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“What’s the Big Deal to Be Romanian if You Don’t Have What to Eat” : Food Practices in “Transition”

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Abstract: This article examines some of the main changes in food practices from the first half of 1990s shaped by the new political and economic environment. Based mainly on an analysis of press articles from this period, three main themes are identified in the discussion of alimentation: “hunger”, queues, and new configurations of commerce. This article suggests that these are entangled in a changing culture of shortages specific to the 1980s through an adaptation of older practices of consumption and commercialization of food, discursive tropes and moral judgments. In this way, a simultaneously prospective and retrospective orientation appears in which some of the ethos of the previous social order is used in new ways of making sense of the present. Food plays an important role in this orientation, its rationalization and precariousness specific to the 1980s being now replaced by new worries and uncertainties raised by the economic measures of “transition”.

Keywords: transition, culture of shortages, food practices, change

The quote in the title belongs to a peasant woman and was given as an answer in a broader survey research to the question “What does it mean for you to be Romanian?”¹. Her answer, although unique, is mentioned in 1992 by the author of an article from *de Pres* newspaper that was questioning the sources available for “Romanians’ pride” in the new economic, social and political context. Despite official promises regarding the transition to democracy and market economy as a way to assure “everyone’s

wellbeing”, alimentation remained in Romania in the first half of the 1990s one of the main concerns of ordinary people, often involving comparisons with the 1980s. The passage from a culture of shortage to a culture of relative abundance has not in any case overlapped with any linear and theological process as imagined by the engineers of transition, but has been a very specific change with numerous adaptations and improvisations as responses to the “new rules of the game”. In the following sections, I intend to examine some of the transformations of the food practices from the beginning of the 1990s as answers to the new economic and politic measures but also as adaptations of older forms of talking about, commercializing, and consuming food.

Food practices in “transition”

Food may be seen as the perfect lens through which social changes from the beginning of the 1990s may be looked upon due to its centrality at daily life level or at the level of state governance. Its materiality and sensuality make broad and external social processes to be experienced at the most personal and intimate level, while its concreteness makes it an important index to the broader social, economic and political context (Caldwell, 2009). Examining practices and discourses from postsocialist Eastern Europe beyond abstract concepts like globalization and market can offer a more nuanced understanding of the meanings with which macro processes are felt at the quotidian level. From this perspective, Nancy Ries depicts the potato, a vegetable that played an important role in food practices and discourses in postsocialist Russia, as a “complex system of knowledge” that organized labor, exchange and consumption (Ries, 2009). More than a subsistence product in a precarious economy that may index to the visceral experience of social stratification, the potato is surrounded by multiple strategies, has broader historical and cultural meanings and becomes a useful aliment through which families and communities adapt to the economic conditions of postsocialism.

Another type of studies give a prominent role to

1 Mungiu, Alina. 1992. Orgoliul țării pierdute [The Pride of the Lost Country]. *Pres* 13(133): 9

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changes in attitude and behaviors related to various kinds of food and food practices. Yuson Jung describes the new answers and adaptations to standardized food from postsocialist Bulgaria as a new consumption competence (Jung, 2009). Socialist state control is replaced by consumer control through new local understandings of globalization, an abandonment of a manicheist rhetoric like capitalism vs. socialism, and a new conceptualization of standards and control in the quotidian experiences of consumption. For Zsuzsa Gille changes in paprika production from postsocialist Hungary are perfect analytical lens for examining practices and processes of Europeanization as a way of “Euro-globalization” that leads to the creation of an overlapping of economic areas in which the neoliberal and the protectionist capitalist model meet in the interest of power (Gille, 2009).

As these studies make clear, food is one of the strongest evidence of the impossibility of separating economy, politics and social as distinct and autonomous spheres. Food can be a marker of social stratification, various aliments playing an important role in distinction, or can contribute to building social relations and to expressing different forms of sociability. This aspect may be considered even more important in conditions of food shortage, precarious production, distribution and commercialization or of insufficient means for procurement. In Romania, the change from a command economy, in which production played a central role but in which shortages become an internal feature of economic organization, to a market economy, which, at least in theory, should have brought an equilibrium between demand and supply and new mechanisms for creating and satisfying needs, has involved numerous adjustments of food systems and of everyday food practices.

