

# 4

## The “Etatization” of Time in Ceaușescu’s Romania\*

Katherine Verdery

That the nature of time differs in different social orders has been a staple of anthropological analysis at least since Evans-Pritchard’s work on the Nuer and Leach’s classic paper on the symbolic representation of time. Accordingly, anthropologists have catalogued the variant organizations of time in other cultures; they have also examined what happens when the bearers of non-Western or noncapitalist temporalities confront the new organizations of time brought to them by capitalist commodity production. Such treatments of time as a social construction do not always make explicit, however, the political context within which time is experienced and the politics through which it is culturally “made.” That is, to see time as culturally variable, with different conceptions of it functionally fitted to one or another social environment, is only part of the story. These conceptions themselves are forged through conflicts that involve, on one hand, social actors who seek to create or impose new temporal disciplines – either as elements of new productive arrangements or as the projects of revolutionary political regimes – and, on the other, the persons subjected to these transformative projects. In a word, the social construction of time must be seen as a political process.

In this chapter I explore temporal politics through an example in which regime policies created struggles over time, as people were subjected to and resisted new temporal organizations. The example is Romania of the 1980s, prior to the violent overthrow of Communist Party leader Nicolae Ceaușescu in December 1989. Both directly, through policies expressly aimed at the marking of time, and indirectly,

---

\* This chapter was first prepared for a meeting of the American Ethnological Society in March 1989 – thus before the end of party rule – and revised slightly thereafter. I had not conducted fieldwork explicitly on the subject of time but marshaled ethnographic data from various field trips on other topics (pursued chiefly before the collapse of socialism, plus a brief visit in 1990) to make the argument. I am much indebted to Ashraf Ghani for extensive discussions that led me to frame this chapter as I have and for suggesting many of its central ideas. Thanks also to Pavel Campeanu, Gail Kligman, and Henry Rutz for comments on an earlier version. Three research grants from the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) supported my fieldwork in 1984-85, 1987, and 1988, which produced the data I report here.

The volume in which this chapter was initially published had made the relation between “structure” and “intention” its organizing theme, hence the centrality of these notions here. Reprinted from *The Politics of Time*, ed. Henry Rutz, American Ethnological Society Monograph Series no. 4 (Washington, D.C.: American Anthropological Association, 1992), by permission of the American Anthropological Association. Not for further reproduction.

through policies aimed at solving other problems but implicating people’s use of time, the Romanian Party leadership gradually expropriated Romanians of much of their control over time. I call this process “etatization,” a term borrowed from Romanian writer Norman Manea, who uses the word *etatizare* (literally, “the process of statizing”) to describe the fate of people’s private time in his native country. While some might wish to render this as “nationalization,” I prefer the more cumbersome “etatization” because in Romania the “state” and the “nation” have not necessarily been isomorphic: the activities of the state-occupying regime have often been at odds with what some would see as the interests of other inhabitants, the nation or “people.” Although I will not make this distinction the basis of my argument, one might phrase the struggle over time in Romania as, precisely, a struggle between “etatization” and “nationalization” – that is, a struggle between the state and the people for claims upon time.

I concentrate here on the “etatization” part of this struggle: the ways in which the Romanian state seized time from the purposes many Romanians wanted to pursue. There are a number of means through which time can be seized – rituals, calendars, decrees (such as curfews), workday schedules, and so on. My discussion focuses on the vehicle through which these devices organize time: the body, site of many possible uses of time, only some of which can be actualized. To phrase it differently, I treat time as a medium of activity that is lodged in and manifested through human bodies; that is, I emphasize not alternative *representations* of time but alternative *utilizations* of it. While acknowledging time’s cultural element, I presuppose that there is an irreducible durative aspect in the passage of time no matter how it is constructed. Thus at a given level of technology, an individual can accomplish only so much in the space between successive midnights. If political decisions force more activity onto individuals within this space without increasing their technical capacities, then certain purposes or projects will go unrealized, and this prospect may provoke resistance. While my premise may seem a failure to problematize time as a cultural construct, I hold that, to the contrary, struggles over time *are* what construct it culturally, producing and altering its meanings as groups contend over them.

To “mark time” in a particular way is to propose a particular use or deployment of bodies that subtracts them from other possible uses. Alternative deployments of bodies in time reveal for us the seizure of time by power, which I will illustrate with some ways in which the Romanian state seized time by compelling people’s bodies into particular activities. Bodies subjected to such seizure had a few options, in response. They could voluntarily acquiesce in it, acknowledging the state’s right to make this claim and accepting the hegemonic order within which it was exercised. They could acquiesce in form only, compelled to do so by the way in which time was seized and alternative uses precluded, but not necessarily agreeing with the claim made on them. Or they could resist the seizure of time, seeking to withdraw themselves for purposes other than those proposed from above. Many Romanians in Ceaușescu’s era chose the second and third options. Whenever possible, they

preferred to use their bodies in time toward reproducing households and local relations rather than toward promoting the power of the Romanian state and its ruling Communist Party.

In my examples, I distinguish loosely between the fates of time-invested bodies in urban and in rural settings, without further specifying their class situation. I also consider how time is related to the sense of self. Because social senses of self are intricately bound up with temporal investments in certain kinds of activity, incursions upon these activities have consequences for how the self is conceived and experienced. Therefore, I also describe briefly how the state's seizure of time encroached upon people's self-conceptions.

