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'DID YOU ARRIVE BY TRAIN OR BY SHIP?:' TRANSPORTATION AS POLITICS AND METAPHOR IN FIELDWORK IN SOCIALIST ROMANIA

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ABSTRACT. This essay considers how transportation and mobility model the character of Romanian-American interaction during fieldwork from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s. Transportation in socialist Romania was a register of modernization and regime legitimation as well as an absolute threat to that legitimation. Official suspicions of movement and political concern about transportation translated into differentially restricting, policing, and limiting availability of transportation. In contrast anthropological fieldwork is predicated on movement while Western culture also claimed free mobility as a cultural good. These different teleologies provoked diverse disjunctures in my interactions with Romanians. While I engaged with Romanians naively, my travelling together with people either gave them cover for resistance or provoked their fear of political exposure. Sharing transportation resources with Romanians encouraged others' concerns about my alleged political bias or was used to affirm socialist superiority. In other words, transportation during socialism was never neutral, but freighted politically and culturally confrontational.

Keywords: transportation, fieldwork, Cold War, socialism, mobility, UMass Romanian Research Group

Introduction: The Universe from the Back Seat of a Dacia 1300

This essay considers how transportation and mobility model the character of Romanian-American interaction during fieldwork from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s. I never considered transportation as a critical diagnostic in its own right. However, a review of fieldnotes for this issue of *Studia Sociologia* suggested transportation was a cultural domain operating across a range of contexts which profoundly shaped my interactions with

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Romanian citizens and understanding of Romanian society. Though I did not have a specific "transportation" category in my fieldnotes,[2] related issues kept emerging from diverse field scenes. In fact, as I thought about it, it was clear that mobility connected intensively with both socialist life and anthropological fieldwork. For example, the socialist state mobilized and controlled its population partially by limiting and socializing transportation. In contrast, anthropological fieldwork depends on constant, individualized movement across field sites, in centers and peripheries, meeting with colleagues and informants in different localities, or even taking an occasional vacation break from the field. These contrasting teleologies thus created interaction contexts ripe for negotiation, challenge, subversion, and/or reaffirmation of systemic principles and individual beliefs.

Burrell and Hörschelmann (2014: 2-3) suggest that, as much as any other phenomenon of socialist life, mobility and transportation illustrate socialist state conditions as they "articulate(d) power, politics, and materiality with human agency, (thereby) shaping peoples' understanding of the limits and possibilities for action within the regime." Though transportation and mobility in socialist societies has been considered sui generis (Cirniala, 2014; Siegelbaum, 2013; Živković, 2014), I hope to broaden this perspective to consider meanings and tensions emerging from the interaction of socialist subjects with the Western cultural other. Discerning meaning from transportation interactions thus provides clues to powerful features of political economy, underlying cultural principles, as well as some of the fault lines between Western and socialist systems defined in individual interaction.

Looking back four decades, contestations related to transportation and mobility often emerged from prosaic occurrences. For example, early in my fieldwork older villagers universally sought information about my arrival in Hîrseni commune by asking me "Did you arrive by train or by ship?" ("*Ai venit cu trenul sau cu vaporul*?"). At the time, I assumed the question simply implied my informants' naiveté and lack of geographical understanding. However, the question is actually a synecdoche. Though referring manifestly to my village arrival, the query was essentially a commentary on history and memory under Romanian socialism, implying relations of time, place, and identity, and questioning whether an outsider, such as myself, ought to be incorporated into or marginalized from local systems of meaning.

[2] I did, however, develop categories that addressed among others, "commuting," "horses," "mechanization," "migration," "modernization," "visiting," and a few more general categories which spoke to the issues discussed here.

By way of explanation, train and ship travel had both long-standing significances in village culture and history as well as intense connectivity to more recent socialist conditions. An American putatively arriving by sea articulated with memories of those who left to the USA before the First World War (Kideckel, 2007). Thus, to some, a sea-borne arrival implied knowledge of those long-lost relatives, influencing many villagers to present me with envelope fragments, partial addresses, or blotted phone numbers while asking if I knew their family members or could find out more about them. Furthermore, my village nickname, "Americanul," duplicated that of some who returned from the USA, thus echoing the economic and political upheavals this return migration produced in village affairs. Meanwhile, train travel implicated me even more in problematic understanding of the recent village past. The railroads, after all, were a visible instrument of the state and a defining quality of socialist development (Turnock, 2005).[3] Village sons and daughters came and went on trains, but older villagers rarely did. Instead, their train-related experience had been travel by horse-drawn cart to deliver produce to rail sidings in the forced agricultural contract system in the years before collectivization. These bitter events remained clear in local memory, thereby potentially compromising my identity by placing me in league with the Romanian state, or tainted by collectivization.

