Away towards the Asylum

Abandonment, Confinement and Subsistence in Psychiatric (De-)institutionalization in Romania

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Submitted to

Doctoral School of Political Science, Public Policy and International Relations

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Submission date: 15.04.2018

Word count (excluding references and appendix): 119.980 words

Declaration

I hereby declare that no parts of the thesis have been accepted for any other degrees in any other institution. This thesis contains no material previously written and / or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgment is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

Leyla Safta-Zecheria, Budapest, 15.04.2018

Abstract

This dissertation explores the everyday role of psychiatric asylums, in order to understand how they could be reworked into less oppressive structures through psychiatric deinstitutionalization. The dissertation is built on one year of ethnographic fieldwork in northeast Romania around former and existing psychiatric institutions, as well as archival and library research and interviews with policy advocates and policymakers. I argue that despite the terrible part psychiatric asylums have played as places, where the mentally ill and disabled have been let die throughout modern history, asylums still are defended by both some of their inmates and their carers on the grounds that they offer the possibility for subsistence for those who understand themselves as abandoned by their nuclear families and in danger of becoming surplus populations to the needs of capital and the state. It is the quest for subsistence that makes people consent to their medicalization and their confinement. This is the case, since abandonment happens as a fracture in social relations, previous to the person coming to live in an asylum. But even in the absence of a desire to remain, asylums work to confine people to their premises through ableist narratives and in certain instances through actual violence. Exploring how subsistence, abandonment and confinement work to circumscribe people's aspirations, as well as looking at the everyday life of post-asylary alternatives, allowed me to develop the modalities of sense making approach, a novel understanding of how sense is being made in practice by extending both Dvora Yanow's ([2000] 2011) and Ian Hacking's (1982, 1991, 2012) conceptual work. Moreover, it allowed me to develop a new mode of policymaking. This modality of policymaking is grounded in the work of educator Paulo Freire and proposes moving the locus of decision making closer to the people that are affected by projects of deinstitutionalization, thus helping to develop a politics of hope that can inform policies. This thinking is also rooted in the need to overcome anthropological representations of abandonment, as a final and hopeless process (compare Biehl, 2005). Overcoming the temptation to reproduce the vernacularly dominant hopelessness of abandonment in scholarly thinking, can inform a politics of hope that can help rework processes of abandonment in practice, by de-normalizing the meaning structures that reinforce abandonment, as the dominant imaginary of economically autonomous nuclear families. Through this the dissertation seeks to contribute to the anthropology of biopolitics and

abandonment, to the methodological question of how to conduct ethnographic policy research, as well as to opening up possibilities for a Freirean modality of policymaking.

Acknowledgements

During the time of writing this dissertation, I have been fortunate to experience one of the most affectionate and intellectually stimulating atmospheres that I ever thought possible. And this in a variety of places, academically and fieldwork wise. This makes thanking everyone involved a hard, if not impossible task, now when there is an official possibility to do so.

My supervisor, Viola Zentai, has offered kind and caring guidance from the very beginning. Her ability to see where I was going, even before I could develop an intuition of it and her capacity to read between the lines beyond what is actually there into what I mean to say has always amazed me. As has her intellectual and personal generosity as a mentor and friend. I hope that one day, I can be half the mentor she is to other people, who are trying to find their way. So much of her thinking has gone into this dissertation that to mention even a small part of it would risk putting her name on every third footnote.

My supervisory panel at CEU was a friendly and stimulating environment which made it easy to share even unbacked but important ideas to be developed. John Clarke, who from our very first encounter at the CEU Sociology and Social Anthropology Department, volunteered to become my "lifeboat" in my subsequent transitions between anthropology and policy studies, has lived up to his promise by being a stimulating and kind commentator to this day. I admire John's ability to encourage people and his perceiving sense of where an argument is going. Prem Rajaram Kumar, has helped into being much of the abstract thinking that has gone into this thesis and has helped me, as well as others of my friends and colleagues to navigate the boundaries between anthropology and political science. Prem's ability to parsimoniously render the mundane abstract and political remain an inspiration for my thinking to come.