In this paper, I will explore some of these changes through an analysis of press articles from the beginning of the 1990s that foregrounds three main themes in the discursive treatment of aliments and food practices: “hunger”, queues and the new configurations of commerce. My choice for using “transition” instead of postsocialism as a descriptive term (and not an analytic) for this period is based on its currency in popular culture, being a term often invoked at the time and not only in economic specialists’ terms. This does not mean that I accept the teleological assumption of “transition” in which a socialist past can be easily transformed in a future of a “by the book capitalism” by way of “shock therapy” measures (Burawoy and Verdery, 1999). As Stephen J. Collier (2011) argues in the case of the Soviet cities, “degovernmentalization” may better describe the transformations of these cities in the first half of the 1990s

as a process in which the former socialist orientation to the telos of the plans as way of making sense of the present vanished and there were no linkages between present and future. However, I don’t think that the orientation to future specific to this period should be disregarded since hope, uncertainty or expectations played an important role in giving sense to everyday practices². Katherine Verdery sees the “irrational” means of trust and hope that were frequently invoked in popular explanations of Caritas, a pyramid scheme very successful between 1992 and 1994, as ways of reconfiguring a new morality of moneys and of learning new forms of economic rationality (Verdery, 2003: 344).

In this way, periods of economic instability or of changes from one economic system to another can be described as ones in which future’s uncertainty is augmented and the new political and economic configurations reshape values and practices. But there is also a simultaneous prospective and retrospective orientation in which some of the ethos of the previous social order is entangled in the new ways of making sense of the present (Konstantinov, 1996). In this context, I treat de press discourse on food consumption and provision from the beginning of the 1990s as one in which some of the terms of a previous culture of shortages continue to surface albeit in a more and more adapted manner. As Liviu Chelcea (2002) notes on describing the culture of shortages specific to the 1980, specific strategies and cultural practices of consumption had been developed for coping with the generalized lack of goods, like hoarding, rationing, intensive recycling, and extensive repairs. As my discussion of the press material will reveal, these and others haven’t simply vanished after 1990 but were readapted alongside new strategies for coping with the new problems while older tropes and moral judgments were being used in making sense of the present.

Methods

Using an archive of newspaper articles I was able to trace some of the main themes regarding alimentation and food practices in this period. My main source was the periodical *Expres: ziar independent* [*Express: Independent Newspaper*] that was published between 1990 and 1995. *Expres* was a weekly newspaper that through its self-reference as a “independent newspaper” marked

² To give just some examples of titles from press: “The Need for Hope”, “The Liberalization of Prices between Unrest and Hope”, “Economy and Hope”.

its position as anti-“Power”, often criticizing other newspapers as being “in favor of power” or as “FSN’s officious”. Press had an important presence in people’s daily life during the 1990s (in the first months after December 1989 appeared over 1000 newspapers), being one of the prime vehicles for the circulation of the new discourses regarding market economy, democracy and other significant transformations from this period.

The method of analysis chosen for this study was ethnographic content analysis (ECA). This kind of analysis doesn’t start from predefined categories, being based on the assumption that the subject matter orients the investigator in the choice of adequate methods and theories. In contrast with quantitative content analysis, ECA doesn’t measure frequency and variety of messages and it is not used to verify hypothesis advanced before research. ECA “consists of reflexive movement between concept development, sampling, data collection, data coding, data analysis, and interpretation” (Altheide, 1987: 68), allowing the categories or themes to emerge during the study.