### **The Forms and Mechanisms of Etatization: Intention and Structure**

I organize my argument in terms of the relation between structure and intention, viewing the etatization of time in Romania as the joint result of intentional projects of state-makers, unintended consequences of actions aimed at other problems, and structural properties of Romanian socialism as a social order *sui generis*. For my ethnographic examples to make sense, I should first characterize Romanian socialism in the decade of the 1980s, in terms of both the projects its leaders pursued and the inner logic of the social order itself; an inner logic only partly related to the leaders' intentional projects. The tendencies I discuss antedated the 1980s but became especially "Visible then, as economic crisis sharpened their contours.

To a greater degree than in any other East European state, coercion combined with attempts at ideological persuasion were the basis of rule in Ceaușescu's Romania. This distinguished that regime from others in the region, in which material incentives generally played a greater role. The most extreme contrast in the bloc was between the virtual police state of Romania and relatively liberal Hungary, with its low level of police control and its high standard of living. Because the Ceaușescu leadership determined to reduce noxious "foreign interference" by repaying the foreign debt ahead of schedule, it imposed increasingly severe austerity measures beginning in 1980. These included massive exports of foodstuffs and other necessities, and significant reductions of imported goods and fuel, to slow the drain of hard currency. Expecting popular opposition, the regime intensified its apparatus of surveillance and repression. Persons who raised a protest were expelled or isolated by round-the-clock police watch; strikes or riots were put down by force; increasing numbers of persons were drawn into the net of collaboration, reporting to the Secret Police on the activities of their friends and associates. Under these circumstances, resistance tended to take covert forms, such as theft of public property, laxity in work discipline, and constant complaining within one's intimate circle.

The exercise of coercion accompanied concerted efforts to raise popular consciousness in support of Party rule. Under Ceaușescu, activists strove to create a "new socialist man," a clearly intentional project that involved wholly new ways of constituting the person. Some of this, as I will show, was to be accomplished through

new temporal markings. Another element of persuasion under Ceaușescu involved overt nationalism, partially (though far from wholly) explainable as an explicit quest for legitimacy. National heroes were exalted, workers' energies were coaxed forth in the name of industrialization as a national goal, national enemies were built up in more or less veiled ways to mobilize the Romanian populace behind its Party's protective front. Previously inculcated national sentiments made this a lively field of activity, although not one of uniform agreement.

The intentions and projects of Romania's Communist Party leadership moved in sometimes coordinate, sometimes contradictory relation with a set of systemic tendencies that were not consciously planned. These tendencies resulted from the overall organization of socialism's political economy, with its collective rather than private ownership of the means of production, its central allocations, and its centralized management of productive activity. Basic to the workings of socialist firms, as described in chapter 1, were "soft budget constraints": firms that did poorly would be bailed out, and financial penalties for what capitalists would see as "irrational" and "inefficient" behavior (excess inventory, overemployment, overinvestment) were minimal. In consequence, they did not develop the internal disciplinary mechanisms more often found in capitalist ones. Firms learned to hoard materials and labor, overstating both their material requirements for production and their investment needs. Thus these systems had expansionist tendencies that were not just inherent in growth-oriented central plans but were also generated *from below*. Hoarding made for unpredictable deliveries of inputs, which caused irregular production rhythms, with periods of slackness giving way to periods of frantic activity ("storming") when a delivery of materials finally enabled effort toward meeting production goals.

Central decisions together with hierarchical interactions between planners and producing firms, then, resulted in "economies of shortage" that generated "scarcity" in Romania, a scarcity primarily of supplies rather than of demand (the scarcity central to capitalism). Time was implicated in such scarcity in several ways, but particularly as the medium through which labor would act in production to make up for the nonoptimal distribution of the other productive resources. Once enough materials were brought together to produce something, the task of the authorities was to seize enough labor time from workers to make up for earlier periods of shortage-enforced idleness. But precisely those periods of enforced idleness motivated the authorities to further seizures of time, for "idle" time might be deployed toward other objectives, and power might be served by interfering with them.

Two examples will show how the Romanian Party seized time in order to increase the production of goods within the system of shortage I have described. The examples come from the period 1984-88, a period in which relative shortage was greatly exacerbated by massive exports of foodstuffs and reduced imports of fuel. Thus the "normal" systemic shortage was conjoined with explicit policies that worsened it.

One villager who commuted daily by train to an urban factory job complained to me of the irregularity of his work time. On some days he would hang around the factory doing very little, on others he would commute two hours to work only to be sent home owing to insufficient electricity; on still others he was required to work overtime, for which he was not paid. He would pay himself for the overtime by cutting work to help his mother plow, sow, weed, or harvest on the private plot they held as members of the collective farm. For such work, the mother would withdraw her labor time from the collective, whose requirements she had filled by bailing and stacking hay during the winter months, when her household economy could better tolerate her absence. Mother and son together produced enough food on their private plot to maintain four or five pigs, a number of sheep, and a good standard of living for their three-person household.