The Doctoral School of Political Science, Public Policy and International Relations at CEU, has been a great interdisciplinary home, making me not feel out of place as an ethnographer and interpretive thinker. For this, I thank especially Xymena Kurowska, during whose class on political ethnography, I came to develop the stepping stones of the methodology that went into this project and Lea Sgier, whose perceiving and thorough remarks about analyzing and writing have helped me discipline and organize

my thinking. Being a teaching assistant to Dvora Yanow at the CEU organized ECPR summer school was a great opportunity to develop my thinking about and challenge the boundaries between anthropology and policy studies. Receiving Dvora's perceptive comments on an early draft of what later came to be part 3 of the dissertation, helped focus and organize my thinking. I also thank the Doctoral School for devising a supervisory system made out of panels and yearly conferences that have offered me a venue for structured exchanges that helped me not to get lost in the researching and writing process, as well as form the stepping stone to some future projects.

At the Doctoral School, my friends and colleagues, Andreea Nicuțar and Eda Sevinin, made me feel at home by offering me a warm Foucauldian community. Andreea's and Eda's invaluable comments and carefully chosen references up to the very last moment, enriched my time at CEU and made me feel personally at home in the Doctoral School. I do hope our ADC initiatives live on beyond my departure from CEU. Andreea, Eda, as well as Zsuzsa Lutian were also generous hosts to me in Budapest, when coming back to CEU after months of absence. Your generosity made it possible for me to never feel a stranger in Budapest.

I have also been fortunate to have the guidance and piercing comments of Tania Murray Li, at the Anthropology Department in Toronto, at the very beginning of the writing process. Her mentorship, but also her generous and serious way of being, as well as her writing, have been an inspiration to my thinking, which I hope lives on in this thesis. At the University of Toronto, participating in the writing seminar led by Todd Sanders, alongside Salvatore Giusto and Erdem Evren, has been a great opportunity to develop my ethnographic writing and thinking. Many of their comments live on in this "final" version of the thesis. In Toronto, the Popescu family, Edith, Marius and Traian were generous hosts, to which I remain indebted.

My time at the *Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen* in Vienna was a very intellectually productive time. It would have not been half as exciting had I not enjoyed the intellectual exchanges at the *Wiener Kreis*, a thinking and talking gathering organized by Holly Case, which I too hope to replicate in the future in a different setting. The conversations with Holly Case, Ondřej Slačálek and Andrew

Braudel were stimulating counterpoints to hours of reading and writing. Ondřej, we must write our book on evil academics. The time spent with my close friend Alexandra Panican in Vienna, provided welcome distractions as well as intellectually and emotionally deep reflections on my academic work.

I was fortunate to spend a couple of months in the company of a truly Freirean research group at the *Núcleo de Investigação e Ação Social e Educativa,* in São Carlos, Brazil. Much of the Freirean thinking in this thesis was stimulated by the dialogic gatherings, visits to schools in peripherialized neighborhoods and academic discussions in São Carlos. A special thanks goes to Roseli de Mello, for being an excellent host and for engaging in depth with the thinking that later turned into chapter 10.

This project was sparked quite spontaneously, while trying to find a collective research project in 2011 at the *Studienkolleg zu Berlin* with Alexander Brödner, Andreas Leidinger and Felix Förster. Although we have lost touch, our vivid conversations and research trips live on through this project.

I especially thank Heiko Pleines, my very first supervisor at Uni Bremen, whose generosity and ability to ask questions, has been a guide to my thinking and a standard for my future mentoring. What this project is concerned, I thank Heiko, for encouraging me to postpone starting my doctoral studies until I have a topic that I am absolutely sure I want to pursue. This advice has spared me much self-doubt and has contributed to the awareness I have developed of myself as a researcher. I also want to thank Jörg Niewöhner, who supervised my MA thesis in European Ethnology that opened the way for the current PhD research. Jörg's comments and suggestions that I could not fully sort at that time have informed my thinking ever since.