I started my research with following any treatment of alimentation in the articles, from macroeconomic aspects to quotidian details. Broadly, the newspaper’s content was organized in editorials on political, economic and social themes; investigations of subjects like prostitution, beggary, marginal occupations, etc.; and articles on topical subjects. Alimentation is a subject that is discussed in two main ways, either by paying attention to consumption and to quotidian uncertainties and anxieties or to production and distribution and their economic transformations. The latter most often criticize the various the way in which former state enterprises were privatized and draw attention to illegalities in the production, distribution and commercialization of food (most often meat). The former are especially present in weekly columns like *Shopping*, *Restaurants*, that appeared until the end of 1993 and in which almost literary descriptions portray the quotidian life in Bucharest and the conditions of the postsocialist transformations. Both are imbued with moral judgments that function in press as a criterion for the selection of information and as a way of consolidating moral codes through generating a collective feeling of common indignation and preoccupation (Luhmann, 2000: 31).

The various criteria used in press for the selection of information would make naive any assumption that press articles are objective reports on social life. I have already mentioned *Expres*’s positioning as an anti-“Power” newspaper, political orientation playing an important role in the discursive formation of newspapers. To see if the main preoccupations surrounding food that emerged

during the research were more broadly shared, I have also consulted articles from *Adevărul* [*The Truth*] and *România Liberă* [*Free Romania*], two of the most important daily papers at the time, but in a less systematic manner. Just examining press articles without taking in consideration their context of production and circulation is a limited endeavor, so I’ve tried to verify my sources by taking into account present online forum conversations about food in the 1990s, discussions with various persons and published interviews. However, following Akhil Gupta’s argument on the role of newspapers in contributing to “thick description”, newspapers articles are an interesting cultural text in themselves as forms of situated knowledge that create narratives of daily life and imaginaries of a collective (Gupta, 2006: 222). In this way, the way in which the three main themes that I have identified - “hunger”, “queues” and new commerce - are discussed in press may be seen as expressing more broadly shared preoccupations of the period and a specific ethos.

“Hunger felt in throat, an old ailment”³

*[...] to the mass psychosis due to the continuous aggravation of the crisis, apparently unbelievable sequences add: producers that barely find a placement for their commodities, merchants scared by the drastically lowered volume of their businesses and shivering shoppers with bags weaving in air, breathlessly watching every hundreds of grams added to the balance pan.*⁴

In an article from August 1990, the communist period is described as characterized by “the 3Fs of sad memory: Hunger [*Foamea*], Cold [*Frigul*], Fear [*Frica*”⁵. Nicolae Ceaușescu and his family, together with collaborators and friends, are accused of an assault on “the genetic make-up of a people”, of a “biological, alimentary and hypothermal genocide” that made millions of victims. Although not in the same tragic terms, 1980s are often remembered as years of “hunger and strong crisis” due to the shortages of goods and to the governmental measures of „scientific rationalization” of aliments like sugar, oil, butter, cheese, legitimized by the official discourse as an effort to erase Romania’s foreign debt. Meat in its general absence has become a kind of iconic marker for this period, being

³ “*Foamea-n gât, boală veche*” is a quote from the title of an article. The following subtitles are also quotes from various article titles.

⁴ Pavel, Cristian. 1993. Prețul cărnii – o nouă cravașă guvernamentală pe spinarea cumpărătorului. [Meat’s Price – a New Crevice on Buyer’s Back]. *Expres*, 43(194): 11.

⁵ Cristea, Ion. 1990. Un milion de morți și trei milioane de bolnavi. [One Million Dead People and Three Millions Sick People]. *Expres*, 38:2.

often deployed in condemnations of the former members of nomenclature criticized with the expression “the ones that didn’t eat soya salami”. Talking in the present with a former teacher about her first visit in Italy in 1986 to her son that emigrated a year before, meat is still depicted in a strong and visceral way, as a vehicle for a social consciousness that gave a new meaning to her sense of belonging to a peculiar type of society in those years:

What impressed me the most, since in ‘86 the scarcity was at its peak, was the supermarket. [...] When I entered in a room big as this [the kitchen of a communist flat] and there were all these types of meat, pork, poultry, boar, whatever you like, sausages, bacons, salami, all sorts, prosciutto as they eat, I started to cry because here we hadn’t any, we hadn’t even seen. “What happened, mom?” [her son asked], “O, I, o, but aren’t we humans, we in Romania, how come that they have such an abundance and we don’t?”, “That’s it, mom, that’s way I left, because of poverty and hunger”. (A.T., 81 years)

