

**The Catharsis of Going out into the Street:
Experiencing the 1989 Romanian Revolution***

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Abstract

The violent event of the 1989 Romanian revolution was experienced both as transforming and traumatic. Using vivid, synaesthetic testimonies on those days, the paper highlights the *liminality* of the revolution-as-lived, its symbolic dimension, the existential dilemmas and the harsh reflexivity triggered then, while critically examining narrative patterns of the revolution-as-told.

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Motto:

*"The year of 1989 has given me back my true identity.
I sharply realized which world I have been living on.*

*Adrian Marino**

The bloody violence of the 1989 founding event of Romanian post communist democracy was experienced both as transforming and traumatic. The violent death until the dictators' fall had a sacrificial dimension, whilst that provoked afterwards was a legitimizing death.

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(In translation: "Anul 1989 mi-a redat adevărata identitate. Mi-am dat seama exact pe ce lume trăiesc.") Adrian Marino in a dialogue to Sorin Antohi. *Al treilea discurs. Cultură, ideologie și politică în România*. (The Third Discourse. Culture, Ideology and Politics in Romania), Iași, Polirom, 2001, pp. 36-38.

Ultimately, the physical and psychical violence of the revolution dramatically legitimized the new leaders who came to power.

This paper develops an ethnographic analysis, based primarily on 1990 testimonies of some people from the capital who went out into the streets at that time. It tries to capture the dramatic atmosphere of the street revolutionary movement, as well as to reveal recurrent themes and patterns in the narratives on revolution, since the revolution as lived and as told are inextricably intertwined. It stresses the highly *liminal* character of the revolution as experienced, and its symbolic dimensions, spreading light on the existential dilemmas and the harsh reflexivity triggered then by the momentous of December 1989. By focusing on the symbolic dimensions of the revolutionary experience, this account on the revolution as lived would like to offer a closer, more empathic view on what is analytically called the mass mobilization or popular revolt, as one of the key factors and a distinct phase in a revolutionary process.

How did people experience those days of revolution? What made them revolt and put their life at stake? How did they perceive the abrupt moment of rupture between a world which collapsed and another one which was to be imagined? How did they face violent death, the unknown, the great hopes and fears? Whilst desperately trying to liberate themselves from an overwhelming past by exorcizing it, what was the future they imagined like?

It seems that such essentially new experiences in one's life were, at that time, instinctively expressed through rituals and symbols. A time of deep crisis, the revolution instantly revived old recurrent historical myths, which were subsequently manipulated for political use. This was a time when people dramatically reevaluated their whole life, a moment which turned into a crucial autobiographical point of reference, of before and after 1989.

Despite the deep meanings of those experiences, subsequently, even highly comprehensive accounts or descriptions of the revolution have tended to leave them apart or just to mention them in passing.¹

¹ For instance, in a recent competent and comprehensive analysis of the 1989 Romanian Revolution, the British historian, Peter Siani Davies, refers also to the revolutionaries' state of mind by describing it in terms of mass behaviour, as homogenous crowd driven by destructiveness and adrenaline. „Charged with adrenaline and freed from traditional constraints, after years of numbing tedium, the ordinary Romanian began to play an active role in the unfolding events. (...) The most obvious way of showing commitment to the revolution was joining the huge mass on the streets.”) Peter Siani Davies, *The Romanian Revolution of*

Moreover, in the making of collective and social memory(ies) of the revolution these aspects are becoming more and more faded. Actually, they tend to be silenced. Even though flashes still persist in the participant's memories, they are barely scattered through the clusters of narratives on the revolution which have been socially produced during more than a decade and a half elapsed since the events. This is the reason why implicitly I also urge here to situate historically (culturally and socially) every testimony or account we work with or provoke as researchers, because the work of memory which refines in time the significances of the past, might also bury them deeply beneath different circumstances and current political interests.¹

Sketches of the revolution 'as it happened'

In order to contextualize our discussion I would like to remind you of some background information on the events of December 1989, by providing an overview on the Romanian revolution as a linear, chronological reconstruction of the events.² Nonetheless, there is an inherent ambivalence of the term 'history', meaning both 'what happened' and 'that which is said to have happened', which fluidly overlaps the socio-historical process and the knowledge of that process, namely the story, or the narratives on that process.³ And inevitably, any historical and anthropological account on a past event plays actually on this ambivalence between the events as happened, as remembered and narrated.

December 1989, Cornell University Press, 2005, p. 116, 117. On a contrary, this paper aims at subverting such a simplistic interpretation of the revolution in the streets, by revealing its complexity and depth as a phenomenon, and the dimensions which the official discourse on the revolution have systematically silenced during this span of time.