Below I ethnographically discuss a few travel anecdotes that mainly bring together visiting anthropologist and host Romanians (and in one instance, visiting Romanians and host anthropologists). These define the cultural and political economic principles emerging from the idiosyncratic interaction of individuals during transportation events. I especially focus on how such situations illustrate fault lines between opposing cultural and political economic principles, and exposed Romanian citizens and this foreign anthropologist to socialist policy and fraught political and cultural sensitivities even while engaging in normal daily activities.

Transportation and Mobility in Socialist Society and Culture

The political quality of transportation and mobility are not solely characteristic of the former socialist states. The modern politics of transportation is found in choices or placement in the organization of infrastructure (Yarrington, 2015), statuses, and values attached to different transport means (Lutz, 2014), or even differential movement shaped by income, political status, or displacement (Harms, 2013). The politics of transportation is also apparent in anthropological

[3] Former Communist leader Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej (1901-1965) had been a railway worker and the Grivița rail workers' strike (1933) was one of the formative events in Romanian socialist history.

fieldwork. Most simply put, anthropologists often have access to transportation resources largely unavailable to host populations. This inequality can translate into a tug-of-war over such resources, as did Paul Rabinow's use of an automobile in fieldwork in Morocco (1997). The car enabled his quick access to diverse field sites, better provisioning, and the chance to leave the field for elsewhere. However, his informants had other ideas and continually demanded Rabinow drive them to market and on other errands. As expected, he ditched the vehicle.

Transportation and physical mobility were especially imbued with power relations in socialist societies. Thus, simultaneously and contradictorily, population movement was both a register of modernization and regime legitimation as well as an absolute threat to that legitimation (Cirniala, 2014: 45). Movement was essential to the development project of socialist regimes, illustrated by improved roads, railroads, and other public transportation, the growth of private automobile ownership (Siegelbaum, 2013), encouragement of internal tourism, and even the occasional dispensation of passports for touring abroad (Stefan, 2014). At the same time, individual access to mobility and transportation implied the potential escape of individuals from the eyes of the police and eased entry of people into places where the Party's domination of corporate life was also largely absent. Official suspicions of movement and political concern about transportation thus translated into restricting emigration, internal restrictions on places to live, limited housing stock, continual "carding" of mobile individuals for their identity papers, closing certain cities to immigration, and limiting the availability of transportation means, among the more notable practices.

The power relations of transportation in East European socialist societies, such as Romania from the late 1940s to the late 1980s, were also visible in their variable application. That is, mobility was not restricted equally across the board, but differential mobility possibilities were part and parcel of the way by which socialist governments ranked their citizens and either coopted their complacency or coerced their compliance. Though limiting transportation was part of the practice of "etatization" (Verdery, 1996: 40), not all citizens experienced the same degrees of transport limitation. Paradoxically, the closer the fit between individual and state, the less the individual was dependent on the state for transportation. Greater political trust translated to greater mobility. Thus, for example, many officials and some scholars had an easier ability to purchase private cars, afford taxi transportation, or travel to foreign venues. Allowing trusted members of society to occasionally travel abroad, meanwhile, was used to visibly challenge Western critique of restricted mobility in socialism, even while enabling Romanian access to Western people and ideas and things. Meanwhile, those lower in the socio-economic scale, e.g. industrial workers, clerks, and other "just plain folks" (*oameni de rând*) were confronted daily with over-crowded busses and

trams, limited ability to purchase private transportation, and heavy restrictions on movement. Collectivized peasantries and other rural dwellers had to make due with rickety bicycles, horse- and water buffalo-drawn carts, and the occasional bus to bring rural workers to nearby or not-so-nearby factories.[4]

Contrasting prevailing dualistic socialist mobility beliefs, movement in Western society was an essential aspect of capitalist life and generally desirable. Unlike socialist political trustworthiness, differential mobility in capitalism is often a function of market access. Those at either end of the class hierarchy have greater degrees of mobility. Those at the top have volitional mobility, as in frequent vacations, while those at the bottom experience forced mobility, as in labor migration. Continual movement often characterized capitalist lives as the exchange of smaller for larger homes, the belief in “voting with one’s feet,” and commitment to notions of upward mobility. Only in America could Kerouac’s “On the Road” be thought to imagine an entire culture. Mobility was also critical in the anthropology of the middle 1970s, when the discipline still privileged fieldwork in non-Western societies. The anthropologist’s job was to make distant lands intelligible. Classic ethnographies, like Malinowski’s journey to the Trobriands or Evans-Pritchard landing among the Nuer, encompass travel stories defined by the heroic person of the anthropologist. In the visiting anthropologist, then, the individualism of Western mobility ran smack into the socialist transportation policy regime.

Thus, the presence of our group of five graduate students and their professor in mid-1970s Romania was both highly desired by Romanian officials but seriously suspect from the moment we arrived. As the Romanian dictator sought to maneuver outside the Soviet orbit post-Prague Spring, the diplomatic opening between Ceaușescu and the West was clearly in our favor. Contradictorily, our research topics,[5] and requests to reside in village communities and be allowed close daily contact with Romanian citizens were remarkably concerning for the security threats they represented and for our possibly contaminating citizens with foreign ideologies.[6] Thus, it took some time for us to gain permission to reside in the communities of our choice, and once we finally arrived, transportation issues were thrust front and center.