I would say that in a sense the various ways of remembering the communist period have some similarities with the two main academic understandings of the communist societies, either as totalitarian systems with a centralized authority that controls every aspect of everyday life, or as one in which the party state is entangled in a society which still has a high degree of autonomy (Burawoy and Verdery, 1999). The condemnations of the detestable leader or of the presumable omnipresence of the Security are contrasted by memories of various ways of “getting along” in which everyday practices are overcoming the constraints and uncertainty of the formal institutions: “What’s sure is that if you were smart and you knew how to get along – that means that you knew how to «make connections [pile]», you were living well” (Romanian Peasant Museum, 2008: 24). Verdery (2003) describes personal relationships as being integral to socialism due to its main organization, the „centralized planification”, that was negotiated in practice and undermined by administrators of the state enterprises through inflations of budgets and hoarding. Consumption played a minor role for the socialist state being a mode of distribution through which the state’s control of goods was stopped in a political economy oriented mainly around central accumulation and heavy industry production.

The hard work and various strategies for acquiring food developed in a secondary economy in which, among other things, „the sellers could gain favors and supplementary money, for example, stocking rare goods for selling them to some special clients, which, in exchange, were giving them tips or were making important favors” (Verdery, 2003: 50). For M.P., which in the 1980s was working for

an enterprise distributing tires in the country, making alimentary gifts assured a continuous circulation of goods, having also the effect, suggested by Caroline Humphrey (2012) in her discussion of favors, of enhancing a sense of self-worth through the various relationships in a relevant social circles. She was always carrying with her butter and hard cheese, cakes or bacon made by her, when she left in delegations in various cities, so that she could maintain good relationships with the managers or workers from the big tires enterprises:

It was hard, but it all depended on how you could get along [...] Anyway, what can I say, thanks, God, I remember how I had the refrigerator full, there were periods when there were five, six wheels of hard cheese, they were bringing it to me, and I had all the interest ... I mean, we were also eating at home, but how much could you ate ... I had all the interest when I was going in delegations, I had to give them, and then, how to give them if you don’t have? [...] Just for one truck you needed twenty [tires] and you were having many beneficiaries to which something had to be given [...] the ladies from the procurement department with which I was co-working and I was giving them the orders and they were approving, I went like in my home at their place [...] Even the workers from there knew me “Mrs. P. has come, what have you brought us?” (M.P., 75 years)

The two ways of understanding communist societies mentioned above imply also two different ways of examining “transition”, either as a discontinuity with the socialist order, either as a continuity through a form of path dependence. However, as Burawoy and Verdery (1999) suggest none of these perspectives explain the specific characteristics of “transition” as a process, that neither relates in a full manner with the past, nor is completely tied to an imaginary future often framed in terms of a market economy existing only in neoclassical theories. What may seem like a survival of socialist practices are in the new context adaptations to new market initiatives, often using older ways of talking or symbols. Food practices at the beginning of 1990s passed through a slow transformation, private initiatives co-existing with state commerce and industry and rationalizations of some products like sugar still surviving due to state monopoly. Compared with the 1980s the entire political economy of food is reversed through political measures like liberalization of prices, privatization and stability measures. These reverberate in everyday life where more and more goods enter the new “market” but less and less money is available for common people to procure them.

Between 1990 and 1992, the “fixed” prices calculated through socialist centralized planning mechanism were replaced by “liberalized” prices established by new economic state or private agents and introduced

through successive rises. In this period, food prices rose approximately eight times and the social protective measures that followed them, like indexing of wages and some prices, are depicted more through a generalized state in which “we have more and more money, but we can buy only less and less”⁶. After the promulgation of 50/1990 Decree for Free Initiative, new types of commerce appear, food being now commercialized in state groceries, in private stores or in more informal markets, often associated with some kind of “tricksters”. The boundaries between them are rather porous, state stores being often described in press as supplying the other types of commerce, mainly through some forms of favoritism. Also, merchants from all three types of commerce are now labeled as “speculators” while “private” is used as an umbrella term for all kinds of activities more or less legal.

