

Larisa Cosmina DOBROTĂ*

THE INVENTION OF THE ANTI-PASTEUR VACCINE: AN INSTANCE OF STATE DECENTRALISATION IN ROMANIA

Abstract

The paper deals with analyzing the privatization of the Pasteur Institute, seen as a national symbol, in post communist Romania, i.e. trying to understand the mechanism of the state regulatory practices and the ways that their absence influences the development of society. The Pasteur Institute was chosen as an example in order to show what kind of changes occur after the disappearance of the "standardization" imposed by the communist regime, a state of liminality which gives way to social changes, apparently following Neoliberal policies of the state's withdrawal from the public life of institutions, and thus preventing the dominated from truly understanding the genuine nature of their submission. By comparing the case of the state reconstruction in the Republic of Georgia with a similar case in Romania, this essay shows the perverse effects of state decentralization which may seem to generate freedom, but instead do the exact opposite, turning reconstruction into disintegration.

Keywords: *post communism; Neoliberalism; social change; decentralization; perverse effects*

INTRODUCTION

The point of departure in writing this essay was the text by the anthropologist Elizabeth Cullen Dunn, *Postsocialist spores: Disease, bodies, and the state in the Republic of Georgia*¹, dealing with the vivid and thorny debate about being inside or outside the regulation of social spaces by the state; the initial idea is that in the former Soviet republic of Georgia the occurrence of botulism is 90 times higher than in the United States. The author's intention was to demonstrate that discovering the origins of this potentially fatal disease

* M.A. Student in Anthropology, Bucharest University, Romania

¹ Elizabeth Cullen Dunn, *Postsocialist Spores: Disease, Bodies and the State in the Republic of Georgia*, *American Ethnologist* 35 (2): 243-258, 2012.

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requires a new understanding of the concept of “state”. Dunn builds her arguments, as she acknowledges herself, by means of the same principle as Michael Foucault in his work *Surveiller et punir*²; just like the relative effects of the state power may be observed through the analysis of the state institutions and the state regulatory practices, reaching the body of the individual being punished, so one may observe the failure of the modern state and the disciplinary practices of Neoliberalism in Georgia, analyzing the body of the individual affected by botulism in relation to eating habits, material production and spatial organization.

The anthropologist uses the actor-network theory³ in order to show the border between the state and society is non-existent from an analytical point of view. The state is virtually omnipresent, and the spaces which are seemingly free of the activity of the state, such as remote villages or the area wherefrom the state has withdrawn according to Neoliberal policies, are however spaces subject to a strong infusion of state agents or their practices. On the other hand, the author also refers to Phillip Abrams’ theory (1988), who claims that the state is not an institution with an objective existence, nor a group of practices, objects or agents, but a discursive construct, preventing the dominated from truly understanding the genuine nature of their submission. Following Dunn’s argumentative thread, it is to be noticed that she attempts to prove the importance of state involvement in the practices of daily life, which is possible only by exploring the relation between the semiotic and the material value, especially when it comes to moments of radical change, such as the case of the Georgian republic after the fall of communism.

The entire paper focuses on a very intriguing parallel between the spores of the botulinic bacterium and the remnants of the Soviet communist regime. The most interesting part of the article deals with the events occurring after the disappearance of “sovstandardization”. In a state that has fallen into chaos, the remnants of the previous system are still felt in the practices adopted by the individuals. The idea of “quality standard” is so deeply rooted in the collective mentality, that no one would ever doubt the quality of products “remade” according to the previous model. Giving up one’s deeply

² Gallimard, 1975, translated in Romanian by Bogdan Ghiu, Humanitas, Bucharest, 1997.

³ Developed by Michel Callon and Bruno Latour, John Law and others, it maps relations that are simultaneously material, tangible, and semiotic, i.e. among concepts. *The Annals of Dunărea de Jos University of Galați, Fasc. XX, Sociology, n. 10, 2015, 103-109.*

embedded habits in favour of new, borrowed ones, is disconcerting, to say the least.