[4] Workers commuted to the Făgăraș Chemical Combine (CCF), the main employer of Hîrseni workers in the 1970s, from as far away as 37 km (Zderciuc, 1972: 277).

[5] I studied agricultural collectivization; Beck focused on the socio-cultural and historical circumstances of frontier conditions; Cole considered worker-peasants in a suburban village; McArthur focused on Saxon-German history and social structure; Randall examined the life circumstances of private mountain peasants who generally tried to live outside the demands of the state; and, Sampson focused on urban planning and systematization of Romanian settlement.

[6] Concern for the contamination of Romania’s citizens by foreign influences contributed to passage of the Official Secrets Act in 1974, just at the moment that the UMass Romanian Research Group entered the field for our first stint of long-term field research.

Though we needed to travel to various research sites, movement out of our communities for which we had received permission was suspect. Furthermore, as anthropologists we dealt with those across the social and political hierarchy and thus were exposed to conditions, incidents, and issues of mobility and transportation of different sorts and with different people. The generally rooted circumstances of many in the villages and their broad suspicion and uncertainty about movement they expressed so poignantly in the train/ship question above complicated matters even further. These contrasting expectations were intensively manifested in the transportation experiences I had across the span of my fieldwork between 1973 and 1984.[7] Virtually any and all transportation modalities including planes, ships, trains, busses and trams, automobiles, bicycles, and even horse- and water buffalo-drawn carts, were sites of potential subversion of socialist policy, conflict between socialist policy and anthropological practice, and contradiction between Romanian and American cultural expectations.

Below, using the lens of various "transportation moments," I evaluate the meaning of interactions during field research, alone and with colleagues, and with Romanians of diverse statuses. I suggest how anthropological research at socialist sites through all these interactions helped define aspects of then-socialist society and the challenges to socialist principles. The foreign researcher's presence was never merely neutral, but often highlighted socialist principles in stark relief, either embellishing or disrupting them. Furthermore, no matter how mundane these transportation events, each was imbued with aspects of power and politics emanating from the systemic tensions of the Cold War and the contradictions of Western and Romanian attitudes and values related to mobility. These ethnographic depictions thus enable reflection about a topic generally obscure in the study of socialism and aid our understanding of this historical moment, and the manner socialist society was engaged by foreign analysts.

Transportation, Mobility, and Field Research in and about Cold War Romania

The diverse transportation moments described below, and the values, processes, and contestations they illustrate, by no means encompass the totality of the cultural, emotional, and political states characterizing the relationship

[7] After a very uncomfortable month in the commune in Summer 1984, where I was hounded by police and where friends and acquaintances were threatened for speaking with me, I stopped traveling to Romania until the regime was overthrown in late 1989. I returned to Romania soon after the Revolution, in April 1990, and was there for the celebration of Orthodox Easter, the first televised airing of Ceaușescu's trial in its entirety, and the occupation of Piața Universității by members of the newly reconstituted and merged National Peasant and Christian Democratic parties (PNT-CD) in opposition to emerging president Ion Iliescu.

between the foreign anthropologist and Romanian hosts. Nor do they fully illustrate the range of transportation moments I experienced during fieldwork. I have selected them more for their expository than for their dramatic qualities. Though each is a unique event unto itself, together they portray a changing picture of my developing interactions with Romanian friends and colleagues conditioned by socialist realities and anthropological sensibilities.

Before the Field: Naiveté and Obscurity

The earliest moments of my field experience and relationship with Romanian realities and people is probably best characterized by the incredible naiveté we acted out toward each other. As a graduate student, I was not particularly swayed by an understanding of socialism as totalitarian. Quite the contrary, I went to Romania looking for ways that life betrayed the totalitarian image. At the same time, summer 1973 was probably the high point in the relaxation of political control of Romanians by their socialist masters, giving Romanians a sense that other things were possible. In fact, however, neither myself nor my Romanian interlocutors saw things too clearly. While "America," and hence my presence, may have served as a symbol of this opening and American culture something to be celebrated, the "system" was still very much evident and structured to prevent dissent and contamination by outsiders.

I suppose my naiveté about East European life was first made clear to me in summer 1973 at the Austrian border town of Brück am der Leitha, when I was thrown off the Wiener Walzer Express train heading to Bucharest for lacking a Hungarian transit visa. This was my first trip to Europe, where my understanding of the right to unfettered border crossings, nurtured by years of travel between the US and Canada, clashed with the realities of Cold War Europe. Though I secured a Romanian tourist visa in advance of my trip, I neglected to prepare for the entire trip. Traveling on a very tight budget, I refused the inflated offer of the Austrian cab driver to haul me to the border where I could secure a visa, but instead returned to Vienna, hitching a ride with a German long-haul trucker, to retrieve a visa the following day (I slept over night in the main Vienna train station) at a Hungarian office that issued transit and other visas.

