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No.1

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Nationalism and
Anti-Capitalism
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Context

In autumn 2013, Romania witnessed some of its biggest post-1989 protests. From September to about early December tens of thousands of people took to the streets in major cities of Romania. The reason was the project of an opencast mine in Roşia Montana, a small mining town located in the Apuseni Mountains. In the making for almost 16 years, the project has been mired in controversy. First, the very existence of the project and its non-transparent character raised suspicions of complicity between local politicians of all stripes and the Canadian mining firm behind the project. Allegations of conflicts of interest, illicit lobbying and top-level corruption were abundant. Long-term journalist investigations gave credence to many such views, documenting a vast network of business and political interests, both local and global, undergirding the project.¹

Secondly, and equally important, the project itself, if implemented, would have an ecological impact that is nothing short of astonishing. Some 12,000 tonnes of cyanide would be used to extract the gold, silver and rare metals hidden in the four mountains of the region, which would leave behind some 13 million tonnes of mining waste *per year*. To put it bluntly, the exploitation would imply the transformation of the region into a huge lake of cyanide. One of the biggest projects of its kind in the world if realized, it would also be amongst the ecologically most destructive. To add insult to injury, according to the contract between the state and the company, which still remains largely secret, the ecological cost in the region of 500 million euros *per annum*, would be billed to the state budget.

1 See Mihai Gotiu, *Afacerea Rosia Montanta*, Editura Tact, Cluj-Napoca 2013.

While Rosia Montana Gold Corporation, the company making the bid for the exploitation, initially tried to downplay the ecological impact, even by enrolling expert voices to its ranks, it had to backtrack when faced with mounting evidence to the contrary. Therefore, the company changed tack and through a PR effort estimated at around 1 million euro depicted the project as an economic opportunity in an area of deep poverty and high unemployment rates. By emphasizing this aspect, the company managed to rally a series of locals to their cause and thus, more generally, to create a gap between them and the urban protesters who were supposedly devoid of any concern for the economic well-being of the locals, preferring instead an aloof, vague, ecologist and naturist attachment to the small village in the Apuseni. This dichotomy was repeatedly mobilized and amplified during the months of protests and, for reasons I discuss below, the protesters themselves were unable to counter it effectively.

What sparked the mass movements on September 1 2013 was the announcement by the government that a special law was drafted and that it would be passed through the Parliament in order to give the project green light. This announcement was alarming for two reasons. First, the government – a coalition of social-democrats and liberals – came to power by opposing the project. Their rivals, the Democrat-Liberals and the Romanian President Traian Basescu, had all been staunch supporters of the project from the very beginning. By making this U-turn, the government simply gave credence to those who believed that all Romanian parties and politicians are the same – “same garbage” as the slogan of the 2012 protests had stated², a slogan that would be widely heard again during the 2013 marches. Secondly, the new coalition in power had over 70% of the

2 In January and February 2012, tens of thousands of people protested against the austerity measures imposed by the Romanian government with the explicit backing of President Traian Basescu. These were one of the biggest protests after 1989. They involved street confrontations between protesters and police who used very violent tactics to crash the protesters. In the end, the government was forced to resign.

Parliamentary seats. In such circumstances, passing a law backed by the government would have been a mere formality. Therefore, faced with such dooming prospects, street actions became the last resort of opposition to the project.

Retrospectively, one can divide the dynamics of the protests into three distinct stages even though at the level of each city local varieties existed. My discussion here is based on my direct experience in Bucharest, the site of the largest protests. The first stage, which lasted for a few weeks, entailed the impromptu occupation of some iconic squares or streets in the city during the evenings by crowds of no more than 1000 to 2000 people. Their strategy was similar to other Occupy movements across the world, mixing political messages and chants with more creative forms of expression. People partaking in these nocturnal events were loosely integrated into the same urban networks of young professionals, artists, intellectuals and students, sharing a similar cultural taste and a similar political orientation in which distaste for official, organized politics was salient. Because of these sociological, cultural and political features, the occupations were largely ridiculed by mainstream media and public opinion and were tendentially dismissed as some sort of hipster ecological nuisance.

However, the persistence of the nightly occupations coupled with a series of political blunders the government made in order to justify the special law it had in store for the mining company, quickly changed the demographics and nature of the protests. Increasingly, the protests ceased to be solely about the Rosia Montana affair and became an opportunity to voice a series of other demands, especially anti-governmental ones. This was the second phase.

