

Marin, Ileana. Book Review. “*Romania under Communism. Paradox and Degeneration* by Dennis Deletant. New York: Routledge, 2019, xxxi, 590 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Map.”

With an impressive academic career in the UK, Holland, and the US, Dennis Deletant is one of the widely read historians of Romanian communism, who has published seminal studies on twentieth century Romanian history and politics. His topics range from 1940s labor camps in Transnistria and the Iași pogrom, to the “Bessarabia question” and language policy in Soviet Moldova; from the Romanian military doctrine and the Marshal Antonescu regime to the British Intelligence activity in Romania during WWII; as well as from the Soviet influence on Romanian communism and the Romanian Secret Police to the aftermath of communism. His most recent book, *Romania under Communism. Paradox and Degeneration* (Routledge, 2019) is by far the most comprehensive inquiry on Romanian communism on four accounts. First, it expands on Deletant’s two previous books from the 1990s (*Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej and the Police State; Romania under the Communist Rule; Ceaușescu and the Securitate*), completing them with further research in the archives of Romania, Russia, the USA, and the Great Britain. The section of “Unpublished studies” includes 5 doctoral theses defended in London, Budapest, and Iași between 2006 and 2017, which bring forth the freshest viewpoints in the communist studies scholarship. Second, the 590-page book lays out the strategy of focusing on historical actors, their will, access to power, and ability to apply a transactional model to political leadership. The emphasis on concrete individuals and on the consequences of their decisions becomes apparent from the very beginning. The section “Biographies of key figures” gives ample information on old communists, early dissidents, political opponents belonging to pre-1948 parties, as well as short bios of spies, union members, and prominent military. Third, the 9 appendixes organized chronologically—from Lesakov’s 1947 report on his meetings with Romanian communists to the 1989 organization of the Securitate—shed light onto the Soviet interference in the Romanian communist party’s purges of the 1950s and, later, on Ceaușescu’s paranoid efforts to protect himself against the Warsaw Pact leaders. Fourth, the body of the book goes beyond a history approach bordering on cultural studies. Dennis Deletant looks at how communist ideology affected the major domains of Romanian society. Besides the state-controlled economy that started with the nationalization of industrial units and collectivization of the privately-owned land, national security, and domestic and foreign affairs policies, the author examines the communist set of norms and principles that were forced upon Romanian culture, education, mass media, religion, and justice. This is not the first book in which Deletant broadened his resources by referencing moments of crises in Romanian literary history, analyzing the contexts in which major novelists and poets of the time critiqued, more or less directly, the system. It is the first in which he included several prominent intellectuals’ letters of dissent in full, letters that were sent to him in samizdat form before December 1989.

In spite of the fact that this massive tome incorporates almost in their entirety Deletant’s *Communist Terror in Romania: Gheorghiu-Dej and the Police State, 1948-1965 (CT)* and *Ceaușescu and the Securitate: Coercion and Dissent in Romania, 19650-1989 (CS)*, his most recent book is a revisitation, or better said, a realignment of previous arguments. For those who have read Deletant’s books dedicated to the progression of communism from timid beginnings, to forceful implementations, and a continuous perfection of the institutions of power, it is obvious that much of the content comes from them. Yet, the overall argument is different. Not only is the argument overarching and difficult to demonstrate, but it is also challenging if one

considers the complexity of all phases of communism in Romania from the first congress of the Romanian Communist Party in May 1921 to its dissolution in December 1989. Deletant argues that although Romanian communist leaders succeeded in securing autonomy from the Soviet Union, they remained “single-minded despot[s]” (3). A gifted writer, Dennis Deletant understands the strong impact that the style and well-chosen words have and handles them with fine tuning. The most obvious example in this respect is the way in which he rephrases his books’ titles and subtitles. By taking out the two leaders’ names from the title or the subtitle of his previous books, Deletant indicates his further conceptualization and a larger contextualization of the historical events that defined the two eras: 1948-1965 and 1965-1989. More importantly, what seemed to have been initially the imprint of a strong personality—Gheorghiu-Dej and Ceaușescu, respectively—it is viewed as a collaborative effort of political actors. In short, any inference that communism somehow got traction due to the two leaders’ decisions and performances no longer corresponds with the author’s own perspective.

A set of deeper nuances is presented by the books’ subtitles and their changes. From the key words “coercion and dissent” in the 1995 subtitle to “paradox and degeneration” in the 2020 one, the distance is both symbolic and conceptual. While “coercion and dissent” indicate the two poles of the social tension instilled by the workings of the Securitate through its extensive ramifications in all domestic institutions and, in some cases, reaching out even to international bodies, “paradox and degeneration” announce an augmentation of both the scope and the approach of the book.