Both my naiveté about Eastern Europe and a degree of Romanian naiveté about visiting Americans, was repeated over and over that summer, especially emerging in diverse transportation venues. For example, that first summer Sam Beck and I traveled for a day with Romulus Vulcănescu (d. 1999), a highly regarded ethnologist and folklorist, in Vulcănescu's car across the Bărăgan, the southern Romanian plain, to the town of Curtea de Argeș. Vulcănescu was proud

to claim his independence and lack of fear of the Party in the privacy of his vehicle, and used this trip to highlight this and to introduce us to important qualities of Romanian culture and folklore, like the tale of *Meșterul Manole* or *țuica de Turț* and *bulz* at an out-of-the-way village inn. Vulcănescu spoke often of his political independence and respect for Americans, clearly aiming for possible collaboration. Comically, however, he also tried to impress us with his knowledge of American culture by, among other things, mimicking American driving habits. He periodically turned to face whomever of us was in the backseat (sometimes Sam, sometimes me), proclaiming "Mannix, Mannix" in a loud excited voice while careening down the road and jerking the steering wheel left and right.[8] To this day I remain impressed by both the absurdity of the situation and Vulcănescu's courage, not as a driver, but as a scholar.

My naiveté was finally replaced with a sense of Cold War reality when, in that summer, I took a week's trip to the Danube Delta, hitchhiking there and back. My trip to Tulcea was uneventful and I really remember nothing about it. However, that changed when I boarded the ferry heading out on the northernmost Chilia branch of the Danube, marking the border between Romania and the then-Soviet Union. My intent was to travel to the furthest point on the ferry's route and then "see what happens." The trip along the Chilia was eye-opening. Aside from the numerous passengers traveling with chickens and pigs, I was both impressed and mortified to see the gun emplacements along the Soviet border. The sensitivity of the border, only able to be experienced by my purposeful mobility, especially thrust itself on me when we landed at Periprava, the final port of debarkation.

During the multi-hour ferry journey I was befriended by a young *lipovean*[9] man. My Russian amounted to a phrase or two, my Romanian at the time was essentially non-existent, and his English also rudimentary, but we bonded over music, both of us declaring our love for Creedence Clearwater Revival! M's quick thinking saved me from my own naiveté. As I left the ferry, a soldier at the end of the gangplank was examining debarking passengers' papers. He was visibly chagrined when I gave him my American passport, and did a triple-take looking back and forth to me and my passport. For a moment he hesitated, as if he was going to call his superiors, when M saved the day. He grabbed my passport from the soldier's hand, grabbed me by my shirtsleeve and hustled me away. I expected to hear gunfire over my head, as we walked briskly from the port.

[8] "Mannix" was an American TV series about a rugged police detective popular then on Romanian television. He was often involved in very exciting car chases, which Vulcănescu was play-acting.

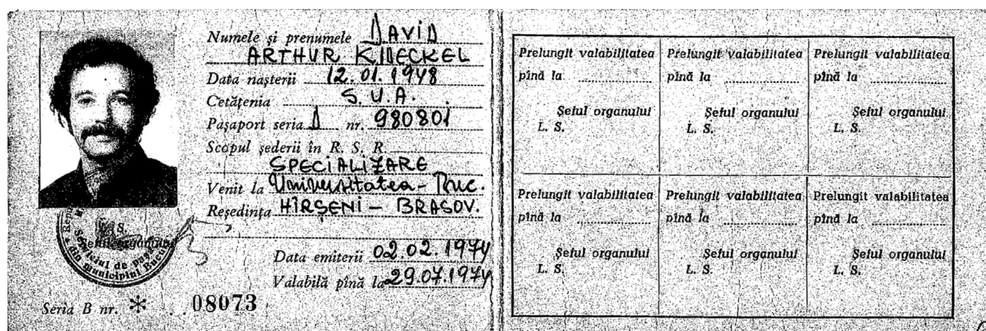
[9] *Lipovenii*, or Old Believers, had fled Russia during the time of Peter the Great, escaping his reforms of Orthodoxy. Many settled in the Danube Delta area and, until Ceaușescu's regime attempts at forced collectivization, right around the time of my early-1970s visit there, lived much as they had since their Russian exile in the 17th century.