Also, the lack of organisation of the replacing system, the postcommunist organisation, cannot cope with the challenge of reorganising a country, the lack of information of the citizens reflecting in their health, which is a clear indicator supporting the thesis proposed by Elizabeth Dunn referring to the need of individuals to abide by state organisation. The metaphor used by the anthropologist is admirable, comparing the spores of *C. botulinum* to the *E.coli* or *Listeria monocytogenes* bacteria, living in the ecological niches created by the consolidated agriculture in the US, and calling botulism a “disintegration disease”, mirroring the economic and political situation in the republic of Georgia.

The anthropologist’s text drew my attention on the mechanism of perverse effects, a concept that in Raymond Boudon’s view is transposed into the creation of an “undesired” state of facts, which has not been intended at first and becoming unpleasant from the point of view of either the actors involved, or only one of them.⁴

Boudon speaks about perverse effects in the context of social change, which is translated for some as “technological progress”, inevitably leading to the global transformation of society⁵. This is the topic of the essay I propose, as it is an aspect of society that I have to face everyday, thus forging a two-fold relation with my immediate environment and everything in it that affects me on a personal level.

THE ROMANIAN WAY

In 2009 I moved to Calea Giulești, at the end of the itinerary of tramway 11, a location most Bucharest dwellers would term as “far away”. Once you enter Calea Giulești, after passing the crossroads with the Constructorilor Boulevard, the urban landscape, suffocated till then by the height of blocks built in the communist period, undergoes a sudden transformation: more and more one-storey houses, a few construction material stores and the depot. In this suburban environment it is virtually impossible not to remark the 4-storey

⁴ Raymond Boudon, *Efecte perverse și ordinea socială*, Bucharest, EUROSONG & BOOK, 1998, p. 33.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 32.

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“colossus”, rivalling a tramway stop in length, bearing a large blue and white sign reading **Institutul Pasteur România, fondat în 1895** [Pasteur Institute Romania, founded in 1895]. In summer, the desolate image is tamed by the lush vegetation, covering most of the building that looks downright deserted. The plaster covering the walls is falling down, and the windows are almost all broken. However, the brand new sign is shining under the silent gaze of Louis Pasteur’s statue. This is the initial paradox.

The second one refers to the online presentation of the Institute. A simple Google search leads to a seemingly paranormal site for the ones familiar with the building as such⁶. The internet page opens with the image of a researcher, whose face cannot be seen, confidently holding a vial with a dripping serum of sorts. “Research, production and diagnosis of reference in Romania”. Then the image turns into Pasteur, the Filipești-based branch, “the most modern factory of veterinary medicines in Romania”. And above these images is the thick-lettered quotation from Pasteur, “The human doctor saves man, the veterinarian saves mankind”. This juxtaposition is at least puzzling, given the real state of facts, i.e. the precarious state of the institute itself. It seems like the script of a science-fiction movie, in which, once you go beyond the dilapidated walls, you suddenly find yourself in the secret world of a laboratory, where dedicated researchers discover vaccines able to stop devastating epidemics. Such a script is a tried recipe for cinematographic success. But leaving all these considerations aside, this is a building with a history dating back 121 years. My imagination and curiosity were already on high alert, anticipating a fruitful discussion with the specialists working there who might be able to tell me about the incidence of a disease in our country that could parallel the connection in Elizabeth Dunn’s research. Thus I decided to “test the waters” and talked to the guard at the gate, already convinced that he would be able to send me to an informed person with whom to discuss the activity of the institution.

One of the entrances houses a veterinary pharmacy, open for the public, its windows full of promotional posters, and the other the guards’ booth. I introduce myself and make an attempt at striking out a conversation. Initially they are willing to help, but do not know what information to provide, they tell me that people are working in the institute, but they cannot tell me what these people are working on exactly. « *People are coming in the morning, at*

⁶ <http://www.pasteur.ro/> accessed on July 17, 2016.