Beginning in about 1983, however, the state sought ways to move some of this “private” product into state warehouses rather than peasant cellars. At first, villagers were given a list of items and amounts – a pig, some chickens, one hundred kilograms of potatoes, and so on – that they were required to contract to the state from their plot, in exchange for a minimal payment. When this proved inadequate, each rural family was told not just how much of various goods to *contract* but exactly how much of each to *plant* on the private plot. Upon delivery of the contracted amounts, the family would receive coupons entitling them to buy bread at the village store; without the coupon they could get no bread. Because private plots were too small to grow cereals, purchased bread was most villagers’ only option. The new contract requirements therefore effectively seized the labor time that had been given over to household production for household consumption; it added the products of that labor time to the meager output of state and collective farms. In this way, the authorities recouped a portion of the enforced idleness of their factory worker, as well.

Comparable seizures of time were also found in village households whose adults all commuted to work in the city. Such commuter households were assigned a quota of agricultural production alongside their regular jobs; failure to meet the quota might mean confiscation of their private plot. Because the private plot guaranteeing them something to eat was the main reason these workers had not moved to the city altogether, the sanction was an effective one: without the plot, household consumption would suffer. To keep their plot, commuters now had to pay a substantial “tribute” in extra work. Both these examples rest, of course, on the much earlier decision by the Party to collectivize land, enabling later seizures of the labor time embodied in rural folk.

These examples show rural households compelled into the state’s definition of their use of time. The source of compulsion in both instances was the state’s leverage with respect to household consumption, which villagers wished to protect. To these specific instances one could add many other ways in which central planning, shortage, and export combined to reduce individuals’ control over their schedules to a bare

minimum. Zerubavel, in a discussion of scheduling control, observes that “every scheduling process implies a combination of personal and environmental elements, the proportion between which is very significant sociologically.” Using the examples he adduces (from North American society), over what sorts of items had Romanians lost scheduling control by the late 1980s?

Urban dwellers could generally choose the time when they would use the bathroom, but their choice of when to flush or wash up was constrained by whether or not the public water supply had been turned off. Buckets of water stored in apartments might compensate, but not for bathing, which (if one wanted one’s water hot) depended on having gas to heat the water. People could not choose the time when they would heat water or cook their meals, since the gas was generally turned off at precisely the times of normal use, so as to prevent excess consumption. Urban housewives often arose at 4:00 a.m. to cook that being the only time they could light the stove. Unless one walked, no one could choose when to arrive at work since public transportation was wholly unreliable (owing to measures to conserve use of gasoline), and the ration of gasoline for private cars was so derisory that cars did not provide an alternative for daily movement.

Although the natural environment usually controls when farmers must sow their crop, Romanian farmers were not permitted to plant by the timing optimal for nature: if tractors received no fuel allotment, there might be no planting until well into November or June. Village women lost control over when they would iron or do the laundry, for fuel conservation measures included turning off the electricity delivered to rural areas for large portions of each day – generally according to an unannounced schedule. Village women who commuted to urban jobs often found that there was no electricity when they returned home, and they were obliged to do the washing by hand. Electricity outages also prevented villagers from choosing when they would watch the two hours of television to which Romanian air time had been reduced. The state infringed even upon the most intimate decisions concerning when to make love, for the official desire for (and shortage of) more numerous laboring bodies led to a pronatalist policy that prohibited all forms of contraception as well as abortion. This forced the “scheduling” of intimacy back onto the rhythms of nature.

To Zerubavel’s strategic question, then, concerning who is authorized to schedule parts of the time of other people, we can reply that in Ceaușescu’s Romania, national and local political authorities scheduled (or, better said, precluded the scheduling of) an extraordinary amount of others’ time. Behind these appropriations of scheduling lay political decisions about how to manage austerity so as to repay the foreign debt. It is impossible to prove that an additional conscious intention was to deprive the populace of control over its schedules, but this was indeed an effect of the policies pursued.

Many of the regime’s seizures of time were explicitly aimed at increasing production; yet these and other policies also had the effect, whether consciously intended or not, of producing not *goods* for the state but *subjection* to it. To clarify this I

must introduce another structural element of Romania's redistributive economy. Redistribution, Eric Wolf reminds us, is less a type of society than a class of strategies implemented through various means. Redistributors must accumulate things to redistribute, which form their "funds of power." A redistributive system delivers power into the hands of those persons or bureaucratic segments that dispose of large pools of resources to allocate. From the highest levels of the planning apparatus on down, therefore, actors strive to bring as many resources as possible under their control.

In socialist redistribution, it was generally the Party and state apparatuses that disposed of the greatest means for redistribution. The practices of socialist bureaucrats thus tended to augment the resources under the global disposition of the apparatus of power, a tendency Fehér, Heller, and Márkus see as the basic "law of motion" of socialist societies. Particularly important, in their analysis, was that resources not fall out of central control into consumption but expand the basis of production for the apparatus. In other words, these systems accumulated *means of production*, above all. Competitive processes within socialism's all-encompassing bureaucracy thus made inputs count more than production or outputs. Inputs, however, might be both absolute and relative – relative, that is, to the resources commanded by other actors. To the extent that the resources of other actors could be incapacitated, the pool at the center would be enhanced. Jan Gross, from whom I draw this proposition, argues that Stalin's "spoiler state" produced its power by incapacitating those actual or potential loci of power that were independent of the state – sponsored organization. This regime's power came from ensuring that no one else could get things done or associate together for other purposes.