Occupations were replaced by Sunday afternoon 5 hour-long marches through the main arteries and neighborhoods of the city.

The previous protesters were now joined by other broader segments of middle class constituencies. Rosia Montana became an empty signifier that managed to encapsulate a series of overlapping but also contrasting demands. There was hardly a unified set of political interests, sensibilities and demands among the participants. The protests attracted a vast array of social segments and agendas, all identifying in these movements an outlet for their wider concerns: ecologists, nationalists, football supporters, anarchists, feminists, left-wingers and people claiming no political interests and affiliation, all mixed together. This was also evident in the diversity of the banners people carried, from those demanding the end of corruption among politicians, to those militating against capitalism, the IMF and austerity measures or those simply claiming national pride. As a result, the numbers swelled significantly to about 30-35.000 at the peak of the Sunday marches in mid-October.

With the growth in numbers and the diversity of issues, the initial distinctive character of the movement was lost. Everyday actions were replaced with Sunday manifestations, which appeared convenient both for the protesters and for the government and the police. While officially the movement remained leaderless and horizontal, in practice small nuclei of people took charge of organizing the marching routes and of negotiating with the police. Some even sought to present themselves as legitimate voices of the protesters and even as their leaders. Inevitably, this led to the accumulation of tensions and frictions among various groups of participants and, in at least two occasions, to violence among participants sharing different views. While the police seemed much more lenient towards the protesters compared to the 2012 brutalities, it nonetheless remained adamant to crack down on any forms of organized dissent. In fact, the protesters themselves shared the police's interest in keeping the marches "civilized" and "peaceful".

Faced with mass protests, but also as a result of back-door political maneuvering, the government backtracked and the draft for the special law was eventually rejected by the Parliament. With this undeniable success of the mass mobilization, the protests immediately dwindled so that by late November and early December only a handful of hardcore activists were still protesting in the main square of the city or actively taking part in organizing meetings. The protests thus entered the third phase, that of symbolic preservation, exemplified by the march on 21st of December, the anniversary of the Romanian 1989 revolution, when the victory against Ceausescu's dictatorship and the victory against the goldmine exploitation were celebrated together as triumphs of civil society.

However, to complicate things further, it is necessary to note that these protests also had an important subtext. In fact, in the autumn of 2013 two types of protests took place in Romania and their relationship was and has remained ambiguous. In 2009, the Romanian government leased out to the American company Chevron a total of 271.000 hectares, in the east and south of the country, for exploration and exploitation of shall gas involving fracking. The exact details of the deals are confidential and marked as a state secret. In the autumn of 2013, just as the protests for Rosia Montana moved from the second to the third phase, Chevron started moving its equipment into the tiny village of Pungesti, close to the eastern city of Vaslui, in order to begin its explorations. This triggered the staunch resistance of the local peasant population, backed by activists from the cities that came to their aid, some of them already heavily involved in the Rosia Montana campaign. What was staggering in the case of Pungesti was the level of state repression compared to their attitude towards the urban protests for Rosia Montana. Police and gendarmes dismantled the local resistance through heavy use of violence. For a while, Pungesti was declared a zone of exception.

The movement in and out of the area was restricted, several peasants and activists were unlawfully arrested and beaten and independent reporting was curtailed.

These events had important reverberations within the Rosia Montana movement and many activists expressed immediate solidarity with the movement against fracking. However, the situation in Pungesti proved also significantly divisive among the protesters for Rosia Montana. People who supported wholeheartedly the movement against the gold exploitation had no such strong feelings against fracking. Some even welcomed the project. Except for some activist circles, the two movements were never joined together and the anti-fracking campaign did not become a national one.

To a certain extent there were good reasons for this. In order to reach this mass level of national exposure, the movement against the gold-mine exploitation needed some 16 years of patient activist struggle. By contrast, the anti-fracking movement was only in its infancy and very few people were aware of what the process really entailed.