A recurrent theme that is employed in this period in many articles for describing the new economic, politic and social realities is “hunger”, a term used in various formulations or expressions. In August 1990, the rubric *Empty stomach's democracy* appears, several articles being published that depict everyday struggles for getting food: queues for poultry or sugar, consumers outraged by the emptiness of shelves and the services from the state commerce or various forms of poverty⁷. In an article from November 1993, written as a summary of “four years of salvage «transition»”, “hunger” is a term used for rendering the life of “the poor citizen that is forced to blow all his wage on food” in the context of a new phase of rising prices⁸. Although the newspaper has a favorable position on market and democracy introduction in Romania, being very critical on state interventions in various areas, political measures like price liberalization are always questioned through articles that expose several deviations in their assignation. The new prices for meat products based on currency devaluation, raw materials import, the new VAT and the increment of governmental bounties for production are criticized as a proof of government's incompetence, paving the way for an artificial rising of prices, based not on market mechanisms, but on the measures of “so-called « social-democrats », more hungry and pervert than the old nomenclature”. Duplicity is readapted in talking about political class, either through describing the existence of two forms of governing, one of the National Bank, the other

of the Government, or for exposing the “false welfare”. In many articles this is explained as being in reality an abundance of goods due to the dropping of consumption power, since “for the common citizen, the most acute sensation is the impossibility of buying the necessary food for a decent living”, an affirmation sustained by statistical comparisons like “between 1992 and 1993 meat consumption was with 55-60 per cent lower than in ‘89’”. “Hunger” as a metaphor for the rush economic conditions of the time may be seen also in the discussion of food consumption in statistics terms by using macroeconomic indices to describe “the state of the nation” (e.g. consumer price index that had risen in 1993 to 356 per cent¹⁰). The decrease of daily caloric consumption (in 1994, almost 50 per cent of population was consuming 1936 calories/day, when the minimum for a decent living was considered to be 2715 calories/day) became a way of quantifying “transition” and of imagining the nation as a biologic entity composed of “common citizens” depicted as being preoccupied only with assuring their basic biological needs¹¹.

Besides “hunger” as an experience of shortage, hunger as a way of manifesting against political power begins to appear in press in this period. One of the first hunger strike reported is that of the cineastes, followed by the ones made by the protesters from University Square that were demanding an electoral law in terms proposed by the Timișoara Proclamation or a new private television and a free mass-media. The hunger strike extends beyond the more inflated atmosphere that followed the Revolution, becoming almost a common way of protesting during the first years of the 1990s. Various articles invoke as motivations for this kind of protest a continuous discontent for the perpetuation of the “communist structures”, unfair deprivations, or the refusal of the rights associated with participation at Revolution. In 1993, hunger strike is depicted as a fashion, when a high status priest protests in this way for vindicating a building by claiming that it belonged in the past to the Romanian Orthodox Church.

9 Teodorescu, Vlad. 1993. Guvernul Văcăroiu cultivă falsa bunăstare. Vitrinele sunt pline nu datorită abundenței, ci a scăderii puterii de cumpărare. [Văcăroiu's Government Cultivates a False Welfare. Shop fronts are full not because of abundance but due to the decline of purchase power]. *Expres*, 28(179): 10.

10 Popa, Andreea. 1994. Statistica ne duce pe cele mai înalte culmi ale mândriei patriotice [Statistics Take Us on the Highest Peak of Patriotic Pride]. *Expres*, 6(209): 6.

11 See, for example, Teclici, Valentina. 1994. Jumătate din români țin cură forțată de slăbire [Half of Romanians Keep Forced Diet for Losing Weight]. *Expres*, 13(216): 11. Nistorescu, Cornel. 1994. Viețuim și atât. [We just live]. *Expres*, 13(216): 3.

6 *Adevărul*, 4 September 1991, p. 3.

7 *Expres*, No. 30, August 1990, pp. 4-5.