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half past eight... better say nine. You should talk to them if you want... but they are all young, they have been working here for an year, they cannot possibly tell you what was here before." I become aware that this is everything I am going to find out from them, and ask them for the permission to look at a panel with the Institute's map, eager to disclose at least a little bit from the secret hiding behind the grey walls. It is at this point that they become aggressive and forbid my going further. Of course I asked why. And this is the third paradox, revealed by the guards' answer: « *It's private property, miss! Leave, or I'll close the gate and call the police.* " I leave, disappointed and wondering: how can a National Research Institute be private property? The answers also come from the all-knowing internet. The Pasteur Institute has been a private property since 2000. On October 30, 2000, the Agriculture and Food Supply Ministry and the Commercial Society A&S International 2000 SRL signed a selling-buying contract no. 60, whose subject was the privatisation of the National Society Institutul Pasteur SA⁷.

And this is not all. The society A&S International 2000 SRL owns 99.9 % of the shares (the Romanian state being the owner of the remaining 0.1 %), with the provision that it is obliged to preserve in totality the activity of the society as stipulated in the Governmental Decision no. 638/September 25, 2008, i.e. to provide free of charge at the request of the above-mentioned Ministry, activities of diagnosis when needed, in case of suspicion of the evolution of diseases on the A list, to make a priority from providing the Ministry with the results of the research undertaken or to maintain the activity of veterinary research and diagnosis, etc⁸.

On April 24, 2013 an article is published online mentioning that the Pasteur Institute has filed for bankruptcy⁹. It is interesting to note the readers' comments : "*The Pasteur Institute is a bunch of thieving people. Pasteur has moved all its remaining activity in Filipești de Pădure, in Prahova county, where the operating conditions are 3rd world*" or "*people now are kept on leave without pay as*

⁷ Information retrieved from <http://www.ziarulatac.ro/investigatii-servicii-secrete/privatizarea-institutului-pasteur-crima-organizata-si-spalare-de-bani-prejudiciu-pesto-500-milioane-de-euro-46556> accessed on July 17, 2016.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ Information retrieved from <http://www.dailybusiness.ro/stiri-companii/institutul-pasteur-isi-cere-insolventa-88801/> accessed on July 17, 2016.

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they have nothing to work on. They were fooled into signing requests of unpaid leave instead of being offered furlough”.

An institute that was able to withstand two world wars caved in front of the Neoliberal economic principles, which are interpreted in the genuine Romanian style as the “bribe and connections policy”.

CONCLUSIONS

It is obvious that we are dealing with a situation similar to the one described by Elizabeth Dunn, in the sense that the state’s decision to sell a property belonging to the national patrimony was a failure, and state-decentralisation according to Neoliberal principles has gone so far that a symbol pertaining to the cultural property of the Romanian state has been turned into a completely unprofitable joint-stock company, not to mention the onerous aspects of this privatisation. The term property is also used in this context as a political symbol, a complex of social relations among people (and their identity), and things (their possessions), as stated by Katherine Verdery¹⁰, who is concerned with privatisation and the emergence of new property rights as a result of the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, where progress was comprehended function of the degree in which state has renounced its power over the institutions, quantifiable only in the number of new businesses and the amount of foreign capital invested. The result of implementing this type of economic policy has led Romania to multiple failure, starting with the sell-out of small properties, such as the underpricing of villagers’ plots, and ending in the loss of nationally crucial institutions, such as the Pasteur Institute. This governing practice, as stated by Michel Foucault¹¹, is in fact freedom-consuming, as instead of generating freedom, it organises it.

So, the genius of Neoliberal theory has managed to provide a benevolent mask, replete with positively connoted words such as freedom,

¹⁰ A. L. Cartwright, „The Vanishing Hectare: Property and Value”, in *Postsocialist Transylvania (review)*, *Anthropological Quarterly*, Volume 77, Number 4, Fall 2004, pp. 871-875 | 10.1353/anq.2004.0051 – accessed on July 17, 2016.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *Nașterea biopoliticii. Cursuri ținute la College de France, 1978-1979*, Cluj-Napoca: Ideea Design & Print, 2007, p. 67.

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choice, rights, able to hide the harsh reality of the restoration of class domination¹².

Thus, we may use the building of the Institute as a metaphor for the state, viz. A form without content, an institution which is neither dead, nor alive, like a sort of a bureaucratic apparatus without standardised forms to fill out, the result of a reform imposing privatisation as public policy of economic development which has been haunting Romania since the 90s.

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¹² David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 119.

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