After most of a week with him, his family, and friends, swatting mosquitos, eating fish soup, and playing football, I asked about returning to Tulcea, but he indicated I shouldn't worry. On the appointed day, instead of taking me to the Chilia branch, we walked on paths through dunes and reeds to a small lake where he motioned me to stay and then he left. Under an hour later a motorized canoe showed up with a grizzled fellow at the tiller. I got in and we left on a winding journey through Delta back channels. We stopped to pick up one peasant lady at a small riparian settlement, who tried to teach me Romanian while we floated past woods and fields. But the language lessons abruptly stopped as we neared a barge anchored in the channel on which stood rifle-toting guards supervising a gang of prisoners up to their waist in muck dredging the channel. Given our location in the northern part of the Delta, it was unlikely that the prisoners were working on the Danube-Black Sea Canal, condemned by UN resolution in the mid-1950s. However, the UN action also condemned Romania's ill-treatment of prisoners in the Danube project, and the sight in front of me clearly echoed that. The old man at the tiller motioned me to be silent as we glided past the barge. But prison ships and shotguns were not things I expected in reforming Romania. Clearly, I wasn't in Kansas any longer!

My Delta sojourn suggested that pockets of Cold War Romania largely resisted or maneuvered around state control and that youth will have its way. My presence even afforded that young *lipovean* man the opportunity to enact a small resistance. Floating past the barge I learned of a menacing state which, once my period of active fieldwork began, reappeared if only in the minds of my friends and informants who convinced me there was potential danger in the intimacy of private conveyance, whether automobile or water-buffalo drawn cart, beyond the watchful eyes of the *Securitate*.

Traveling in Capitulation and Resistance

After spending some months in the field I had become integrated into a network of village intellectuals who occupied positions of civic responsibility within village and commune. Though they were committed Party members (at least publicly), I thought our discussions open and honest. Still, despite our closeness, and small acts of resistance we practiced, like the regular Friday night poker game I hosted at my rooms with matchsticks as stakes, during which we joked about the local police listening at the widow, my friends' social positions allowed them little room to deviate from the Party line in their work. They were often caught between desires to express their friendship and trust in me and their need to affirm their political trustworthiness. This tension was particularly apparent in transportation contexts that, by definition, opened my friends to suspicion and peril.



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Romanian identification card. *Source: Author's archive*.

An automobile trip to Brașov with one friend in autumn 1975 is a case in point. He needed to drive to the city to meet with county education officials. Hoping to visit the county statistical bureau, I asked if I could tag along. My friend was ok with my accompanying him until he remembered his automobile papers did not reflect his car's changed appearance. In order to personalize his Dacia 1300, he recently had half of the vehicle repainted.[10] Thinking about the prospects for the trip, he temporized while discussing the consequences lest we be stopped by authorities seeking our papers. He said that it would be bad to show the police his vehicle information without the new color having been registered. Furthermore, to be driving in an incorrectly registered vehicle in the company of an American, would look especially problematic since he was on "official business." In my Western mindset I thought it ludicrous that the car's color would matter to the police, so I pressed him to take me along. He ultimately agreed to my accompanying him, but spent a good part of the trip fretting about the police randomly demanding the papers of passing motorists.

In a contrasting case from spring 1976, a local worker asked me to drive him to the city in his car, claiming my American identity would protect him from police sanctions. I had never met this fellow until the morning at 4:00 a.m. when he showed up at my rooms, knocking loudly to wake me. He beseeched me to drive him to Brașov, so that he might register his new car and secure his driver's license. He received his car some weeks before and it sat in his courtyard as he had neither driver's license nor papers. He needed to get to Brașov to finish those formalities, but worried police might stop him on the way. As word was out that I had a valid driver's license, he sought my help as a solution. Though I

[10] He also personalized the vehicle, as was the style then, with a virtual menagerie of toy animals resting on the back shelf above the car's trunk, including the requisite dog whose head bobbed as the car moved.

resisted and suggested we could go another day, he informed me that this was the last day he could get these papers without much delay. His entreaties were so mournful, I relented and we had an uneventful trip there and back.

Compared to the sensitivity of travel in private automobiles, where my Party friends were cautious about American contacts, the public experience of bus travel was seemingly much less problematic. In fact, my introduction to Hîrseni commune came when Sam Beck and I met a few workers at the bus stop outside the Făgăraș Chemical Combine (FCC) gates and were invited back to Hîrseni village with them. They seemed completely unfazed about being seen with us on the bus. From that introduction to the village and commune in summer 1973 I continued to spend considerable time at town and village bus stops, and on the bus as well. As my research was concerned with the implications for the local collective farm (CAP) of villagers juggling twin responsibilities of factory and agricultural labor, I often went with workers into town and home again. However my commuting came to the attention of the local police head (*șef de post*) who asked why I regularly counted people going to and from the city and why I was a frequent bus passenger as well. It turned out that my commuting was actually not as sensitive as was my hanging around the CCF, a major manufacture of explosives for the Romanian military.