However, more deep-seated ideological and social reasons cannot be discarded either. While Rosia Montana is situated in a poor but beautiful and touristically attractive area, Pungesti is situated in a poor but drab region. The resistance movement for Rosia Montana was started and orchestrated by groups of activists in urban centers – mainly from the Transylvanian city of Cluj – and enlisted only marginal support from the local population. By contrast, the Pungesti movement was more local and driven by the peasants themselves. Urban activists were not able to steer their resistance; they were just able to magnify it nationally to a certain extent. Social differences and local trajectories, therefore, imprinted the two movements accordingly, not only in terms of local dynamics but also in terms of national articulation.

Moreover, the political aspect was also crucial. While many people were sympathetic to arguments regarding the corruption of state officials by the Canadian firm seeking to extract gold, there was no similar response in the case of Chevron. Chevron's actions were regarded as mere lobbying, something deemed legitimate and within the rules of "proper" capitalism. Corruption and rotten capitalism in one case; lobbying and "proper" capitalism in the other: no wonder Pungesti was not able to generate any significant nation-wide mobilization.

In addition, the consensus for fracking within the political class was beyond dispute. Politicians of all orientations, irreconcilably divided along many other issues, shared a similar position on fracking. This was regarded as a necessary strategy meant to ensure energy independence from Russia. Therefore, the extraction of shale gas was linked with geopolitical as well as economic interests meant to keep the country within the sphere of American dominance. Little wonder in this context that the former US ambassador to Romania was also a Chevron lobbyist, while the Romanian prime minister enrolled Wesley Clark, another energy lobbyist, as his counselor. To put it bluntly, in the case of fracking, the stakes were much higher than in the case of Rosia Montana, even though, ultimately, the respective ecological impact is largely comparable, despite the different technologies involved.

Consequently, in order to understand the Romanian Autumn of 2013, these two protests must be viewed together. Although their magnitude, scope and ultimate outcome were different, what the two movements had in common was the articulation of a particular ideological and discursive framework in which nature and nationalism, as well as the criticism of capitalism and corruption, intertwined. In the next section I turn to a closer investigation of these issues.

Defending the body of the nation: ecology as nationalism and the rise of the extreme right



The first question that needs to be addressed when discussing the Romanian protests of 2013 is whether they were akin to the Turkish ones: that is, to a movement that started from a fairly localized ecological issue that escalated into a huge popular uprising against the incumbent Prime Minister and, more generally, against neoliberal and neoconservative policies? Did we witness a transformation of an initially ecological mobilization into a wider social and political uprising?

In fact, in Romania the *opposite* was the case. In general terms, beyond the immediate pretext of gold exploitation, the protests were a reaction of the urban segments of the local middle class to the effects of the ongoing global capitalist crisis. Since this is a crisis that entails dramatic austerity measures and huge pressures on labor, some segments of the middle class felt the downward pressure on their capacity for social reproduction. The movement for Rosia Montana offered them a channel to direct these frustrations and expectations, beyond the genuine immediate concerns with the ecological destruction which would be caused by the mining project itself. But the protests did not lead to the articulation of a thoroughly political response. They in fact prevented a wider cross-class alliance, since with the exception of middle class urban segments, the rest of the population was either uninterested or simply irritated by the topic, forced to face its own struggles for making a living amid increasingly impoverished circumstances.

While the political diversity of the protesters is unquestionable, there were nonetheless three main central themes that united the majority of the participants: 1) anti-corruption; 2) nationalism of

different articulations and forms of expression; and 3) a deep-seated antagonism to the Social-Democrats now in power, considered to be the offspring of the ex-communists. From this perspective, the language of the protests represented in fact a reloaded version of the early transition demands for anti-corruption, anti-communism and “clean” capitalism. From this ideological perspective, the goldmine project in Rosia Montana thus encapsulated everything that was deemed wrong with the Romanian transition: the collusion between local politicians and shady capitalists in which the state played a paramount role. In opposition to this state of affairs, the protesters demanded more market mechanisms, more democracy, more transparency and, generally, more “European” values. Despite some quite marginal leftist and anarchist quarters that tried to bring forth a general criticism of capitalism as a system, the bulk of the protesters continued to operate within the distinction between a “rotten capitalism” (the Romanian one) and a “good capitalism” (the European and American one). The latter was invoked in order to defeat the former, which, as I have mentioned above, made an outright movement of the bearers of this type of discourse against Chevron’s fracking plans veritably impossible.

