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POLITICAL ECOLOGY FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

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Political Ecology for Civil Society

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4.3 From Mining to Becomings: Rosia Montana's Movement for Democratic Justice

Irina Velicu

The context of Rosia Montana

Rosia Montana is a small village in Transylvania, Romania where, for the last fourteen years, a Canadian corporation has been pushing for the development of what would be the largest open cast cyanide-use gold mine in Europe. In the 1990s, Rosia Montana was declared mono-industrial, not allowing for any other form of business than mining to be developed by locals. Under this pressure, the majority of Rosieni were discouraged and disillusioned, ultimately conceding their displacement by selling their lands and properties. People have been told that the 'disease' of communism handicapped them and as a result many Rosieni were ashamed to exercise criticism against privatization. At the same time, politicians and media representatives have overwhelmingly supported the corporate takeover of the region. This tense context has created a situation of urgency in which the choice to develop **a mine became a life-related choice** - or rather, a non-choice. About 100 families were stubborn enough to not give up their land and confront the corporation; their movement mobilized thousands of supporters from all over Romania and the world. How have Rosieni imagined themselves as something else than miners, in the face of these events? How have they articulated their resistance to what seemed an inevitable development path?

Responding to Injustice: Organizing Resistance

In 2002, 300 families from Rosia Montana and the surrounding villages created Alburnus Maior (AM), a mining resistance organization. AM gradually gained the support of many activists and public figures worldwide (Greenpeace, Mining Watch, the EU parliament and even the World Bank). In more than a decade of struggle, a relation of trust was slowly built (not without tensions and quarrels) between NGOs, ac-

tivists and the Rosieni opposing the mine, resulting to co-mobilizations at local, national, international levels. This coalition also attracted the support of various professionals, including architects, lawyers, economists, engineers and artists, who have voluntarily given specialized support for the campaign. Empowered by this solidarity, Alburnus began the strategy of legally challenging the permits and authorizations obtained by the corporation for the gold-mining project in January 2004. By mid-2007, courts began to rule against the company. Further, these court proceedings demonstrated the illegality of the permit process.

Figure 37: Figure 1 Anti-mining protest for Rosia Montana (Source: Irina Velicu)

In addition to legal strategies, a diversity of protests and public events, publications on websites, permanent press releases, articles and documentaries have greatly strengthened the efforts of the movement. The persistent work of more **specific campaigns** such as the "No-Cyanide Romania" or the campaign to include Rosia in the UNESCO patrimony continued to bring attention to the detrimental impacts of the proposed mine at Rosia Montana. While none of these more specific campaigns were successful, the efforts mobilized **national and international opposition to the mine**. The movement slowly grew from hundreds to hundreds of thousands of sympathizers, while also pushing for more civic engagement.

Rosieni and their supporters appreciate the beauty and richness of the land, mountains and rivers surrounding them. This, along with the comfort, relative stability and predictability of controlling their livelihoods, make them feel 'rich' enough to refuse development as simply mining. They started to think about other possibilities of maintaining the commons together while questioning the long-term benefits of mining extraction. Rosieni have created what French philosopher Jacques Rancière has called a dissensus, or "a conflict over the common itself

[...] not a quarrel over which solutions are best to apply to a situation, but a dispute over the situation itself" (Rancière, 2004). Dissensual politics disrupted habitual conditions of sensible experience, shedding more light on the complications and contradictions of economic development as a goal:

> "How is it that the EU is telling me I am poor? I have 15 cows; I can take care of my family...
>
> When I wake up in the morning and I see the mountain, for me that is mental health.
>
> I don't want any type of development... I don't want just anyone to come here to change the area. I tell people openly "you have to grow up, you cannot be dependent on gold or whoever comes . . . dependent on others just as drug addicts".

Transformed attitudes like these have been turned into actions through the creation of the first green festival in Romania, HayFest. Initially a music event that focused on entertainment, HayFest has become a cultural event that represents Rosia as a 'big stage' of organizations and thousands of citizens from all over the world showing their solidarity with the cause and socializing/debating issues of common concern. By creating all these different (everyday) practices, Rosieni's movement gradually made other Romanians think differently about development and about global problems. **Rosia Montana evolved from a local labour conflict into an emblematic socio-environmental movement** defending traditional ways of life, knowledge and the commons.

Becoming Something Else: Identity as a Denial and Events of Subjectification

Resistance to mining might not have been successful if not for the continuing, long-term efforts of a handful of people who were producing different routines and habits in what became the everyday life of 'Saving Rosia Montana'. Rosieni gradually transformed their mind-set, learning to imagine themselves as something else than just miners or 'poor people'. Instead of feeling helpless, people began to find strength and imagination to live differently their everyday life. They became 'entrepreneurs' of their own destinies, diversifying their economic and social activities both individually and collectively; activists and citizens concerned about their autonomy and independence, informing themselves about other similar cases from other continents, re-discovering their

home-community as a rich sustainable place with mountains, lakes, forests and hospitality for small scale tourism.