Generally speaking, commuting by bus entailed mainly complacence with a few small challenges to political expectations. For example, now and again while waiting at the bus stop, young men stood and played cards, using their upturned palms as a table. Riding the bus was a dour affair, especially in the morning, as people's hunched backs and occasional snoozing manifested a habitus of the downtrodden. Workers were tired from work in the village the night before and many had to take the 5:00 a.m. bus, for which they awoke between 3:00 and 4:00, to be in time for their 7:00 a.m. shift. The bus ride home was usually more animated. Having finished their shift, some workers stopped at the factory store to purchase household goods unavailable in the village. Others got a drink with their mates at one of the bars in town. Every now and then, heated but brief exchanges broke out between workers on the afternoon bus. At Christmas time the busses were often filled with *cete* of young men from different villages.[11] Dressed in special hats and sashes, they made a commotion by competitive caroling while shouting humorous insults back and forth. But whether coming or going, when I got on the bus, friends would always motion for me to sit with them. They seemed less self-conscious and worried about exposure than myself.

[11] The *ceata* was a young man's association formed specifically to organize village events during the Christmas season. *Cete* (pl.) from different villages or different *cete* from the same village often competed with each other in Christmas caroling or other feats of bravado.

Playing cards waiting for bus. *Source: Author's archive*.

As the contrast between bus and automobile suggests, private travel was potentially more challenging to the system because it enabled exchanges away from official eyes. Though this could both encourage or frighten my friends, I always felt the possibility of silent conspiracy with private travelling companions who could use the moment to supplant party narratives. For example, one cold spring morning at the CAP barns I decided to help an older man, Dml P, load a cart with manure, and then work with him the rest of the day. After loading the manure, we headed in the water buffalo-drawn cart to the scales across the village to weigh his load for labor credit, and then continued east to spread manure on his CAP plot. On the trip to the east field, as we passed the communal cemetery, Dml P began a litany of complaint. Rebuking collectivization, he recounted each person or household that, before collectivization, had owned the plots of land we traversed. He groused about how long it took to cart manure using a water buffalo instead of a horse, and the convoluted route he had to take to get the manure, weigh it, travel to far fields, and spread it. He said he gave a horse to the collective, but it died a few years previous. He contrasted work with horse and plow with the disinterested tractorists of the Station for the Mechanization of Agriculture (SMA). He said the declining quality of commune land resulted from its mistreatment at CAP hands, especially the farm's failure to cover manure from the elements.

Travel with Dml P offered a lesson in collective farm history. Older villagers often prefaced remarks about collectivization by first declaring “When we were private farmers….” Hauling the manure, Dml P also created meaning by contrasting past and present-day (i.e. mid-1970s) circumstances. His narrative was especially sharp when he contrasted water buffalo and horse-drawn transportation. When the collective was formed in the mid-1960s village horses, ownership of which conferred local status, were expropriated by the CAP. Villagers could work with their former animals only with permission from a farm administrator, at the level of brigadier or higher, or from farm teamsters (*conductori*). Seeking permission to use one’s former horse was an indignity that called up memories of land ownership and independence in the days before socialism. Many horses expropriated by the CAP were ultimately worked to death. Villagers claimed this was purposeful, furthered by the state’s ideological commitment to mechanization and the poor conditions in which horses were kept. But villagers really never talked about this and I only gained knowledge of this history by travelling slowly across village lands.

These contrasting incidents illustrate transactional life under socialism, complicated by the variable of the foreign visitor. It was not simply that Romanians of every stripe were fearful about being observed in too close a relationship with me. Instead, people’s decisions were made, and my identity evaluated, based on immediate political and practical circumstances. I was symbolic capital on the bus, but automobile travel was more problematic. I felt privy to secret conspiracies carting manure with Dml P, but allowed individual needs to determine my responses to the two automotive situations. I scoffed when my close friend held me at arm’s length, though my driving with him potentially imperiled his political status. Still he ultimately agreed to travel together to either or both verify his friendship or challenge my perceptions of socialist Romania as police state. At the same time, I originally demurred at the young worker’s request. He was not politically involved and had more to lose if were unable to get his paperwork straightened out on the day in question. He tried and failed to find other drivers, so roping me in was a win for him, authorities be damned. Though the police didn’t stop us on either occasion, concerns they might only reaffirmed self-censorship among a local elite and growing individualized commitment to consumption on the part of the working class, thus ultimately contributing to socialism’s fall a decade hence.

Inequality and Instrumentality

Extensive resource differentials between myself and friends and informants necessarily enabled my using transportation means to assist many during fieldwork. These exchanges were not so different as other anthropologists

experienced, though by virtue of the socialist context each exchange came with a degree of political or ideological meaning for both giver and receiver. The political significance of instrumental transportation exchanges was neither unidirectional, nor easy to calculate. Sometimes they placed me in a position of political uncertainty. At other times they called Romanian political sympathies into question. While at other times, both parties to the exchange were politically implicated. However, the political calculus involved in rendered neutral or even negative whatever positive value I likely could have achieved in these exchanges.