8 Pavel, Cristian. 1993. Prețul cărnii – o nouă cravașă guvernamentală pe spinarea cumpărătorului. [Meat's Price – a New Crevice on Buyer's Back]. *Expres*, 43(194): 11.

In a way, this kind of protest suggests a reconfiguration of the social distance between „us” and „they” that existed in socialism. This was manifested as a duplicity of the subject performed through hidden ways of consumption, engagement in the secondary economy, „gifts” given as a way of expressing a personal sociality or through a cult of non-work in despire of the official discourse (Verdery, 2003: 44). Now, the subject imagined by the paternalist socialism as one characterized by dependency and passivity, leaves room for experimentations, through a type of citizenship that implies a negotiation of the body, stripped of its essential functions in an attempt to obtain fundamental rights or to have access to different resources.

“While the queues grows, time goes by”

*The flourishing, compact queue is moving on slowly, slowly. People are waiting for their part of sugar sometimes gossiping, sometimes quarreling. From the buses that are passing on the street, blonde heads glance half wondering, half amused at the clutter in front of the shop.*¹²

“Did you buy meat? Was there any queue?” are mentioned in an article from August 1990 as the most heard questions at the time¹³. Searching for meat and sausages through Bucharest, the author of the article finds at Matache Market House “two sorts of beef, in reality ribs without meat and buzzed by flies” and at Amzei Market just some meat and sausages under the guise of a “huge bar of grease”. There is also here a big queue whose members wait to buy the newly arrived goods, some various meat specialties. The queue is organized “after a long exercised scheme”, and participants talk about political issues or the quality of the products. After losing two hours and a half with searching and waiting, the author’s time is still threaten by looking for bread, “just the same as in the odious era”. This isn’t the only article that describes a reality that refuses to vanish in the first years after December 1989. Queues, after reaching their apogee in the 1980s and becoming one of the visual icons of socialism, are still present in this period, when aliments like sugar, bread, butter, oil or meat due to various failures in their production and distribution are often missing from commerce. Their existence though is almost denied by governors when in an article from March 1990, Petre Roman, the prime-minister, is quoted

asking rhetorically:

*I’m frankly asking why? The provisioning with aliments is definitely improved in comparison with the period before revolution. It’s even better than a month before and it continues to get better. We have done great efforts in this area: only in the first trimester we spent 200 000 dollars for imports of aliments. As for the rest, there isn’t enough work being done in the country.*¹⁴

The extended presence of queues at the beginning of 1990s is mentioned not just in press but also in various forms of remembering this period. In a discussion on an online forum about food rationalizing, memories like waking up at four o’clock in the morning for going to stay at the queue for milk in 1993 or 1994 are shared by different members. Nevertheless, queues remain a symbol of communism, as Pavel Câmpeanu (1994) argues, they were one of the most important aspect of everyday life under communism. Câmpeanu examines queues as an expression of a culture of shortages in which people have the material means for buying, but the valued goods are limited, a situation that generates a competition in uncertainty and a limitation of the fundamental right to participate in exchange. Time, functional, contextual and economic, creates a demarcation between sellers and buyers and orders in a dissocializing way, losing time for waiting in a queue being simultaneously a way of exercising economic power and a way of adapting to it. Queues continue to exist in the first half of 1990s as a response to new types of shortages created by the adjustments to a market economy, especially for products like gasoline, but also as an “automatic response” to a real or imagined lack of goods. There is a performative effect of the mediatization of some possible effects of various economic measures, like anticipating shortages of bread or milk or strikes, that contribute to an atmosphere in which “bombarded with the most alarmist forecasts, people had outfaced with stoicism the artificially created queues and the «properly» speculated prices by the «on the beam» merchants”¹⁵. “Rumors” are often invoked as a political or economic strategy for dealing with the repeated rising of prices and some general schemes are identified: a three stages development, starting with the stage in which a product begins to lack and a first rumor appears, followed by a general deficit in which economic agents begin to hoard, the queues grow, but the Government denies any

¹² Stoian, Ilie. 1990. Coadă crește, timpul trece... [While the Queue Grows, Time Goes by...] *Expres*. 30: 4.