This relative conception of power seems to me to illuminate a number of seizures of time in Ceaușescu's Romania. Their immediate "cause" was, again, a shortage economy strained to the utmost by austerity measures and exports; the effect was an astounding immobilization of bodies that stopped the time contained in them, rendered them impotent, and subtracted them from other activities by filling up all their time with a few basic activities, such as essential provisioning and elementary movements to and from work. My examples show us how shortages of certain items were converted into a seizure of citizens' time, but rarely for producing goods that might *alleviate* shortage. These seizures instead produced incapacity, and therefore enhanced power.

The most obvious example, all too often signaled in the Western press, was the immobilization of bodies in food lines. I see this as a state-imposed seizure of time because it was precisely the state-directed export of foodstuffs, alongside the state-supported crisis in agriculture, that raised to epic proportions in Romania a phenomenon also present in several other socialist countries. More generally, it was socialist policy to suppress the market mechanism (which, in Western economies, eliminates lines by differentiating people's ability to pay). Urban in its habitat, the food line seized and flattened the time of all urbanites except those having access to

special stores (the Party elite and Secret Police). Meat, eggs, flour, oil, butter, sugar, and bread were rationed in most Romanian cities; they arrived unreliably and required an interminable wait when they did. During the 1980s other food items, such as potatoes and vegetables, came to be in shorter supply than usual, as well. Depending on one's occupation, some of the time immobilized by provisioning might be subtracted from one's job-office clerks, for example, were notorious for being absent from their desks when food hit the local store – but people like schoolteachers or factory workers had to add onto already-long working days the two or three hours required to get something to eat.

In a brilliant discussion of socialism's queues (of which the food line is the prototype), Campeanu offers additional insights through which we can tie the immobilization of bodies in food lines to the enhancement of central power. Queues, he suggests, function as agents of accumulation. They do this, first, by reducing the opportunity for money to be spent; this forces accumulation on a populace that would spend but is not permitted to. Moreover, by rationing consumption, queues prevent resources from being drawn out of the central fund of use values administered by the state, which (according to the argument of Fehér et al. mentioned earlier) would reduce the reserves that form the basis of its control. Queues thus maintain the center's fund of power. Second, Campeanu argues, queues serve the larger processes of central accumulation through the unequal exchange that is their essence. The state is entitled to buy labor at its nominal price, but labor must buy the goods necessary for its reproduction at their nominal prices *plus* "prices" attached to time spent in line and to good or bad luck (i.e., being served before supplies run out). Thus the value of the labor force becomes paradoxically inferior to the value of the goods necessary to it, as waiting drives up the cost of consuming without affecting the price labor must be paid in the form of a wage. In other words, by making consumption too costly, queues enable a transfer of resources into accumulation. This forced accumulation is achieved by converting some of the "price" into waiting time – that is, by disabling consumption as consumers' bodies are immobilized in lines.

Was there not some "cost" to the state, as well as to consumers, of immobilizing people in food lines? It must be remembered that socialist systems did not rest on the extraction of profits based in workers' labor time (a process quintessentially rooted *in time*). "Time wasted," for a capitalist, is profit lost. In socialist systems, which accumulated not profits but means of production, "time wasted" did not have this same significance. Time spent standing in lines was not a cost to the socialist state. This same time spent in a general strike, however, would have been costly indeed, for it would have revealed basic disagreement with the Party's definition of "the general welfare" and would thereby have undermined that central pillar of the Party's legitimacy – its claim to special knowledge of how society should be managed.

Still other seizures of time derived from official priorities in allocating fuel, already alluded to. Some of the petroleum produced in or imported by Romania was

exported for hard currency; beginning in 1984, this was facilitated by prohibiting the use of private cars for most of the winter. The remaining gasoline was preferentially allocated, first, to the chemical industry and other major industrial production; then to transporting goods destined for export; after that, to peak periods in agriculture; and only last to public transportation. Villagers who had to take a bus to town or to the train might wait for hours in the cold, or end by walking six to eight kilometers to the train station; residents of urban centers formed gigantic swarms at infrequently served bus stops; many urbanites preferred to walk long distances to work rather than be trampled in the melee. Vastly curtailed train schedules immobilized people for hours on end as they waited for connections. Trains were so crowded that most people had to stand, making it impossible to use the time to read or work (the more so because trains were unlighted after dark). No one has attempted to calculate the amount of time seized by the state-produced fuel shortage. Among friends with whom I discussed it, anywhere from one to four hours had been added on to the work day, hours that could be put to no other purpose (except, for some, to the exercise of walking).

The fuel shortage was converted into an additional “time tax” for residents of villages: it increased their labor. Labor-intensive agricultural production returned to replace mechanized agriculture, as tractors and harvesters were sidelined by insufficient fuel. Tractor drivers sought to conserve their tiny fuel allotments by making the furrow shallow rather than deep and by increasing the spaces between rows. This produced more weeds as well as an inferior crop yield. Exports of petroleum reduced production of herbicides, which meant that the bountiful weed harvest had to be weeded by hand. The greater demand for labor in villages was part of the motive for taxing commuters with farm work, as mentioned earlier; added to the effects of reduced electricity upon the work of both urban and rural women, it greatly lengthened the working day for all.

Although the austerity measures responsible for these conversions of shortage into a “time tax” were not entirely the state’s “fault,” the peremptoriness with which they were executed lends credence to the notion that power was constituting itself through the effects of austerity. An exchange in the correspondence column of an urban newspaper illustrates this nicely:

[Query from a reader]: “For some time now, tickets are no longer being sold in advance for long-distance bus trips out of Iași. Why is this?”