The dimension of anti-corruption further magnified the scope of the protests, attracting constituencies which paid little if any attention to the Rosia Montana affair before the fall of 2013. For these protesters, the whole case was a symptom of the failure of the political class as a whole. It therefore needed to be replaced by a new one, less corrupt and endowed with the values promoted by post-communist civil society. For them, the ecological aspect was secondary to the aim of reforming the political class. From this perspective the Romanian Autumn was similar to the Bulgarian Summer in that the main demand was for a replacement of the current politicians and the checking of their power with more direct forms of popular participa-

tion through civil society institutions under the direct supervision of the EU.

But this clear, almost utopian, clinging to the European promise did not prevent an equally powerful nationalism to emerge during the protests. In fact, and perhaps quite paradoxically, the European aspiration went hand in hand with nationalism. For many participants in the protests, the Rosia Montana affair appeared as a syndrome of selling out to foreigners who are pilfering the local resources. The anti-corporate chants and slogans were not so much anti-capitalist in nature but more an expression of the feeling that Romania was being bought cheaply by foreign interests and institutions. Politicians were again at fault for allowing this to happen in exchange for personal benefits. Thus the anti-corruption discourse gained a new meaning: the corruption of the body politic of the nation, the intrusion of foreign interests and elements. This dimension was discursively emphasized by the figure of the small peasants in Rosia Montana. They sought to go about their own (agro)business, but were hindered by a greedy foreign corporation, willing to destroy the area for its own large profits.

There is, perhaps, nothing surprising in this form of opposition: economic nationalism and local interests mobilized against global capital. FIDESZ's success in Hungary, for example, was premised on such a basis, championing itself as the defender of Hungarian interests in a hostile EU environment. This is a familiar right-wing argument in many places around the world where global capitalist interests upset local relations.

What is specific to the Romanian case, however, is the way in which nature and ecological concerns were brought into the equation. The destruction of nature that the project would have entailed was not

seen only as an economic catastrophe or a ruthless capitalist form of accumulation, but more importantly perhaps, as a form of destroying the very body of the nation, of annihilating its integrity, history and values.

This specific form of mobilization, however, did not suddenly surface in the autumn of 2013. It has been the backbone of the resistance movement to the goldmine exploitation project for the past 15 years. Participating on several separate occasions at the annual summer festival held in Rosia Montana, the main event of the resistance campaign, I witnessed firsthand how ecology and nationalism became practically indistinguishable in formulating arguments against the project. In this rhetorical construction, nature was almost divested of its ecological aspect (clean water, fresh air, etc.) and became suffused and indeed almost synonymous with the nation itself. In short, nature had to be protected and preserved because it belonged to the nation; it was an expression of the nation's concrete body.

This nationalization of nature allowed then for a series of nationalist tropes and mythologies to be grafted onto this ideological edifice and to be subsequently mobilized as arguments against the project. For example, the gold the Canadian company was vying for has, in this narrative, not only an economic value. More importantly, it is construed as a legacy of the Romanian forefathers that contemporary citizens are obliged to defend and preserve. Similarly, the defense of Rosia Montana, faced with the aggression of the foreign corporation, was equated by many protesters with the struggle of the Medieval kings against Hungarian and Ottoman invasions or – in an historically more recent register – the struggle against Soviet invasion after 1945. The struggle for Rosia Montana was thus portrayed as a struggle with deep historical roots and of accordingly historical proportions, which every good Romanian was called upon to join.

Rather than an entirely new phenomenon, it is merely the contemporary expression of a much longer history. When the Romanian nation was established at the middle of the 19th century, nationhood was linked organically with language, blood and soil. Thus, nature was incorporated into the national project itself. The nation was defined according to a territorial logic in which the boundaries separating Romanian and foreign land became charged with ideological significance. For the romantic imagination that cemented Romanian nationalism in the 19th century, nature was not only Romanian in essence, but a testament to the Romanians' belonging to these lands from immemorial times. Put differently, the Romanian nation was as old as nature itself, a view that established a complete symbiosis between nature and nation and justified claims of property over the land in the name of this immemorial legacy. This territorial logic of the nation was exacerbated after 1918 and the formation of Greater Romania through a series of annexations following the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Tsarist Empire and the Ottoman Empire. Its territory almost doubled. This entailed the incorporation of a series of "national minorities" within its new borders, which led to an exacerbated nationalist policy during the interwar period in order to strengthen the nation and cultivate a patriotic sense in the new population.