¹³ Maiorescu, Bogdan. 1990. Nici la restaurant nu găsiți așa ceva. [You Won’t Find Something like This Not Even at Restaurant]. *Expres*, 30: 2.

¹⁴ *Expres*, 6-9 March 1990, p.1.

¹⁵ Bejan, Lia, Cristian Pavel and Ștefan Ioniță. Românii nu mai cred nici măcar în greve. Fie ele japoneze, parțiale sau generale. [Romans Don’t Believe Anymore Not Even in Strikes. Be They Japanese, Partial or General]. *Expres*, 8(211): 5.

rise, followed by a final stage in which the rise of prices is officially announced¹⁶; or some rumors begin to circulate in which greater values than the ones that will actualize are mentioned, a strategy described as an “medical psychological strategy to tell the patient that he is dying, while in the end he can enjoy that only his leg has been amputated”¹⁷.

“A burst of colors, clients and medley merchandises”

*For some time past, the walking traveler through Bucharest is, more than ever, stormed by an aggressive, dirty street full of people at any time. Cheap mirages imported from Stambul alternate with hastily patched stands where there are sold better or worse imitation of Coca-Cola, sandwiches with blue salami and a kind of bread, pretentiously called pizza, at just 31 lei, from which at the moment of their take out from the front, flies raise slowly and bloated.*¹⁸

At the beginning of the 1990s various forms of peddling and new shops appear as private initiative is officially legislated and encouraged replacing at least in part the empty shelves and the selective abundance of goods reserved only for the privileged members of communist state apparatus. These are often portrayed in press with a lot of sarcasm as an expression of some Balkan culture opposed to an Occidental one. These new forms of commerce are described as a clutter place in which various products are mixed together: “bad and very bad whisky, chocolate, cigarettes, canned bear are placed alongside placidly with nylons, Ruby Rose makeup, perfume that imitate better or worse the French ones”¹⁹. If before 1989, the official commercial spatiality of the city was established in a centralized manner, a certain number of stores with specific profiles being allocated to a certain number of residents, now, the uncontrolled transformation of “essentials stores” in bars, cafes, shops for selling donuts, tourism agencies, etc. are criticized as an expression of a “mercantilism” unaware of citizens’ needs²⁰. When specialized stores are open in this climate of meddled commerce, these are treated with a positive appreciation although the products commercialized by this kind of shops were rather inaccessible. One example

is the store opened in October 1992 that was selling households appliances made in Italy where the visitors are described as entering more to watch and less to buy and to have a visual contact with unfamiliar objects: “at least you can look and imagine how a modern kitchen could be, this is not a little thing”²¹.

Many articles are preoccupied in this period to establish the differences between state and private commerce, more often the latter being described as having a “net plus of quality and keenness in services”, more clean and with more merchandises. State stores are often criticized for maintaining their personnel, for having too many and disinterested sellers, for a lean provision, and for ways of circumventing the products. The author of an article from June 1991 creates a typology of the commerce from this period when faced with state groceteria where from five sellers just one was working and the only commercialized product was the sugar sold on table:

*The others [sellers] don't see you, don't hear you. They just talk between them. [...] State commerce remains unchanged. At the privates from nearby, the store was coated with white stone and mirrors, everything is clean and you can't look for a long time since one of the sellers rapidly comes to offer you something. [...] Between the ruined state commerce and the commerce of the enterprising private there is another category, that of the dodger that makes anything, even trading if all goes well.*²²

Although there is some optimism regarding the new private commerce, this is not a generalized state. Not every private restaurant has the same quality, problems with hygiene are frequently reported, neighborhood stores leave much to be desired, and the manner in which prices are established remains an enigma that gives birth to the expression “to hit with the price”. Various forms of commerce, especially peddling and open markets, are described as having as the main source of provision the state commerce, “the mystery of empty shelves” being explained through “preferential selling” and reselling at four of five times bigger prices²³. Another source of provision is the personal production of food, juice occupying a first place in this kind of commerce, although this kind of products are described as an “attempt on citizen’s health” due to the improvisations in the production process²⁴. Petty commerce spread after December 1989, for some becoming a profitable business,

¹⁶ *Adevărul*, 22 October 1992, pp. 1 and 3.