What is even more relevant is the fact that “paradox” and “paradoxically” occur in the 1995 text at least at two crucial moments. One such moment is described in the chapter “Central Planning as Coercion: Systematization” when Deletant describes the destruction of thousands of villages in the name of peasant emancipation into workers and the efficiency of extensive agriculture (CS 298). The paradox is twofold: first of all because at the beginning of the 1970s, the Romanian Communist Party praised itself for being independent of Moscow, yet it implemented the old Soviet systematization strategy of destroying the so-called “non-viable” villages. The second aspect of this paradox refers to the fact that Soviet researchers had already proven that strategy to be counterproductive ten years before the village systematization began in Romania. Furthermore, Ceaușescu, at odds with Khrushchev, pushed the village systematization (one of Khrushchev’s old policies) years after Khrushchev’s demotion. Nonetheless, at the July 1972 conference of the Communist Party, Ceaușescu cajoled the party into approving rapid and drastic measures that led to the massive industrialization of the economy. The second moment which Deletant views as paradoxical is Pacepa’s defection to the US presented in the chapter “The Securitate and Repression: 1978-1989.” Pacepa’s decision is interpreted as “one of the greatest blows ever delivered to an East European intelligence agency” (CS 322) on the one hand, and as a compliment for the professionalism of the Intelligence Department, on the other hand. Pacepa, who had led the Intelligence Department as the deputy minister of the Ministry of the Interior, seems to have been afraid of his own intelligence officers who were close to identifying him as the leak to the CIA (CS 324).

As the new subtitle “Paradox and Degeneration” shows, the author reevaluates his contribution to the scholarship on Romanian communism. Both “paradox”—with its connotations of illogical, non-sequitur, unjustified, unreasonable—and “degeneration”—with its unescapably censorious

meaning—throw a new light on the author’s position as historian. He is a historian who, more than anything else, critiques historical accounts, finds explanations between the lines of the documents, infers politicians’ attitudes toward adversaries from their turn of phrases in public speeches, and looks at party leaders, their entourages, lackeys, and opponents, as if they were characters in search of an author. And Denis Deletant is their skillful author.

From title characters, Gheorghiu-Dej and Ceausescu are transformed into major players in a multi-generational saga of communism. As Frederick Kellogg (472), Maria Bucur (116) and Charles King (604) noticed in their reviews of Deletant’s 1995 and 1999 books, the author transforms historical personalities into *personages* as Maria Bucur put it. As such, Deletant resurrects the power contenders and transfers detailed portraits (Ana Pauker, Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu, Doina Cornea, Mircea Dinescu, Laslo Tökés, to mention only a few), memorialistic accounts (Corneliu Coposu, Dinu Giurescu, among the most prominent), and narrative recreations of political fights (Pauker, Luca, Gheorghiu-Dej, and Pătrășcanu; Drăghici and Ceausescu) into his new volume. Taking into account Kellogg’s criticism regarding “the flimsy...monographic aspect” of *CS*, Deletant moved many of his mini-monographic accounts into a separate annex of “Biographies of Key Figures.”¹

The collation of *Communist Terror, Ceausescu and the Securitate* and *Romania under Communism (RC)* maps out Deletant’s revision process and the strengthening of his argument. The first chapter, mostly following the first two chapters in *CT*, puts forth the challenges of Romania after WWI: corruption, huge social discrepancies between rural and urban areas, unbalanced distribution of the industrial units through provinces, and xenophobia. Bringing these issues up in *RC* from the less prominent position in the second chapter of *CT*, Deletant draws attention to the fact that “The Romania in which the Communist Party operated was radically different from the Romania in which socialism first appeared” (*RC* 4). Putting the paragraph about Gustav Corbu’s imprisonment in endnotes and readdressing the destinies of communists in the last years of WWII, Deletant concentrates on the liaisons created among communists in Romanian jails, on the ruthless elimination of any opposition (i.e. Foriș), and on the leader-in-making, Gheorghiu-Dej. After this point, shorter chapters in *CT* collapse into longer ones in the new book. “The *coup* of 23 August 1944 and the path to power of the Romanian Communist Party” of *RC* retunes the argument by pointing out the initially not so clear connections between Romanian communists and NKVD to secure their access to power through the *coup*.