While this project was largely a failure, it nonetheless led to the creation of the Romanian fascist movement, born out of a particular conjuncture between nationalism, extremism and precarious economic conditions which defined the interwar period, not only in Romania. What was defining for Romanian fascism was its mixture of Orthodox non-canonical spirituality, attachment to peasant values, a distaste for modernity, and a cult for nature, ancestry and virility. While the fascist movement was initiated by urban student leaders, it had a tremendous success in the countryside among poor

peasants and lower clerics, where it contributed to magnifying the ideological subordination of nature to the Romanian nation and its supposedly ancient spirituality. The return to nature and simple earthly connections was considered an antidote to the cosmopolitanism brought about by modernity and its (Jewish) promoters who only sought to corrupt the national fiber. Cleansing the nation of its corruptors would entail the restoration of a more organic link with Romanian nature, in the double sense of essence and environment.

Ironically (or not, given the local specificities), these ideas would re-surface again, in barely altered form, during Romanian communism, after a first decade in which socialist realism was dominant. Once the Romanian state claimed independence from the Soviet Union within the socialist bloc through the voice of Nicolae Ceausescu, the official policy of the Romanian Communist Party became increasingly nationalist, reaching grotesque forms in the 1980s. Not only were the promoters of this discourse claiming cultural and spiritual supremacy of Romanians in just about any conceivable area of human knowledge, but also mobilized many important nationalist topics from the mid-19th century and the interwar period, modified to suit the new context. In this atmosphere, nature – and especially natural resources like gold, waters, mountains, fertile lands etc. – were celebrated as part of Romania's exceptionality and worth. Nature was as much a reason for pride as it was an economic advantage that could be mobilized to the benefit of the people.

This particular level distinguished communist nationalism's attitude towards nature from previous ones. In keeping with communism's goals, it added a developmentalist logic. This explains the paradoxical situation that while nature was glorified during communism, the industrial plans of the state entailed brutal effects on nature through deforestations, industrial pollution and the like. During

communism, nature was not only organically associated with the nation and national spirituality, but also constituted an important source of wealth for the nation. Blessed with such wealth and left to its own means without foreign interference, the country was bound to succeed under the able supervision of the Party. What unites the three approaches to nature discussed above (19th century nationalist, fascist and communist) is the inevitable idea that endowed with such a special nature, the country will always be under the threat of rapacious foreigners.

Echoes of this logic were more than audible in the arguments against the Rosia Montana mining project both before and during the protests of 2013, albeit in differing forms and nuances, depending on the specificities of the protesters promoting them. It led to a proliferation of nationalist discourses, manifestations, dress codes, imaginaries and actions that quickly ceased to be solely linked with Rosia Montana. They gained a *sui generis* autonomy and organically articulated with other similar nationalist movements, such as the one militating for the unification with the Republic of Moldova on grounds that “Bessarabia is Romanian land”. Prior to autumn 2013 such feelings and modes of expression were quite widespread, especially among certain sectors of the resistance movement, but they had lacked mainstream visibility. Once the protests got going – and having been proclaimed as a space embracing all ideological orientations – these views managed to gather significantly more attention.

The increased visibility of nationalist and even extreme right manifestations during the Rosia Montana protests (and later, for Pungesti) represented a powerful bone of contention among participants and observers of the resistance movement. This debate became in fact as important as the cause of the protests itself, especially towards the end of the protest cycle, when nationalist and extreme right forc-

es became ever more dominant as the general interest in the protests receded. Brought to public light by the national exposure granted by the protests, these forces constituted the *arrière-garde* of the 2013 movement, though by no means negligible elements of the previous campaigns for Rosia Montana either. As already mentioned, the nationalist and organicist sentiments had been part of the resistance movement from the very beginning and this had represented a fertile soil for groups of nationalist and extreme right allegiances – if not necessarily to flourish, then at least to set up tent.