These becomings can be theorized as '**events of subjectification**'. In his book *Proletarian Nights*, Rancière (2012) refers to the workers during the Revolution of 1830, who read, wrote and discussed journals, letters, newspapers or poetry after their day in the factory. Rancière reinterpreted those writings as rebelling against the predetermination of their lives and identity under the category of 'workers' and thus a denial of other possibilities of life/identity.

Rosieni are now aware that politicians perceive them as a surplus that could easily be ignored, removing them from the domain of the visible. Therefore, their efforts of imagining something else and their becomings are also processes of visibilization: disturbing the 'natural' order of mining/working class paradigm and creating politics by articulating previously unheard voices. Opposing Rosieni have also become aware that their formal recognition as partners in dialogue is not necessarily followed by a policy of redistribution or decision-making in favour of their alternatives. Therefore, during **protests in 2013**, which were the largest post-communist mobilization in Romania, supporters of Rosia Montana did not ask for their rights of participation just to be recognized. Instead, they more broadly questioned the system that allocates rights and liberties, rather than simply contesting a corrupt local government and one development scheme.

Moreover, even if a certain level of participation may be secured, it does not protect Rosieni from being devalued by elites as some kind of social scum: the last thing the Rosieni need is to be recognised as "ignorant miners", as instituted in the current social imaginary. This kind of demonization as the underdog is a form of injustice that cannot easily be repaired through rights or laws: it pervades everyday life and practices. Therefore, Rosieni's fundamental struggle is to push back against being intrinsically tethered to some fixed identities, like "poor workers", "ignorant miners", "nostalgic communists", or peasants who are waiting for support and easily manipulated. In this struggle, the movement has created space and time for broader **subjective and community imaginaries** to be nurtured from an acceptance of other life-worlds as equally valid. Rosieni ventured into the unknown of what their identities could become. This gave them the courage to act from a position of ambiguity and the strength to accept the consequences of disputing and losing

foundational securities or standards.

Non-Foundational Politics and Implications for Democracy

During the autumn of 2013 people were shouting: “The corporation should not make legislation!” and “This is the revolution of our generation” in the streets of major cities of Romania. Perhaps, they imply their generation needs to produce something else from this new level of consciousness and not be allowed to live comfortably numb in the lies of representative consumer democracy. It was also a way of rethinking democracy by **rethinking the subject of the ‘revolutionary collective’**. Forging solidarities and collectives does not have to mean pushing for essential positions, identities or loyalties, be they workers or environmentalists. When democracy remains only about demanding formal rights, democracy is emptied of its core substance: by the people, for the people.

From a f**oundationalist perspective**, democratic politics tends to assume that an identity (or a value-foundation) must first be in place in order for political interests to be elaborated and, subsequently, action to be taken. But any foundational (identity) category is also a product of the very structures it is supposed to criticize in order to emancipate, liberate or represent itself. Power in general could be seen as productive (of subjects) rather than merely repressive (Foucault et al., 2003). Any foundation (identitarian, ideological etc.) is a historical contingent product of **power relations**. Democracy requires imagining new types of relations among beings aware of own embeddedness within power relations and disrupting “all logics that purport to found domination on some entitlement to dominate” (Rancière, 2004).

In other words, rethinking democracy requires politicizing any form of foundational politics in order to avoid romanticization or naturalization even for the purpose of coalition building. A **non-foundational politics** could consider building solidarities and collectives also based on the recognition of fluid and ambiguous identities, and partial or temporary loyalties or interests. What we can do in our continuous construction of open democracies is to always **repeat differently and subvert fixed representations** that may imprison people further.

What was suggested here through describing events of subjectifi-

cation is that, in search for democratic justice, there is need for continuous staging (performing or instituting) of egalitarian subjects and life-worlds, beyond political representation and the compassionate "cause of the other". Democratic politics is not only a practice of contesting or capturing of power, but also of performing alternative spheres of experience and ways of being. For such subjectification and performing to happen, one has to see the political with a "**constitutive lack of ground**" (Swyngedouw, 2011). This implies replacing the prevailing public reason (such as economic efficiency, human rights etc.) with the absence of a final public reason. The acceptance of such a void liberates us from the various invented prisons of colonial nature. The human poetic will to meaning-making can produce other stories and meanings given the lack of a higher standard (or 'true' account of the world) to measure some knowledge against others.