The writing of this thesis would not have been possible without intense and warm exchanges with my intellectually stimulating friends. Çiçek İlengiz has been a great inspiration in thinking the politics of madness and our friendship has inspired me in many unnamable ways, but especially as a woman and a feminist. My close friend, older sister and ages ago flat mate, Roxana Bărbulescu, taught me what it means to be an academic and to write and think academically at a time of my life when I was just starting on this path. None of the research I can do or write now, would be the same without Roxana's warm,

yet focused guidance. Ioana Toma, has been a great inspiration in thinking analytically and in understanding that a scholarly mind never stops. Having dinners with Ioana, has always been both a pleasure and an incitement, leaving me with many unanswered questions each time. If my daily language is more complicated now, it is probably Ioana's fault. Julie Mewes, has been a great inspiration in the ethnography and anthropology of psychiatry. Her focused way of asking questions and her very developed sense of the discipline have helped me find a way as an anthropologist and her comments have added density to my accounts. Sorina Vasile's presence in my life has been a constant encouragement and our feminist and intellectual discussions have been rare gems during the time of the writing of this dissertation. The materials she has shared with me, have enriched my thinking. Alexandra Nicolaescu, my close friend since childhood, has also constantly shown me new perspectives on my work.

My first year at CEU would have never been as wonderful had it not been for my transdisciplinary friends from all possible departments and now in all possible corners of the world (or at least the European world): Claudia, (again) Çiçek, Daniela, Elif, Hakan, Milos, Gabor and Uku. Thank you for welcoming me to Budapest!

As a piece of interdisciplinary work, this thesis would never have been possible without the precise and kind advice and materials I received from my historian friends. Corina Doboș was a generous and invaluable guide to the national archives and public libraries of Bucharest. Her understanding of my topic, helped me make sense of where I was going. Alexandra Ghiț and Dan Cîrjan provided useful advice at the very beginning of my historical research stay.

My friend, Mona Obreja, has introduced me to critical user centered thinking about mental illness and to modes of power analysis that I had only an intuition were there. Her thinking has subtly crept into the writing of this dissertation, her presence guiding my mind when I was about to write something paternalistic. My conversations with Gabriela Tănăsan and Ștefan Bandol offered me different angles of understanding both the practices in the system today, as well as the social lived history of the system. I was lucky to meet Ștefan at a very early stage of my research and he has proven an invaluable guide

through the system and its alternatives. Another person that oriented my inquiry into psychiatric reform early on, offering me good overviews, suggesting me interview partners and exchanging opinions and later on intense discussions was Radu Teodorescu.

During the time of my fieldwork, I was as fortunate as during the time of my academic and my research training. I am grateful for the generosity and openness with which I was received by people in the field, the patience with which my repetitive, sometimes possibly even offensive or embarrassing questions were answered. I am grateful for the openness with which people shared details about intimate aspects of their lives, about their feelings of hope, shame or personal failure. I was taken aback by the incredible affection I was shown both at the Asylum and in Never Neverland by the inmates and residents of institutions. I hope to be able to live up to such intense and beautiful friendships as those we have started. And I hope I have done their accounts justice and have contributed to a better understanding of their lives for those, who have not had a chance to meet them. I am also thankful for the openness with which I was received in asylary and open institutions alike, and the willingness professionals and carers in such a scandalized field have shown to my inquiries. None of this would have been possible without their support, cooperation and willingness to agree to disagree with me.

I thank Roxana, Ovidiu, Marius, Adina, Tibi and Lăcri for being wonderful warm hosts in the field and for offering me an ever-more extended northeast Romanian family. Thank you also for stimulating discussions and new ways of understanding the system from in and outside. Thank you for your open and honest accounts. Thank you also Cristina and Dana, for your friendship and kindness.

At the unconscious beginning of this project was definitely my mother's activity on behalf of humanitarian NGOs with children in children's houses in the early 1990s, which allowed me to understand the privileged context that I was raised in, early on. My family has also been a safe haven from my many research and writing related wanderings, providing me with an enviable safety net. My brother, Altan, has also been keen to understand what I try to do in my research and has been an invaluable support in the many frustrations of moving around across national boundaries. My late

grandmother, Aneta Safta, who was an English teacher introduced me early on to the language that I have now come to write in.

This thesis would not have been possible without the constant inspiration, encouragement and intellectual stimulation that I received from my partner, Mugur Ciumăgeanu. His work with deinstitutionalization, though long ago, has been an inspiration for my research, as I hope that my writing has been a challenge to his thinking on this topic.