The new bicycle I purchased to assist my travel through village and commune was an object of conversation almost from the instant I purchased it. Aside from easing my travel between the four commune villages,[12] I regularly allowed friends and family to borrow the bike and also used it on errands for my family, like buying bread at the consumer cooperative bakery or taking food to an extended family member at the far end of the village. As innocent as these exchanges were, allowing others to borrow the bike occasionally exposed me to charges of political compromise, especially when borrowers were people in positions of power or authority. This two-wheel politics was a natural outgrowth of my fieldwork. Because of my interest in collecting various statistics or farm documents my work often took me to the village town hall (*primărie*) or the CAP offices. Consequently, when people at *primărie* or CAP headquarters asked to borrow my bike, I rarely refused. Others, however, couldn't help but notice the commune secretary or a CAP brigadier tooling through the village on my silver cycle. Tongues wagged as people's political sensitivities were made known in humorous ways.

The cooks in the CAP canteen where I ate with the SMA tractorists poked fun at me about being in the CAP administration, while my friends occasionally wondered (incorrectly) why I let the commune secretary borrow my bike, but never others. As for me, I was largely unconscious of the significance of my choices until the end of my stay. At that time a number of people asked what I intended to do with the bike, if I would sell it, and for how much. I was concerned about playing favorites nor did I want to profit from the bicycle. But even so, I suppose I confirmed people's fears about my being politically compromised when I gave the bike to a former CAP chief agronomist. He was an elderly fellow who was of great assistance to me during fieldwork and had a hard time getting around; hence my gift to him. However, years later friends still poked fun at me for my decision, though I still avoided the taint of capitalist profiteering.

[12] I regularly visited all the commune's villages as I was interested in collective farm internal variation and the differential structure and operation of village agricultural and animal husbandry brigades within the same institution, a prime focus in my PhD dissertation (Kideckel, 1979).

My political identity also changed when I was pressed into service as the driver for the CAP president. The president’s regular driver had taken ill. The president had recently broken his arm and couldn’t drive. And the chief agronomist, who often accompanied the president on his rounds, didn’t have a driver’s license. As I was always hanging around CAP offices, and had a valid driver’s license, it made sense for him to enlist me in his service. I jumped at the chance to take control of the four-wheel drive ARO, and job shadow the president over four days during spring 1976. Among trips to various fields and satellite villages, we investigated who or what was responsible for the untimely death of a water buffalo, traveled to the state Agricultural Bank in Făgăraș to secure a loan for the farm, and to a meeting of officials from the Inter-Cooperative Association in a nearby commune chaired by an important regional Communist Party cadre (Kideckel, 1993: 135-36). At the Inter-Coop meeting I was forced to wait outside with other drivers, which forcefully raised the issue of transport-based differentiation, domination, and subordination.

Drivers at the General Assembly of CAP meeting. *Source: Author's archive*.

Serving as the president's chauffeur completely inverted the power relationships in fieldwork transportation I had come to expect. From the moment I took the ARO's wheel, the president pointed out his American driver to others while declaring himself the "new Nixon" or "our Nixon."[13] His humor proclaimed how he was in power over Americans, and by virtue of my subordination, the superiority and power of socialist collectivism.

This status inversion was illustrated again and again throughout my time as his driver. But transporting the president also outlined dominance and subordination in Romanian ranks as well. For example, as our trip to the Inter-Coop meeting was delayed by the dead water buffalo, the president demanded I speed and run stop signs to get to the meeting on time. He and the agronomist feared showing disrespect to the Party cadre if they were late. However, the following day returning from the bank in Făgăraș, we were over an hour late for the General Assembly meeting of the CAP. When we arrived at the Culture Hall where the assembly was held, the president slowly sauntered up the aisle, greeting people left and right, while others, mostly older men and housewives, fidgeted in their seats from the delay.

Confrontation and Compromise

As my situation as the president's driver suggests, interactions with friends, colleagues, and informants was always more than an individualized experience. Instead, I was always deemed to represent "the system" from which I originated and which was a counter to Romanian socialism. Some, like old Dml P above, used me as sounding board to critique socialist practice. But others felt obligated to defend their system in my presence, forcing a transformation or even compromise of my Western academic identity, turning me either into a booster of American society or socialist fellow traveler. These pressures of compromise especially asserted themselves when I traveled with Party representatives to different venues and for different reasons, where the proximity of these cadres made these experiences distinctly uncomfortable both for me and my companion(s).

These qualities manifested in full when I accidentally shared a train compartment with one of the "comrades" who I knew from his regular appearance in the commune as a supervisor of local farm activities, delegated by the county organization of cooperative farms (UJCAP). We both got on the train in Bucharest. He was traveling back to Brașov, while I would continue on

[13] Nixon had resigned some two years earlier, but still was the only US politician many Romanians recognized.

to Făgăraș, and then proceed to the commune. Comrade G was always an affable fellow in our occasional interactions. In our conversations he liked to speak with me about Romanian history. In any case, stuck together in our cabin for a three-hour plus trip from Bucharest to Brașov, without others present, our conversation ended up as constant debate and disagreement about Romanian development, with the passing scenery as context for our arguments.