[Reply]:” As the Bus Company director informs us, new dispositions from the Ministry of Transport stipulate that tickets should not be sold in advance, and for this reason the bus ticket bureau has gone out of service.”

As an answer to the question “why,” the response leaves something to be desired, showing just how uninterested the authorities were in justifying the seizure of time. The distribution of time implied in the exchange was this: persons wanting to take a

bus to another city would get up hours in advance of the scheduled departure (for one could never be sure how many others would be wanting to travel on the same day) and go stand in line before the booth that would open for ticket sales just prior to the departure hour. As usually happened in Romania, friends of the ticket-seller would have gotten tickets ahead, meaning that even those whose position in the line might lead them to think there were enough seats left for them could be disappointed, returning home empty-handed many hours later.

As this example shows particularly well, such seizures of time did more than simply immobilize bodies for hours, destroying their capacity for alternative uses of time. Also destroyed was all possibility for lower-level initiative and planning. This was surely an advantage to those central planners for whom initiatives from below were always inconvenient; one cannot easily imagine such destruction of initiative, however, as the conscious motivation of the policy. The central appropriation of planning and initiative was furthered by a monopoly over knowledge that might have allowed people to use their time “rationally” – that is, otherwise. Not knowing when the bus might come, when cars might be allowed to circulate again, when the exam for medical specializations would be given, or when food would appear in stores, bodies were transfixed, suspended in a void that obviated all projects and plans but the most flexible and spontaneous.

The preceding examples illustrate how a shortage of resources, especially fuel, was converted into a seizure of time that immobilized it for any other use. I would add to these an additional set of examples in which the “time tax” exacted of people came not from conversions of shortage but from the simple display of power, which was by that very fact further enhanced. In a modest form, this was what happened in most of the interminable Party or workplace meetings that occupied much time for persons in virtually every setting; because meetings also sometimes accomplished organizational business, however, I do not count them. I refer, rather, to displays such as the mobilization of bodies from schools and factories to line the route, chanting and waving, whenever Romanian president Nicolae Ceaușescu took a trip or received a foreign guest. Delays in the hour of arrival seized more of the waiting crowd’s time. (It was not just Ceaușescu who was greeted by the appropriation of bodies and the time they contained: so also were other “important” figures, including even the writer of these lines, who as part of a group of Honored Guests helped to appropriate the entire afternoon of a welcoming committee of schoolchildren.) Every year on 23 August, Romania’s national “independence” day, hundreds of thousands of people were massed as early as 6:00 A.M. for parades that actually began around 10:00 or 11:00. Because experience proved that parades could turn into riots, as of about 1987 these crowds were massed somewhat later, in closely guarded stadiums – to which, of course, they walked. There they witnessed precision drills, whose preparation had required many hours from those who performed them.

Here, then, is the ultimate “etatization” of time, seized by power for the celebration of itself. Tens of thousands of Romanians waited, daily, in contexts in

which they could do nothing else: time that might have gone to counterhegemonic purposes had been expropriated. Schwartz calls this “ritual waiting,” whose cause is not scarcity in the time of someone being awaited. Ritual waiting serves, rather, to underscore the social distance between those who wait and whoever is responsible for the waiting.

The various seizures of time in Romania were not distributed evenly across the landscape, for it was urbanites who waited the most: for transport, for food, for parades, for visiting dignitaries, for light, for hot water, for cooking gas. Villagers waited for buses and trains and light, but rarely for preorganized demonstrations, parades, or Honored Guests; their “time tax” came in the form of ever-greater claims upon their labor. The persons most removed from such encroachment were uncollectivized peasants living in the hills and not commuting to city jobs. Perhaps not surprisingly, these people were prime targets of Ceaușescu’s infamous – settlement systematization plan, which, by destroying their individual houses and settling them in apartment buildings, would bring them more fully under control more vulnerable to seizure of their time.

What does all this suggest about the relation between intentionality and structure, and between “system logic” and contradiction, in the etatization of time? Without the possibility of interviewing high Party officials, one cannot say how many of the effects I have mentioned were consciously planned as such by Party leaders. I find it difficult to believe, however, that the austerity program behind so much of the etatization of time was intended to produce subjection: it was intended first of all to payoff foreign creditors. That its consequences for subjection may have been perceived (and even desired) is very possible. Those consequences emerged, however, as side effects of other policies carried out within a system governed by tendencies peculiar to it (the dynamics of a shortage economy based on centralized bureaucratic allocations).

This is nonetheless not to say that “system logic” is inexorable, or that the effects to which I have pointed were characteristic of socialism everywhere. Specific policies of specific leaderships made a difference, setting up contradictory tendencies and exacerbating them. So did the environmental conditions peculiar to one or another socialist country. The command structure of socialism in East Germany, for example, was similar to that of Romania; yet its proximity to West Germany required East German leaders to maintain a standard of living closer to that of the West, which, together with subtle investment flows from West Germans, resulted in productivity and consumption higher than Romania’s. The “economic crisis” that so exacerbated Romania’s shortage came in part from the leadership’s desire to payoff the foreign debt, instead of rescheduling it as did leaders in Poland. Romania in the 1980s gives us an excellent example of the extremes to which political decisions could push the “logic” of socialism, producing a form of gridlock rather than processes analyzable as somehow functionally “rational.” This extreme case reveals potentials not generally

evident, through which we can improve our grasp of sociopolitical processes under socialism and their relation to time.