This is why I believe that the attempt to separate between the Rosia Montana movement as a whole and the nationalist and organicist understanding of nature it mobilized is misleading. The main steering groups of the previous campaigns never rejected such an understanding of nature. In fact, it was encouraged and welcomed, even though many of the participating groups had an anarchist, leftist and generally progressive outlook. The ‘naturalness’ of nature and especially its organicist and nationalist connotative ballast were never explicitly disavowed, but rather constituted the backbone for many of the counter-arguments to the mining project. When such views entered the national public sphere during the 2013 protests, they simply fueled an already existing popular predisposition formed during decades of state-inspired nationalism and organicist visions of the connection between nature and Romanianess.

Despite these theoretical and ideological lineages, which during the protests prompted a quite significant dialogue on the relationship between capitalist modernity, nature and the nation among certain leftist circles willing to rethink anti-capitalism and eco-criticism beyond the nationalist framework (more on this below), more pressing concerns took center stage during the unfolding of the protests.

Since the protest marches were open to all – with no apparent official, easily identifiable leaders, and only a very broadly defined agenda – there was also no real mechanism through which to curtail certain extremist manifestations, nor a real platform on which these debates could have taken place properly. This encouraged such manifestations to grow and allowed extremist groups unhindered room to voice their beliefs. While the nationalist dimension had already been embedded in the resistance since its inception, the ascent of the extreme right made it utterly dominant, encouraging more militant and manifest forms. So too did the references to nature as a national resource and an inextricable part of the Romanianness that needs defending – to the extent that at times the economic and political issues surrounding the mining project appeared secondary or their emphasizing even an affront.

This was certainly the case on a couple of occasions that sparked debates. During one Sunday protest, the march for Rosia Montana morphed into a previous march for the unification with the Republic of Moldova.³ Because of this particular circumstance, the previous fragmentation of the marches into small groups sticking to each other and the overall diversity were replaced on this occasion by a more coherently organized right-wing and nationalist sector, which stood out among the other participants. This was in part made possible by the continuously declining number of people attending the marches, which left more room for such organized and militant factions to express themselves.

This event is remembered now as the one in which one member of the extreme right punched an anarchist protester in the face in cir-

3 For lack of space, I cannot explain fully the features of this movement. It suffices to note that it is one of the most conservative and animated by some of the most powerful right-wing groups in both Romania and the Republic of Moldova.

cumstances and for reasons that still remain unclear. But beyond this violent incident, what this event revealed was the ease with which the movement for Rosia Montana could blend in with outright right-wing manifestations. This brought into question the viability of the organizing mechanism, in which there were no formal leaders able to make decisions, while self-appointed organizers restricted their role to getting the marches approved and delivering messages through the megaphones. With no one in the position to distance the marches from the extreme right, the former got even more imbued with nationalism, while the latter was legitimized and normalized within the movement. Encouraged by these circumstances, more and more nationalist and extreme right groups started to use the meetings for Rosia Montana as a platform to gain recognition and public visibility. Among them, the revived Romanian interwar fascist movement also became visible again.

While one should be careful not to exaggerate the numbers these groups managed to muster, I do not think that mere numerical criteria are a sufficient indication of the significance of the right wing's growth of influence. The emphasis should be different. While indeed from a quantitative point of view these groups remained rather small, the point is that during the 2013 protests they enjoyed a public presence that was denied to them in previous decades. Immediately after 1989, in the context of the growth of anti-communism and the revived conservatism the fall of communism entailed, right-wing and nationalist groups and factions mushroomed, sometimes in the wings and with the backing of more mainstream intellectuals and institutions, including state ones. The more extreme versions however remained confined to obscurity and underground existence, and after 2000 they were eventually forced to limit their public visibility to internet pages and social media. While not negligible, their public appearances – like the marches against the Gay Parade – were

strictly separated from mainstream ones and properly identified as extremist. During the 2013 protests, this boundary became porous and the extreme right started permeating into the mainstream media.

Another event, one of the last in the campaign, is also relevant to this point. On a weekday evening it was announced that Chevron was moving its equipment in Pungesti amid intense resistance of the locals. There was a rumor, later refuted, that one person was killed. This sparked anger in Bucharest and in other cities and a few thousand people took to the streets in protest and solidarity. This impromptu manifestation mixed the strategy of occupying a key intersection with the march on the streets towards key institutions. What was notable in this march was that the combination of nationalism, religious discourse and anti-communism was at a peak, to the extent that both Rosia Montana and Pungesti became simple pretexts for affirming them. The highlight of the evening was the march of the protesters under the Arch of Triumph – the symbol *par excellence* of Romanian expansionism, nationalism and nationalist territorialist logic – followed by a prayer in front of this monument with everybody kneeling. From a form of manifestation resembling, in the beginning, the Occupy movement, the protests now borrowed from the arsenal of the Romanian legionars.