Comrade G lauded the train service, the many automobiles on the road, and various economic enterprises in the towns we passed. But one particularly telling exchange occurred near the rail side town of Comarnic, famous for a cement factory whose effluence colored the town a dingy grey, including rooftops, streets, walkways, trees, grass, and bushes. Finally, with a chance to challenge his narrative, I asked if he could imagine what the lungs of the locals probably looked like. But G didn’t miss a beat. He disparaged my view that, he said, could only be that of an American living in a place of comfort and removed from Europe’s history of warfare and destruction. To him the cement dust meant jobs and food and money for education and even better health for the people, and was a noble rejoinder to capitalist self-congratulation. There was little I could say in response and after Comarnic G was decidedly stand-offish, I felt upbraided, and our conversation flagged.

Traveling with G, I became an American defender. But my identity was inversed as driver for General Ilie Ceaușescu, Nicolae Ceaușescu’s younger brother, when I shepherded him from a conference in Amherst, at the University of Massachusetts, to another at Columbia University in New York City. The General was part of a delegation of Romanian academics and dignitaries visiting American universities on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Romanian war of independence of 1877-1878. The other delegation members were stuffed onto a bus to the city, but the General escaped that experience to be chauffeured to the NYC event in my seven-year old Volkswagen! Thinking back on the trip, it seems the General was somewhat disgusted by the proletarian transport in which he traveled and the lowly social level of his driver. Consequently, we did not talk much over the two-plus hours. Furthermore, I had the distinct feeling that he would be uncomfortable speaking with me no matter how much out of earshot he was of his delegation.

Driving General Ceaușescu made me indelibly part of the Romanian delegation that showed up to the Columbia seminar. But this was no collegial academic moment. At the university, we were greeted by a loud group of student and community protestors, many with posters of Nicolae Ceaușescu portrayed with bloody vampire fangs. The protest was against the Romanian regime’s actions in Transylvania directed against the Magyar minority. Along with repression and imprisonment of dissidents, other policies included renaming the

city of Cluj/Koloszvar to Cluj-Napoca to emphasize a Dacian connection, and population policies flooding Transylvanian cities with Romanians from the countryside to diminish Magyar influence. Walking with the General into the seminar room I tried to shield him from some of the invective. Also, at that time the Romanian Research Group had recently written a collective article in defense of Romanian policies and as a response to an op-ed by Hungarian professor, Michael Sozan. Our sympathies had been publically declared and my time as the General's driver and host made me feel them more acutely. This was not, in fact, our finest hour.

Conclusions: The Joys of "On the Road" Versus the Travails of Motion Sickness

As these anecdotes suggest, by virtue of its occasional relative privacy and the contradictory meaning of mobility in West and East, travel and movement were politically weighted and culturally significant in even the simplest of exchanges. Though people's hair didn't actually catch fire by hosting me in or on their vehicles, my presence did provoke behavior that can be wholly blamed on the contradictions of mobility in the two then-opposing systems. Thus, travel with Romanians provoked intensity and a need to speak to, if not evaluate, my presence in every case, whether via Dml P's guileless critique of collectivization, the strenuous defense of socialist policy by Comrade G, or even the crazed mimicking of Mannix-at-the-wheel by Prof. Vulcănescu. Furthermore, my relatively and surprisingly free travel also allowed me access to areas of Romania deemed sensitive by political authority and initially encouraged my anodyne view of the world I was researching. However, though I felt liberated by my travel, it also made me a greater systemic threat than I would have been without that movement, such as my Danube Delta excursion and the steamship to Periprava.[14] Furthermore, on an individual level, my travel and mobility contradictorily provoked either greater danger and threat for friends and informants or even greater possibility to Romanians who used their time with me as a means to self-censorship or to provide cover for potential police interventions, as did the two times I drove with village acquaintances to Brașov.

During my years of fieldwork, when I came home to visit, people would ask what it was like "living under Communism." As I told them, I couldn't answer that question accurately since I never really had "lived under Communism;" my

[14] This echoes Katherine Verdery's (2018) experience on her Mobra motor scooter, where she inadvertently wandered onto a militarily sensitive area while looking to define a fieldsite for further research.

life in Romania was ultimately shaped and limited by the knowledge that I was always able to leave. I never had to face the consequences of all my actions and practices, as did my friends and informants who remained in the country. Though my mobility afforded me constant possibility of escape, the fact of my mobility also demanded a degree of awareness and distance of my friends toward me, no matter how close we actually seemed. These two separate realities, mine and theirs, sometimes manifest and sometimes not, always hung over interactions in the field. Fieldwork to the anthropologist, except in rare cases of "going native," still essentially remains an excursion to distant places in an attempt to bring them near intellectually. To one's friends and informants, however, and especially in the socialist states of the 1970s and 1980s, our individualized travel "on the road" to cultural knowledge instead exposed them to potentially serious repercussions of a viral motion sickness brought on by a punitive politics.

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