### Spheres of Encroachment and Resistance

What was the Romanian state seizing time *from*? What activities was it incapacitating, whether by intention or by chance? To what other uses did people continue to put the reduced time left to them? To ask this question is also to ask where struggles against etatization were most evident – that is, where it issued in resistance to the state’s encroachment. I will mention three areas particularly assaulted by the etatization of time: independent earnings, household consumption, and sociability. Each of these also constituted a focus of resistant deployment of time, resistances that – given the degree of coercion mobilized against them – were nearly invisible but nonetheless real.

The widespread shortages of virtually everything, coupled with cleverly disguised reductions on incomes in people’s regular jobs, pushed everyone into secondary and often illegal forms of earning (particularly lucrative for the consumer services rationed by queues). For example, waiters or clerks in food stores were in great demand as sources of food. They filched meat, potatoes, bread, and other items from their restaurants or shops, selling them at exorbitant prices to people who might have been so foolish as to invite an American, say, to dinner. (These practices naturally reduced the food available in shops and restaurants.) Gas-station attendants, in exchange for a huge tip, some Kent cigarettes, or a kilogram of pork, would sometimes put extra gas into the tank. Ticket-sellers at the railway station, if properly rewarded, might “find” tickets for crowded trains. People with cars would hang around hotels to provide black-market taxi service at twice the normal fare (demand for them was high, since the fuel allotments to regular taxis were so small that they were rarely to be found when needed). Drivers for the forestry service ripped off truckloads of wood to sell to peasant villagers and American anthropologists.

The sources of secondary income were legion, but the state’s seizure of time pushed them in the direction of “hit-and-run” strategies requiring little time and few formal skills, rather than the moonlighting, spare-time sewing, extended house building, and other sources of skilled earning for which people no longer had enough time. It was difficult for a schoolteacher to find a few extra hours for tutoring after she had stood in several lines and walked to and from work, or for a secretary to take home the professor’s manuscript to type for extra pay. In consequence, Romanians built up their unofficial earnings not as much from parallel *productive* endeavors as from *scavenging*. The authorities did everything in their power to punish behaviors like those I have mentioned, for outside earnings not only diminished the state’s revenues but also mitigated people’s utter dependence on their state wage, reducing the state’s leverage over them.

Examples of outside earnings merge directly into the second locus of struggle between a time-seizing state and resistant households. The forms of the state’s seizure

of time encroached particularly on the consumption standards of households, whose members reacted by trying to seize some of it back in one way or another. Theft from the harvests of the collective farm was one prime instance. Another was ever-more-sophisticated ways of killing calves at birth or shortly thereafter; this relieved the villager of the obligation to sacrifice milk to the calf and to produce six months' worth of fodder for it, as the state insisted, and also (though this was not the first aim) afforded the household an illegal taste of veal. (The killing had to be sophisticated because all such deaths had to be vet-certified as "natural" if one were to avoid a heavy fine.)

The extent to which foodstuffs – repositories of the time and labor of village peasants and commuters – focused the struggle over time was brought home to me in October of 1988, as I drove into the village of my 1984 fieldwork to pay a visit. Both early in the day when I arrived and late at night when I left, local authorities were out in the fields with those workers they had managed to round up for the potato and corn harvests, and the streets were crawling with policemen shining powerful flashlights on every vehicle that might divert corn or potatoes into some storehouse other than that of the collective farm. Whether on that night or on some other, numerous villagers would "recover" sacks of corn and potatoes from the collective farm, thereby recouping some of what they had been obligated to contract from their private plots. This enabled them and their urban relatives to eat better than they "ought" to. It also enabled a few other urbanites to avoid standing in food lines in October for the winter's supply of potatoes because – using the extra gas they had bribed from the gas-station attendant – they would drive their cars directly to a village and pay five times the market price to buy forty kilograms of potatoes from some peasant. The practice naturally furthered urban food shortages and was one reason why policemen randomly stopped cars to spot-check for transport of food, which they would confiscate. Such events further illustrate my claim that the apparatus of coercion was central to Ceaușescu's regime and to its capacity to seize time.

In addition to the state's seizure of time from secondary earnings and from household consumption, state policies threatened a third area: sociability, or the reproduction of local social relations. It was one thing to struggle for the resources necessary to maintaining one's household; to find enough food to entertain friends and relatives, however, was something else. In urban centers the decrease in socializing (upon which many people remarked to me spontaneously) was the direct result of unavailable food and drink. In villages, somewhat better provisioned with these items, incursions on sociability came from state attempts to mobilize village labor on Sundays and holidays and from strict rationing of certain substances essential to providing hospitality: sugar, butter, and flour. Romanian villagers mark Christmas, Easter, Sundays, saints' days, and a variety of other occasions with visiting sustained by cakes and wine or brandy (sugar is essential to making all these, butter and flour to making the cakes). The various seizures of villagers' time lengthened the hours that women had to spend providing these items of hospitality; rationing

lengthened the time for procuring the ingredients; being mobilized to weed on Sunday reduced the time for visiting; and exhaustion from the various taxes on time often reduced villagers' interest in socializing. In both urban and rural contexts, then, for different reasons, human connections were beginning to suffer from the etatization of time.