¹ I have developed this idea in the article Sidonia Grama Nedeianu. „Memory Features of the 1989 Romanian Revolution: Competing Narratives on the Revolution”, in: *Oral History and (Post)socialist Societies*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Unipress, Freiburg, 2007, under printing.

² The brief reconstruction of the events we propose here is primarily based on central and local newspapers and draws mainly on the inquisitive description made by Stelian Tănase, a Romanian journalist and political analyst, in his book *The Miracle of the Revolution*, while some aspects were clarified or nuanced from oral sources.

³ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past. Power and the Production of History*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1995, p.22.

As it is probably known, alongside the historical changes that swept across Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 – which political analysts labelled as anticommunist, peaceful revolutions – the Romanian revolution seemed to be an exceptional one, because of its violence and the slow pace of radical political and social reforms, which have been only hesitantly initiated since then. The physical and psychical violence engendered by the turmoil of those events, the obscurities of some aspects of the revolution that have remained unexplained, and the highly elusive question of who should bear responsibility for most of the victims have led, inevitably, to difficult memories.

The revolutionary situation arose on December 15, 1989, in Timișoara, a multicultural city on the Western border of Romania. There, from an initial silent gathering of some protestant believers to sustain their pastor, László Tőkés, who was to be disciplinarily removed by the local authorities, on account of his political critique (concerning the Hungarian minority problems), the events turned rapidly and intensively into a mass anti-dictatorial revolt. It finally transformed into a genuine revolutionary movement since, in spite of the fiercely bloody repression of the army forces against the population vehemently protesting in the streets, it culminated on December 20 with the establishment of a new local political organization, the Democratic Front, based at the Opera House of Timișoara, and having a political program proposal. That was the day when the Army had to withdraw from the streets, partly fraternizing with the mass protestors, and when Timișoara was declared the first Free city in Romania. Despite the strong informational blockade, the news about Timișoara managed to spread informally throughout the country.¹

On December 21, the President Ceaușescu ordered an official meeting to manipulate again the nationalism and to publicly condemn what he had defined in terms of ‘antinational, fascist and terrorist actions’, which were organized by ‘the reactionary, imperialist, irredentist, xenophobic circles, and the foreign intelligence services’, in order to ‘destroy the independence and sovereignty of our socialist country’.² There was a fatal breach in the contrived public demonstration,

¹ Some of these aspects were very much clarified through oral sources, namely interviews and informal discussions with revolutionaries from Timișoara at different moments during my fieldwork since 2000.

² ‘Comrade Nicolae Ceaușescu’s speech at the radio and television’, in *Scântea*, the Organ of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party, 21 December 1989, p.1.

broadcast live by the National Television, when an unexpected scream and, afterwards, voices shouting 'Timișoara, Timișoara' interrupted his speech, giving a signal to the country that something was about to happen. People from several cities throughout Romania and from the capital took the risk of going out into the streets, in spite of the officially declared 'state of emergency'. They were protesting against the cruel dictator, who eventually proved to be ironically frail. A more or less similar evolution of events occurred then in Bucharest, as well as in other main cities in Romania, such as Cluj, Arad, Sibiu, Tg. Mureș, etc.

Next morning, on December 22, 1989, in the capital of the country, after a dramatic night with barricades and violent confrontations, columns of protestors from the industrial area of the city flowed to the centre. The news that the Minister of Defence, Vasile Milea, had committed suicide fostered the army's fraternization with the people. While the crowds were assaulting the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party, the Ceaușescus fled by helicopter from the terrace of the official building, which had been surrounded by revolutionaries. That was the *de facto* end of the dictatorial regime.¹

The day of December 22 could be also considered a distinct phase in the evolution of those historical events because the legitimization of the new political power emerged in the revolution began then, as performed through the live broadcast of the Free Romanian Television.² The power nucleus was formed primarily by former high-ranking communists, dissidents from inside the communist party, representatives of the army and the administration. Some of the opponents to communism, the most well-known and appreciated figures, had also been courteously invited to join the newly established political body, CFSN (Council of the National Salvation Front), to ensure its symbolical capital and reinforce its legitimization. Even though the two fugitive dictators were actually captured after several hours that very day,

¹ Stelian Tănase, *Miracolul Revoluției* (The Miracle of the Revolution), Bucharest, Humanitas, 1999, pp. 269, 273.