¹⁷ *România Liberă*, 21 November 1991, pp. 1 and 7.

¹⁸ Nistorescu Monica. 1991. Ciorapi, câți vreți! [Nylons, How Many You Want!]. *Expres*, 19(68): 15.

¹⁹ Nistorescu Monica. 1991. Micile și marile găinării. [Small and Big Illicit Businesses]. *Expres*, 11(60): 15.

²⁰ *Adevărul*, 12 October 1990, p.2.

²¹ Pavel, Cristian. 1992. Vești bune: apar prăvăliile de profil. [Good News: Specialized Shops Appear]. *Expres*, 42(142): 16.

²² Cojocar, Liana. 1991. Șmecherul, negustor. [The Dodger, a Businessman]. *Expres*, 21(70): 15.

²³ *Adevărul*, 5 June 1990, pp. 1 and 2.

²⁴ *Adevărul*, 27 July 1990, p. 3.

while for others just assuring their subsistence. For the latter this was often lived as losing one’s former superior social position, the figure of “the taxicab driver with three faculties” being often invoked for describing the multiples modes of re-professionalization in the period. On the other hand, the social mobility of persons that were until now relegated to the margins of the society is seen by some rather with discontent: “a «no one», and a gypsy too, has become a restaurant boss” (Romanian Peasant Museum, 2008: 221).

Imports played an important role in this time in providing the stores with goods after the long period of shortages and in the adjustment of inflation. However, there is a kind of ambivalence in their treatment in press. Sometimes, imports are described as an offense to national economy and by extension to national identity and their spread is seen as an expression of the decline of the national production and of exports while a phenomenon of “orientalization” due to imports made mainly from Turkey is deplored. Spending reserve currency for imports, in particular for aliments, generates a lot of discontent in various articles: “although Romania was once a right-down granary, now we come to making statistics of imports for edibles – from cereals to the last biscuits arrived from Asia Minor. [...] This is how we «democratize» in an original manner: we eat from others paying dollars”²⁵. In this way, Western goods are seen as too expensive for the “common people” although they have a kind of charisma, while more Eastern goods, from neighboring countries or Turkey are rather discussed as an index of a “Balkan culture”. Not surprisingly, the most often mentioned products on the forum conversations are sweets imported from Turkey. Another product that is remembered as iconic for those times is “American chicken legs”, which although were looking good and were very big were rather suspiciously regarded. One of the participants on the forum discussion describes them as “expired chicken legs brought from at the back of beyond sold at our grocery are the best example of Romania in the 1990s”.

Conclusions

I have examined in this paper some of the transformations of the food practices from the beginning of the 1990s. Discussing three main themes that appeared in press in this period like “hunger”, queues, and new forms of commerce, I hope I have showed how earlier forms of practices and discourse entered the present as new adaptations to the

structural economic and political changes by slowly changing a previous culture of shortages. Also, the material considered here through the selection of details of daily life as depicted in press can be seen as a way of underscoring the importance of “small transformations” and of treating food as a lens to broader economic and politic changes. “Hunger” as a trope frequently used in press for condemning the shortages of the 1980s is also an expression of how both political regimes have a somatic influence on the human body. The long exercised queues from the 1980s are still a reality in the first half of the 1990s reflecting not only dysfunctionalities in the production and distribution of food but also an everyday practice with a temporality imbued with uncertainty. The way in which the practices of the new economic agents are discussed suggests a certain anxiety and ambivalence towards market economy expressed mainly in a moral repertoire that uses tropes from the socialist ideology for condemning practices like “speculation” or “sales through favoritism”. As in the case of dislocations of some traditional equivalences described by E.P. Thompson (1971) when examining popular revolts from 18th century England due to bread’s price, this kind of comments seem to be oriented around an idea of just price either through comparisons with state commerce prices or to an appeal to a market ideal without any subjectivity or arbitrariness.

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²⁵ *Expres*, 6-13 November 1993, p.10.

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