy, we don't have to see out friends to get material things. In practical terms, women do not have to sleep with the butcher to get meat for their children. The formal PCR is gone, and the informal PCR is being used for more sophisticated matters such as obtaining a low interest loan or certificate de proprietar, or paying to get in line at caritas, or speeding up a visa request.

But what about the transition in friendship. Are Romanians become less friendly to each other? Do people seek each other less? After all, there is more to do and less petty things to complain about. Are Romanians becoming less friendly to foreigners, not that the gap between foreigners and Romanians is now disappearing? After all, Romanians, too, can obtain meat, and powdered milk, and CNN, and trips to Germany. Does the transition mean that Romanians will evolve a Western kind of friendship in which money and sentiment don't mix?

With all this transition, n-ar fi rau cu o Minister de Prietenie?

2. Dedublarea diversiunea, si conspiratie

When I translate from Romanian to English, the word which is hardest to translate is "dedublarea". Sometimes it means duplicity, other times dissimulation, but the translation, like

all translations, misses something. For we learn nothing about how Romanians really act with each other and with foreigners.

Of all the negative characterizations of Romanians--those made by foreigners and those by Romanians about themselves--dedublarea is the most puzzling.

Puzzling because it does not simply mean that you cannot believe what people say to you. It also means that people will not believe what you say.

Under the old regime, dedublarea was institutionalized. At a party meeting everybody knew that everyone else was lying. That is, what people said in public was not supposed to be what they felt in private. In fact the two most anomalous types of people in Romania were the true communist or the true dissident. Both said in public what they really believed in private. When I myself was at Stefan Gheorghiu in 1980-81, I met only a few true communists; most were only "membri de partid". And the dissidents in this country were often assumed to be either stupid or psychologically ill. How many times did I hear about Goma or Doinea Cornea, "Ce e cu asta? Ce vrea".

The idea of dedublarea has been best analyzed by the Polish writer Czeslaw Milosz in his book from 1952, "The Captive Mind". The book is about Polish intellectuals and the compromises they make, and is clearly relevant to Romania, in which some of the crudest collaborators now see themselves as dissidents, even "heroes". In the book, Milosz has a chapter on "ketman". Ketman is a Persian word which connoted the ability of Persians to say to the Turks what the Turks wanted to hear. Ketman was dedublarea. Telling the truth to people in power was stupid. Lying to them, or making sure they did not know your real thoughts, was a survival mechanism, and eventually became a talent.

Romania was clearly a ketman society. In a society of powerless people, ketman was a weapon of the weak. Perhaps this is why Romania has great actors and theatre, people who can create characters through public statements and acts. Romania, in this sense, was under Ceausescu a society of actors.

The idea that public utterance had no relation to one's inner thoughts was an integral part of Romanian life. Although many people will not admit it, it was something we had to teach our children: to lie (at least not tell the whole truth) in school, tell the truth at home. Milan Simecka, the Czech writer, writes in his book "The Restoration of Order", how parents would simply go crazy when their children mixed up these codes: when they told the teacher that their father and mother hated the Russians, or when they came home and lied. I

suspect similar problems occur in Romania, where pressures for dedublarea were so great.

Being a foreigner, I could understand that some people might misrepresent themselves to me. More disconcerting was when they assumed that I was lying to them. When I did research here, both in the village of Feldioara, in Brasov at the Consiliul Popular Judetean, at Stefan Gheorghiu Academy and in other party schools, I met various officials who, naturally enough, wanted to know what an American anthropologist, a Romanian speaking anthropologist, was doing here. I would explain my project, for example, that I was studying how village leaders cope with problems (stiinte conducere). I rehearsed my speech as best I could. Still, I would find out later that many people did not believe me. I was a spy, on some kind of mission, their village must be "strategic", and "este clar" that the Americans wanted to find out something. Some of these officials would try to get me drunk and then ask, "Now Stefane, what are you really after, ce cauti la noi."

When I insisted that what I was doing was indeed the same thing, studying local leaders, they were simply incredulous. Impossible. I must have some secret plan. Since they were "actors", in the sense of dedublarea, so must I. Romanians simply assumed that anyone saying anything in public was lying, and that only after a special relationship was established--via friendship, helped by tuica--would the truth come out.

Here comes a link between dedubluarea and conspiracy. If every public utterance only hides some real truth, then people operate naturally with a kind of theory of conspiracy. Social relations involve trying to find out the individual's secret plan. What he is really after. Nothing is as it seems since public statements or actions are simply assumed to mask hidden or alternative sentiments.

Romanians thus operate with a theory of conspiracy. Theories of conspiracy, with their intrigues and diversiuni, are like astrology: you can always find confirmation, and they are impossible to disprove. Any data which seems to disprove the conspiracy--think of any scenario, from Kennedy assassination to the various theories of December 1989, to the judeo-francomasonic-ungaro conspiracy againsts "tara"--any such data which seems to falsify the conspiracy is integrated into the conspiracy: it is part of an even more sophisticated secret plan, a diversiunea. "Vezi ce destept sint _____ ca faci asta". Or to put it in the most simple terms, "Este clar".

Romania is interesting since the most complicated phenomena can always be explained as simple conspiracies,... "e clar domnului ca..."

Stalin, Ceausescu and Vadim Tudor all operated with theories of conspiracy. Any criticism or difficulty was part of some master plan to destroy the Soviet Union or undermine Romania's sovereignty. Anti-sovietism then, "anti-romanianism" now. I myself have been accused of being "anti-romanesc" ("E clar"). But conspirational thinking is also true of the Opposition: ceaucisti, securitate, the almost mystical "Puterea" (untranslatable into English!), rusi, "ei". The opposition also has its grand master conspiracies. The only difference is who is directing the conspiracy, who are the "ei".

It is as if in Romania there could never be simply an "accident", a "coincidence", a "happenstance". In a society so full of chaos, so in need of a "chaos theory", we have only theories of conspiracy.

Theories of conspiracy, accusations of "diversiunea" are one of the legacies of dedublarea. It is dedublarea which lies behind all the theories of the Romanian events of 1989. Once, just once, I would like to read an account of December 1989 which is based on "chaos" rather than conspiracy, an account which would include things like chance, happenstance, mistakes, ignorance, and unclear interest groups. Chance and complexity instead of the Grand Master Plan scenarios so popular with Puterea si Oppositizie, and the man in the street. Perhaps this is why the history of the 1989 events has not been written; no one can face up to the fact that there is no Master Conspiracy or Grand Plot, no Evil Regissor behind the scenes "manipulating" and "diverting". Instead the real history of december 1989 might show us real people acting from uncertain information in their own interests. There are actors, but no regissor. How ironic, then, that actors and regissors play such an important role in depicting and interpreting these events. In what other country would a regissor--someone who is supposed to manipulate actors--take on the job of becoming a historian, and be taken seriously. Now that "Oglinda I" is finished, let us see what happens with the story of December 1989, "Oglinda II".

As for myself, I am sure I will be accused of being...just another diversiunea. Este clar.