² A comprehensive analysis of this dramatic process of legitimization of the new political leaders is part of the analysis on the Romanian Revolution Live Broadcast, belonging to the National Television Archive, which I previously published as part of my BA thesis, Sidonia Grama Nedeianu, *Revirimentul simbolurilor în revoluția română din decembrie 1989* (The Sudden Change of Symbols in the Romanian Revolution from December 1989), *Caietele Tranziției* 1, 1997, pp. 102–106.

the Romanian Television Live kept silence on that, maintaining an incredible suspense that lasted until the evidence of the dictators' death was proved by a videotape that was broadcast on December 26. A day before, on Christmas day, in the barracks of Târgoviște, where the dictators had been arrested for several days, an emergency military tribunal had charged them with genocide and sentenced them to death after an improvised trial that lasted 55 minutes. Their execution took place immediately.¹

From December 22, the day of the first live broadcast of the revolution and the constitution of the National Salvation Front, until December 26, the dictators' execution broadcast, the psychosis of the terrorists, as a ubiquitous threat of unidentified elite shooters, terrifyingly monopolized the public. All in all, the physic and psychic violence inflicted the following heavy casualties: 1107 dead and 3352 injured people, which includes 162 dead and 1107 injured victims before December 22 (those were victims of Ceausescu's repression), and 942 dead and 2245 injured individuals after the day of the dictators' forced departure (victims of the terrorist psychosis). These sad figures mean that 'the manipulation produced more victims than the repression.'²

As regards the end of the revolution, which is always problematic, one could assert that the revolutionary situation was almost over at the end of the year, when everyday life attempted to enter a normal pace, even if echoes of the turmoil of events still resounded. On the other hand, from a political point of view, one might conventionally consider as a short-term end of the revolution (as its first political outcomes), the date of the first free elections, May 20, 1990, with the overwhelming victory of the National Salvation Front, and Ion Iliescu, the main political protagonist of the revolution, being elected president.³

¹ Tănase, *op.cit.*, p. 272.

² This remark was made by a controversial protagonist of the revolution, the Minister of the Army, an old nationalistic communist, Nicolae Militaru, who was appointed by the new president, Ion Iliescu, after Milea's suicide. It was published in the central newspaper *Adevărul*, 22 December 1994.

³ The National Salvation Front (NSF), the first political body of the revolution, and its leader, Ion Iliescu, in spite of the fact that it was only provisionally established in order to cope with the vacuum of power, and to prepare the first elections, subsequently participated in elections, monopolizing therefore the symbolic capital of the revolution; hence its overwhelming victory in the 1990 elections as well as the subsequent ones under Iliescu's leadership (even if it changed the name several times).

Despite this apparent unanimity, the entire period was marked by violence and vehement political contestation of the new political power (the interethnic conflict from Tg. Mureş, March 15–20, 1990, and the continuous protests in the University Square, in April 22–June 13, 1990, which were bloodily stopped by the ferocious “mineriade”). On the other hand, in the long run, it seems that, in the public debate, the end of the revolution has not come yet, since even on its 15th commemoration there were public discourses claiming that ‘the revolution had to continue’.¹

Revolutionary experience as liminality

Now, beyond a conventional historical reconstruction of the events (a kind of surgery of the facts as ‘they happened’, from the multitude of narratives on what happened, which, admittedly, is far from being easy or unproblematic), an ethnographic account would shed light on rather different aspects. The analysis of such a founding historical event is more likely to emphasize the process of ‘reordering worlds of meaning’,² which that moment provoked, or might be merely a pretext for ‘plunging into the midst of existential dilemmas of life’.³

Therefore, speaking about the Romanian revolution it means more than labelling it as an abruptly violent end of a dictatorial (neo-stalinist) regime, and a slow and painful transition toward liberal values and market economy.

What highly characterized the experience of that event (especially the revolutionary situation that lasted until the end of the year) as a radical change and rupture at many levels might be well described in terms of ‘liminality’.⁴ From a political point of view, the revolutionary

¹ Cf. my fieldnotes ‘The revolution has to continue’ was a recurrent statement in the official discourses of revolutionaries representatives from Timișoara, within the program of the 15th commemoration, in which I took part as a participant observer. That was a multi-sited fieldwork on the commemoration of the revolution in Timișoara, Cluj and Bucharest, 15-22 December 2004, which was published as an article: Sidonia Grama, ‘In Between Spaces of Remembering and Sites of Memory. The 15th Commemoration of the Romanian Revolution in Timișoara’, in: *Philobiblon*, vol. 10–11, Cluj, Cluj University Press, 2006, pp. 310–314.

² Catherine Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1999, p. 33.

³ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretations of Culture*, New York, Basic Books, 1973, p. 29.