This tendency was significant for a number of reasons, not least the attenuation of social ties that might be mobilized in overt resistance to the regime. The chaos during and after Ceaușescu's overthrow gave indirect witness to the social disorganization his rule had produced. I wish to focus, however, on the implications of attenuated sociability for people's self-conceptions. This will enable me to discuss more broadly the ways in which the appropriations of time inherent in the state's projects were gradually eroding older conceptions of the person. Through these examples we can see how attention to temporality reveals links between state power and the constitution of self.

### **The State and the Self**

I understand the "self" as an ideological construct whereby individuals are situationally linked to their social environments through normative statements setting them off as individuals from the world around them; thus understood, individuals are the sites of many possible selves, anchored differently in different situations. The self has been an object of intense interest for the organizations individuals inhabit, such as states and religions. Historically, the attempt to redefine the self in ways suitable for one organization – such as the state – and detrimental to another – such as the church – has been a locus of major social contention. Temporality can be deeply implicated in definitions and redefinitions of the self, as selves become defined or redefined in part through temporal patterns that mark them as persons of a particular kind.

For example, the periodicities of the major religions distinguish different kinds of persons. A person is marked as Protestant by attending weekly church services on Sunday and by observing certain religious festivals, such as Christmas or Easter; a person is marked as Roman Catholic, in contrast, by attending mass not only on Sundays (if not, indeed, daily) but also on the holy days of obligation (All Souls Day, feast of the Immaculate Conception, the Assumption, etc.), more numerous than the holy days of Protestants. A person is marked as Orthodox by these rhythms of worship and also by the observance of myriad saints' days (which some Catholics also observe, but in smaller number). A person is marked as Muslim by multiple prayer rituals within each day, by religious festivals different from those of Christians, by special observance of Fridays rather than Sundays, and by the pilgrimage, which gives a distinctive rhythm to an Islamic life. Jews, meanwhile, have long differed from both Christians and Muslims by special observance of Saturdays, as well as by a wholly different set of periodicities and sacred days.

In seeking to create the new socialist man, the Romanian state moved to establish new temporal punctuations that would alter the sense of personal identity tied to the ritual markings of the week the year, and larger periods. In contrast with the religious rhythms just mentioned, the identity of the new socialist man was to be marked by *non*observance of a fixed holy day, his day(s) of leisure distributed at random across the week. Party meetings scattered irregularly throughout the week also marked socialist man as *ar*rhythmic, within short periodicities. Over longer ones, his annual cycle was to be punctuated not by religious festivals but by secular ones – for example, New Year’s, May Day, Women’s Day – and, increasingly, by national ones – Romanian independence day, the four hundredth anniversary of the enthronement of this or that prince, the birthday of this or that Romanian hero. Many of these latter observances, however, unlike those of religious calendars, differed from one year to the next: this year the two hundredth anniversary of the enthronement of Prince X, next year the four hundredth anniversary of the birthday of Hero Y. The *ar*rhythmia of these ritual temporalities echoed that of socialist production patterns, with their unpredictable alterations of slackness and “storming” to fill production quotas. If, as Zerubavel suggests, one effect of temporal regularity is to create the background expectancies upon which our sense of the “normal” is erected, a possible consequence of socialism’s *ar*rhythmia would have been to keep people permanently off balance, to undermine the sense of a “normal” order and to institute *uncertainty* as the rule.

The new periodicities aimed to supplant older ones that marked persons as Romanian Orthodox. This was met, however, by resistant self-conceptions, particularly over the suppression of religious holidays and, in the villages, over the Party’s attempt to extract work on Sundays. Christmas was a major battleground, as factory directors announced that workers absent on Christmas day would not receive their annual bonus, while workers pulled strings to get formal medical statements that they had been absent for “ill-ness.” Peasants, harangued to present themselves for Sunday work, would hide if they saw their brigade-leader coming; or they would show up at the farm, having arranged to be called home for some “emergency” after half an hour. A similar tug-of-war took place between villagers and local Party officials whenever one of the many Orthodox saints’ days fell on a normal workday. The Party defined this time as suitable for labor; villagers and the priest, by contrast, defined it as “dangerous,” insisting that work done on such days would bear no fruit or even bring disaster. Behind these different interpretations lay something deeper, however: the definition of the self as secular member of a broad social(ist) collectivity, or as Romanian Orthodox member of a narrow household one.

In the context of variant self-conceptions, the erosion of sociability discussed earlier was very significant. Sociable gatherings would have cemented close solidary networks that might resist both the officially emphasized large-scale collectivism and the creeping atomization that regime policies produced. That is, sociability served to reproduce groupings inter-mediate between individuals and the social whole. The

etatization of time prevented this, just as many other aspects of Party policy eroded the space intermediate between individuals and the state. In so doing, it incapacitated a major part of Romanians’ conception of self, for in their view, to be Romanian – to be a person – is to offer hospitality. If one does not have the wherewithal to do this, one is diminished as a human being. Some anecdotal evidence will support this claim. First, one hapless host upon whom a friend thrust me unannounced was complaining that it was impossible to entertain one’s friends any more because one had nothing to offer them. To my matter-of-fact suggestion that maybe the food crisis would detach the idea of sociability from the offering of food, he stared at me open-mouthed, in shock. “Then we would be like Germans!” he said, “a people with a completely different nature!” This gentleman’s self-conception was not unique; I encountered it often in my initial fieldwork in a German-Romanian village, where the offering of food was a principal indicator by which Romanians thought themselves distinct from Germans. Second, like this man but in more exaggerated form, others upon whom I chanced without invitation presented their “paltry” offerings of food with a self-abasement I found unbearable.