Chapters in *RC* are also redrawn in order to focus the readers’ attention on the Romanian Communist Party leaders’ adoption and weaponization of Soviet policies against their opponents, which I call the strategy of internecine expediency. Deletant incorporates chapters 4 and 5 from *CT*—“The Path to Power of the Romanian Communist Party” and “The Imposition of the Totalitarian model and Persecution of the Church”—into the longer chapter in *RC* now entitled “Application of the Totalitarian Blueprint.” Thus, the obstacles that the communists had to surpass to secure their political power are placed on the same level of importance: the Ministry of Justice was decimated during the 1945 purge; King Michael’s resistance on the throne lasted up to December 1947; and the Church remained for a while a potential source of opposition. Maria Bucur’s 2004 critique of Deletant’s chapter on the dismantling of religious institutions is

¹ It goes without saying that “coercion,” “terror,” and “dissent” are concepts impossible to avoid in an endeavor of presenting an authoritarian regime.

still valid. By “Church” Deletant understands the Orthodox, the Catholic, and the Uniates, but ignores the Protestants and other religious groups outside Christian denominations. Maria Bucur mentions the Jews, I would add the Muslims, even though their numbers were quite low. As Bucur underlines in her review, the fact that religious denominations were also linked to ethnic groups at that time could have provided an insight into nationalism. While the chapter “The Securitate as an Instrument of Coercion” remains unchanged, the next one, “Gheorghiu-Dej’s Path to Dominance,” results from welding together two chapters from *CT*: “Dej’s Struggle for Dominance” and “The downfall of Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu.” Even though Deletant does not bring in new evidence, by adding Pătrășcanu’s trial after he discusses Dej’s other political machinations in which he involved the Soviets, the author frames the argument differently in the new chapter introduction: Dej was rewarded with the “opportunity to direct” by the Soviets (*RC* 114) because he had obediently executed Stalin’s scenarios for Romania. Dej gained access to power through a ruthless annihilation of rivals (Foriș was assassinated, Koffler was sentenced to death, Luca was sentenced to life in prison, and later Pauker was forced into retirement). However, he could not have imposed himself as leader as long as he was constantly challenged and overshadowed by the well-educated Pătrășcanu, who had proven to have become a formidable opponent.

Among the higher concerns of the book structure, the repositioning of the chapter “Gheorghiu-Dej’s Consolidation of Power” to before the survey of repressive institutions—labor camps later renamed “work colonies”, political prisons, mass deportation or population relocation to fixed domiciles—is a compelling decision. It is because of the unopposed power of the communist leadership that finally succeeded in holding a strong grip on the entire society that the atrocities described in the chapter “The Romanian Gulag” could happen. Deletant does not update his twenty-year old research of the political incarceration system in Romania. During these two decades, at least two major contributions have been published: Mircea Stănescu’s *The Reeducation Trials in Communist Romania, 1952-1960* (Columbia UP, 2011) and the collective volume *Justice, Memory, and Redress in Romania: New Insights*, coordinated by Lavinia Stan and Lucian Turcescu (Cambridge Scholars, 2017).

In this 2019 comprehensive study of Romanian communism, the issue of the armed resistance during the first decade of communism, no matter how marginal it was in *CT*,² finds its relevance even if it’s only for symbolic reasons. The disproportionate force used by the state against these small groups of men and women spread throughout the country provides the scale of the authorities’ understanding of their lack of appeal to the population and their fear of any seed of rebellion against the regime.

Although *Romania under Communism* is not formally divided in two parts, the middle chapters 9 and 10 represent a juncture: the end of Dej’s era was marked by the increasing distancing from the Soviet model and Ceaușescu’s was to continue to “stand up to the Soviets” (*RC* 238). The promise of continuing the politics of autonomy from the Soviets was what made Gheorghe Maurer propose Ceaușescu as the new party leader, according to Maurer’s post-1989 justification.

Deletant works with *CS* the same way he did with *CT*. Alongside rearticulating his old arguments and combining two chapters into one, he expands and updates his information. Among the most

² See Maria Bucur’s review of *Communist Terror in Romania: Gheorghiu-Dej and the Police State, 1948-1965*.

conspicuous are the expansion of the Ursu and Goma cases, and the addition of Herta Müller's account of Securitate techniques in Chapter 16 "Repression, Degeneration, and Isolation." Detailed presentations of Sadoveanu's compliance with Socialist Realism and Buzura's subversive works are delivered in Chapter 14 "Compliance towards the Regime." It should be noted that Deletant often goes back to Dej's era for more context as is the case with Sadoveanu's *Mitrea Cocor*, a novel published in 1949. The new introduction to Chapter 16 builds on the twenty-five-year old argument that the writers and historians conformed to the regime expectations because of opportunism, the generalized practice of dissimulation, and the realization that, in the absence of any political opposition, they would be easy targets (CS 166). The new argument includes two more causes for compliance that suggest the author's empathy for the "creative intelligentsia": the impact of Ceaușescu's buzz word "nation" that made his policies sail and the ubiquitous presence of the Communist Party which left no choice to those who wanted a career but to become party members (RC 332). What is missing in both editions is an examination of historians' works and their specific ways of supporting the regime.