This was the moment when many people decided not to take part in marches anymore, and the street protests ended soon thereafter. Debates moved from the streets to the newspapers, on-line magazines and the internet. The main critics of the spread of nationalist ideological motives and the inability of the organizers to firmly draw a line between themselves and nationalism and extremism came, unsurprisingly, from leftist and anarchist circles. Yet these were networks even less articulated than those of the extreme right, so their ability to influence the course of events or the protests was effective-

ly close to nil, except in the sense of formulating ideas and raising critical points. In the next section, I will briefly sketch out the type of ecological thinking and its links with anti-capitalism which such groups tried to put forth, albeit tentatively and largely at an ideological level, amid the noise of the extreme right and of the complacent mainstream participants tolerating them.



Eco-criticism as anti-capitalism and the articulation of the left

The Romanian protests discussed above and the social transformations they are a reaction to bring into new focus the relationship between nature, land and contemporary processes of capitalist production and accumulation beyond the limits of the history of nationalist discourse described above. Both Rosia Montana and Pungesti are after all clear cases of land grabbing and land enclosure for the benefit of global capitalist accumulation, facilitated by a subservient local state. This process points to a reprimarization of the Romanian economy after the communist experience: a return to the reliance on primary export products, just like in the interwar period. So, we might speak of a neocolonial situation, as some Romanian voices do, thus fuelling nationalistic responses from both right and left. But at the same time it is more than this. For many countries in the world, nature has remained their only reliable source of income and revenue. Thus, nature appears directly as capital, not just in theory but also in practice. Nature itself becomes the primary form of the wealth of the nation. In a situation of financial shortage, states are forced to sell their assets in order to generate some income, even if a small one, as is the case in the Romanian example, where expected revenues from these projects are low.

In the process of land grabbing, the role of the state is central, and the Romanian example is a case in point. The state made available the land for fracking in a bilateral agreement with Chevron. The details of this agreement were deemed a state secret and are thus unavailable to public scrutiny. What we witness here does away with the early logic of post-communist privatization that, at least in principle, maintained the illusion of a (free) market by way of which state-owned assets could become the property of the highest bidder. Now, the state uses its legislative prerogatives and repressive apparatuses in order to transfer directly large chunks of land and other assets into the private hands of some “strategic partners”. The process is then presented to the public as a *fait accompli* and whoever is resisting it – as locals in Pungesti did – is met with police action.

This of course elicits discussions about “corruption” and Eastern European “imperfect” capitalism, just as most of the protesters were shouting on the streets. But from a leftist perspective, in order to understand these complex mechanisms, one should bring into the picture also the political level where state officials, especially in peripheral contexts, meet the owners of big, global capital. The outcome of this intersection is that while it weakens the governing class in relation to global capital and global ruling classes, it in fact strengthens the local politicians and state administrators against the local capitalists, thus leading to a complete remaking of the social framework of the past 25 years. Therefore, while the state is weakened in relation to global capital, at home the state appears to be more and more powerful. In such a context, emerging leftist forces need to wage a double battle concomitantly: one against these very processes of capitalist accumulation, and another one against mainstream interpretations that confine them to mere instances of “corruption” that could be resolved with more transparency and legal action. Getting this double message across was one of the most

difficult tasks of the Romanian left during the protests since, inevitably, it was a minority position.

This task was further complicated by the dynamics of the protests. For example, Rosia Montana Gold Corporation reframed the terms of debate on the issue of the labor/capital conflict. Against the protesters' references to class conflict, the corporations claimed to be defending the right of people to work and have an income. Thus, while urban protesters were shouting against the corporation and against the destruction of the environment, the corporation was simply retorting that it creates jobs and gives significant revenues to the state with which to pay pensions and salaries. Corporate profit was recast not as antinomial to labor, but as the only chance of survival of areas of high unemployment. How to overcome such arguments while also aligning in the same camp the interests of labor and the need to defend nature?