Such instances brought home to me in a very direct way how shortages of food, the diminution of time that was associated with them, and the other “time taxes” that made provisioning so difficult had assaulted many people’s self-image. The erosion of sociability meant more than the decline of a certain social order, marked by social observance of particular ritual occasions that reproduced solidarity among friends and family: it meant the erosion of their very conception of themselves as human beings.

Reports of friends suggested an additional assault on self-conception from the state’s seizures of time. In one report, a friend had heard that eggs were to be distributed for unused ration coupons. Having a hungry eighteen-year-old son, she thought that by waiting at the store with a jar she might be able to get a few broken eggs without a ration card. She explained her idea to the clerk, who found one broken egg; after an hour another broken egg appeared. Another hour turned up no broken eggs, and customers had stopped coming. My friend approached the clerk in the now-empty store, suggesting that she simply break another couple of eggs and that would be the end of it. The suggestion evoked loud and anxious protests: what would happen if someone reported her, and so on. At length the clerk “found” one more broken egg, bringing the yield for two hours’ waiting to three broken eggs. As my friend left the store, she burst into tears, feeling – in her words – utterly humiliated. The experience of humiliation, of a destruction of dignity, was common for those who had waited for hours to accomplish (or fail to accomplish) some basic task. Being immobilized for some meager return, during which time one could not do anything else one might find rewarding, was the ultimate experience of impotence. It created the power sought by the regime, as people were prevented from experiencing themselves as efficacious.

Such seizures of time were therefore crucial in the expropriation of initiative mentioned earlier; they were basic to producing subjects who would not see



themselves as independent agents. They contributed to the “passive nature” by which many observers, including Romanians themselves, explained the lack of overt resistance to the Ceaușescu regime, as well as to the feeling many expressed to me that Communist rule was “ruining Romanians’ character.” The etatization of time shows how intricate – and how intricately temporal – were the links between sweeping state policies and people’s sense of self, the latter being eroded by and defended from forces both intentional and systemic.

Finally, these links between the self and the etatization of time help us to understand better the regime’s profound lack of legitimacy, amply illustrated in the manifestations of public hatred that accompanied the overthrow of Ceaușescu. These links become more perceptible if we define time in terms of bodies, as I have done here. By insinuating itself and its temporalities into people’s projects and impeding those projects through the medium of people’s very bodies, this regime reproduced every day people’s alienation from it. By stripping individuals of the resources necessary for creating and articulating social selves, it confronted them repeatedly with their failures of self-realization. As their bodies were forced to make histories not of their choosing and their selves became increasingly fractured, they experienced daily the illegitimacy of the state to whose purposes their bodies were bent.

Perhaps the contrasting trajectories of regime and social body from which these alienations emerged helps to explain the contrast between two different expressions of time, which increasingly characterized the pronouncements of regime and citizens during the 1980s. Pronouncements emanating from the top of society became more and more messianic, invoking amid images of ever-greater grandeur the radiant future whose perfect realization was just at hand; farmers and factory workers, meanwhile, increasingly invoked the Apocalypse. For the Party leadership, time was in a process of culminating, of becoming *for all time*. For everyone else, however, time was running out. In December of 1989, it finally did – for the leadership, as well.

The preceding discussion suggests that the etatization of time in socialist Romania was quite a different matter from seizures of time at one or another stage in the development of capitalism. Although some of the time seized in Romania was put to the production of goods, much of it went instead to displaying power, to producing subjection, to depriving bodies of activity that might produce goods. Early capitalism seized the rhythms of the body and the working day, and it transformed them; it stretched out into a linear progression of equivalent daily units what had once been the repetitive annual cycles of an agrarian order. The state in Ceaușescu’s Romania seized time differently. First, it generated an arhythmia of unpunctuated and irregular now-frenetic, now-idle work a spastically unpredictable time that made all planning by average citizens impossible. Second, within this arhythmia, it flattened time out in an experience of endless waiting. Campeanu expresses this admirably: “Becoming is replaced by unending repetition. Eviscerated of its substance, history itself becomes atemporal. Perpetual movement gives way to perpetual immobility. . . . History . . .

loses the quality of duration.” The loss of the durative element in time is wonderfully captured in the following Romanian joke: “What do we celebrate on 8 May 1821? One hundred years until the founding of the Romanian Communist Party.”

“Capitalist” time must be rendered progressive and linear so that it can be forever speeded up – as Harvey puts it, “The circulation of capital makes time the fundamental dimension of human existence.” Time in Ceaușescu’s Romania, by contrast, stood still, the medium for producing not profits but subjection, for immobilizing persons in the Party’s grip. The over-throw of this regime reopens Romania to the temporal movements of commodity production, consumption, time-based work discipline, and initiating selves.

In: Verdery, Katherine. *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next*. Princeton University Press, 1996. 39-57