Although the chapter "Dissent" reshuffles old materials from CS, it receives a relevant theoretical discussion of the terms "dissent," "dissident," "non-conformism", and "resistance" in the introduction. These terms provide clear conceptual distinctions for the reader to understand why the number of Romanian dissidents was so small. Another chapter that reorganizes old excerpts is "Repression, Degeneration and Isolation." What intrigues the reader here is the inclusion of the demolition of the Uranus district and adjacent quarters to make room for the Boulevard of the Victory of Socialism Complex as a drastic example of repression. Thousands of families lost their homes; the Orthodox Church lost significant architectural monuments, among which was the Văcărești Monastery. Still, the Patriarchy remained silent, proving again its complacency with the regime.

The two chapters on Transylvania and Bessarabia, which appeared barely related to the Securitate mission as both Ronald Linden and Frederick Kellogg aptly noticed in their reviews of CS, are now combined into one under the legitimate argument that Ceaușescu knew how to use the national rhetoric in "the triangular relationship between Romania, Hungary, and the Soviet Union" (RC 295). Thus, the historically problematic topics of potential territorial claims—Hungary's over Transylvania, Romania's over Bessarabia—find their rightful place in the multi-faceted study of Romanian communism. One can say that Deletant had in mind this extensive project all along, ever since the 1990s, when he published *CT* and *CS*.

A totally new chapter, "The Paradox of Foreign Policy," completes the story of a complicated epoch in which state decisions, trade agreements, and international relations had more hidden agendas than those publicly admitted. Deletant does a good job at pursuing the tangled threads of apparently principled contracts. His insightful analysis of the Jewish and German minorities, who were granted visas so that Romania maintained the Most Favored Nation status gained in 1975, exposes the conditions imposed by the US Congress: "Romanian's performance on emigration" and finding "a solution of humanitarian problems" (RC 276-77). The intricate export-import agreements between Romania and Western countries that covered the "sale" of Romanian Jews and Germans through the Department of Special Hard Currency Operations (RC 282) is a good example of the transactional attitude that dominated Romanian politics of the time. Deletant describes "the give and take" relation Ceaușescu had with the international Jewish

community and with the president of the Federation of Jewish Communities, Rabbi Rosen, who voiced his support of the regime to guarantee the continuation of Jewish emigration. With no other connection to the Jewish and German emigration, other than “many Roma were given dwellings vacated by emigrating Germans and Jews” (RC 286), Deletant digresses in order to introduce a short but informed history of the Roma in Romanian provinces. Always balancing external and domestic affairs, the author also looks into the effects of the Soviet Union’s refusal to grant Romania, a member of the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance, a trade credit between 1975-1984, and into Romania’s increased export to Western countries, without a proportionately matching import. This situation led to Romania’s increased international debt.

The last chapter, “Revolution,” recalibrates the participation of several players engaged in the December 1989 events. Recovering about 15 pages from the last chapter of *CS*, Deletant pieces together the decisive moments that led to Ceaușescu’s overthrow and the fall of communism in Romania. He relies on a diverse range of sources: interviews with participants in the events, television footage, radio broadcasting, transcripts of the Politburo meetings, blogs, and a few Romanian personalities’ accounts of the events, namely Sergiu Nicolaescu, Filip Teodorescu, and Silviu Brucan. Using Peter Siani-Davies’ 2005 book *The Romanian Revolution* and his article questioning the non-revolutionary outcome of the revolution, as well as Cesareanu’s *Decembrie ’89. Deconstrucția unei revoluții* and Tismaneanu’s final report on Romanian communist dictatorship, Deletant reaches the conclusion that it was “the shared experience of suffering” of all Romanians irrespective of their ethnicity (RC 512) that, ironically, defeated Ceaușescu’s regime in spite of decades of nationalist propaganda. The protest of Tökés and his parishioners against a clerical abuse “transcended the narrowness of a sectarian claim and acquired the symbol of a common cause of peoples united against oppression” (512).

Dennis Deletant’s *Romania under Communism. Paradox and Degeneration* is a synthesis of his scholarship, a culmination of his research, in perfect coherence with his argument about Romania’s exceptional place among the countries of the former communist bloc and the unexpected course of events in the aftermath of the 1989 revolution. It is also one of the history books that leans on a cultural studies approach as the author chooses to weave the stories of Romanian communism into a narrative which, more than once, resembles a multi-plot structure: hundreds of historical actors interact, perform their part, voice their strategies publicly and hold others secret. They fight openly and support the consequences, plot and harvest the sour-sweet fruit. Deletant’s balanced views may also come from his understanding of the layers of meaning behind the power discourse, in which he sees either readiness for escalation or for taking a step back, and sometimes, vulnerability or opportunism. The red thread that guides the reader throughout his massive study is the concept of national identity with its correlative terms of diversity, minority, and marginality. Furthermore, the emphasis on the direct experience of those involved in or affected by politics, as well as the author’s personal experience, seem to validate Michael Pickering’s viewpoint that history and cultural studies can mutually benefit from their collaboration. A long read, Deletant’s book is well-worth it.

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