This entailed the theoretical rapprochement between ecology and anti-capitalist approaches. While this tension has shaped leftist debates and politics everywhere, in the Romanian case it had a poignant relevance since ecological movements and groups were rather right-wing in nature and (largely though not entirely) informed by the nationalist logic presented above. For them, the struggle over nature and the social relations with nature under capitalism are of secondary importance. Moreover, at a more general level, the political struggle of these groups remains problematic from a left perspective, also because it is not aimed at the capitalist use and production of nature, but at the general misuse and domination of nature by the human species. Historically abstract human relations to nature *not* capitalism thus become the main culprit and target. No wonder then that the proposed solutions also take on a moralistic character, rather than a socio-economically systemic one, thus assuming forms which

are at least congruent with capitalism, if not outright capitalistic in nature: green energy, electric cars or agro-tourism, just to name a few.

By contrast, the theoretical and political work of the emergent leftist circles involved in the protests against the gold exploitation and fracking revolved around the need to bring issues of labor back to the fore and with them the socially mediated relationship with nature. The immediate step was to highlight the fact that capitalism is a mode of production. As a mode of production, it entails a particular way of organizing and deploying social labor – via its subsumption under the capitalist imperative of profitability. It thus entails a particular relation to nature in which the extraction of resources for production and reproduction of life is undergirded by the imperative of profit and accumulation. Moreover, what is salient for capitalism is the separation between people and the means of production, which forces people to sell their labor power for wages. This transforms labor into a commodity. But this process rests on the concomitant enclosure of “nature” (land, water, pastures, mineral resources, etc.). In the process of capitalist production “nature” is privatized and commodified. The ecological problem is thus indissolubly linked with the capitalist problem: labor and “nature” are both affected and shaped by the process of capitalist production.⁴

4 As Marx wrote: “Capitalist production ... only develops the techniques and the degree of combination of the social process of production by simultaneously undermining the original sources of all wealth – the soil and the worker.” (Karl Marx: Capital vol. I, Penguin / New Left Books, London 1976, p. 638.). I thank Stipe Ćurković for leading me to this quote.



Conclusion

Yet, despite this continuing opposition, to many the battle seems already lost. This feeling was certainly affected by the development of the events in Ukraine. The annexation of Crimea by Russia and the outbreak of prolonged battles in eastern Ukraine during the better part of 2014 exacerbated deep-seated anti-Russian feelings in Romania. Regarding Russia as a threat to its national security, Romania shifted its geopolitical interests accordingly, towards closer association with and increasing political dependency on NATO and the United States. This in turn prompted a rethinking of energy policy by emphasizing the need to gain energy independency from Russian gas. In this context the fracking in Pungesti ceases to be a matter of ecological concern and becomes one of economic and geopolitical interest for the Romanian state. In such circumstances, mobilizing strictly on an ecological platform has only very limited chances of stirring popular support. This is confirmed by recent developments: the number of non-local activists supporting the struggle of the population in Pungesti is now very small.

Moreover, in a climate dominated by fears of Russian expansion, the national question and the long history of Romanian nationalism only gain even more poignancy and fortify themselves at center stage. The already conservative and right-wing atmosphere has been magnified recently, albeit now without attachment to earlier ecological concerns. Now nationalism blends in seamlessly with state reason in the agenda of “defending the nation at all costs”. Securing energy independence from Russia by way of fracking now seems a good enough compromise for many of the very same protesters who took to the streets against the goldmine exploitation in the autumn of 2013.

Naturally, in such a context the left is again isolated. Its criticism of global social forces and its penchant for nuances is dismissed as unpatriotic or even in favor of Putin. Busy to defend itself and find a voice in this cacophony, its chances for public relevance remain as slim as usual.

Meanwhile, land grabbing in agriculture continues apace. Small plots of land owned by largely disenfranchised poor peasants are being bought up cheaply by large agro-business, following legislation adopted by the state in their favor. The process of appropriation by dispossession and the divorcing of labor from its means of production are being recreated in the Romanian countryside at lightning speed. Issues of nature and labor thus continue to hold important mobilizing potential even in the absence of immediate ecological threats. Despite its recent setbacks and defeats in the protest cycles analyzed above, the Romanian left has no choice but to continue the hard labor of their effective articulation, if it wishes to escape marginality and become a relevant social force for the future.

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