⁴ Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols. Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1967.

time as a period 'betwixt and between'¹ a no longer existing order and a not yet established one, opened 'a potentially unlimited series of alternative social arrangements'; 'In this gap between ordered worlds, almost anything may happen'.² There is something as a melting pot which refines different ideas, projects, social expectancies.

Consequently, the particular trajectory that the Romanian events took towards the new social and political order did not simply happen within – what political analysts and politicians call – a 'vacuum of power'. The new socio-political configuration was not, therefore, 'ineluctable' as the official political discourse likes to claim.

The concept of liminality thoughtfully reconsiders the transition between worlds or status. It is no longer a negative term marking an absence, like the above mentioned political term, or even as other anthropologists have described it: as no man's land, of timelessness, and where nothing happens.³ On the contrary, liminality refers to a dramatically intense period with benign and malign potential as well; 'a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise',⁴ 'a realm of primitive hypothesis, where there is a certain freedom to juggle with the factors of existence',⁵ 'a stage of reflection'.⁶

To empathically describe the revolution as lived, a researcher should scrutinize particular testimonies which still encapsulate those genuine experiences, filling the interstices of the multitude of accounts on revolution largely produced in the public space, with competing, multi vocal meanings.

Such samples of testimonies are those gathered at the beginning of January 1990, by a group of ethnologists from Bucharest which had the idea to go out in the streets and record eyewitness testimonies.⁷ At that time echoes of those traumatic events still resounded, while in

¹ Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1974.

² *Ibid.*, p.14.

³ Edmund Leach, *Culture and Communication*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1974, p. 34.

⁴ Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*, p. 97.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 105–106.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁷ The witness' testimonies were published in a valuable volume of oral histories: Irina Nicolau (coord.), *Vom muri și vom fi liberi* (We Shall Die and We Shall Be Free), Bucharest, Meridiane, 1990.

everyday life, a sort of normal pace was to be found. That was a period when the street continued to be a public arena, a stage on which the anticommunist character of the revolution (previously silenced or, at least, very feeble in 22 December 1989) was getting more vocal and radicalized. In the mean time, on the international mass media arena, the 'miracle of the Romanian revolution' turned to be suspiciously questionable.¹

The narratives produced then, even if do not excel in providing sheer factual information that a (positivist) historical reconstruction of a past event might seek, are still invaluable sources. There are plenty of metaphors in these narratives, which encapsulate mythical elements of the memory as a 'special clue to the past, as windows of the making and remaking of individual and collective consciousness'.² For, 'an event lived is finished, bound with experience. But an event remembered is boundless, because it is the key to all that happened before and after it'.³

The specific moments the narratives refer to, are: the beginning of the revolt in Bucharest, since the dictator's fateful meeting on December 21, the night of the cruel repression, the fraternisation of the army in 22, and flashes of the next days until the end of the year and the beginning of the new one. Within these accounts one can find vivid, almost synaesthetic descriptions of the atmosphere in the streets, collective gestures, patterns of interactions, and moreover, precious insights into very personal experiences and inner conflicts. Tracking down metaphors within testimonies, I hereby propose an account of the revolution-as-lived, as a polyphonic text which preserves a richness of voices, hesitancies and searching for meanings.⁴

¹ The book was launched in a context in which the previous positive and rather exhilarating international echoes of the dramatic Romanian revolution had turned into an opposite scepticism and negativism. It was the period when the media coverage of the events and the huge disinformation involved became an issue of debate among journalists and political analysts, especially in the French media. See, for instance, Michel Castex, *Une mensonge gros comme le siècle. Roumanie, histoire d'une manipulation*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1990.

² Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, *The Myths We Live By*, London, Routledge, 1990, p. 21.

³ Apud. Walter Benjamin, in: Alessandro Portelli, *The peculiarities of oral history*, History Workshop 12, 1981, p. 175.

⁴ The longer excerpts I use in this paper are also fragments of the interviews published in Irina Nicolau, *op.cit.*

Breach and crisis

On the 21st of December, the moment of the national television broadcast of the meeting in Bucharest was experienced as a *breach*, as signalling the end and the simultaneous beginning of something indefinite but hoped for. There was an acute sensation of 'Now! Now!; It has to happen!'; and 'the impression that everything was over then', as well as, recalling later, that 'everything began then'¹. After the shouting heard in the street and the interruption of the broadcast, 'I ran away; I said to myself, oh, guys, it's over, they have caught fire; and I rush into the metro station to catch the train quickly, to get there'².

The perception of time precipitated into an extremely intense rhythm and a compulsion of going out there, in the streets, arose. Even though one may say that going into the streets has always been a rather banal form of protest, especially in democratic countries, at that time, in Romania, after almost half a century of totalitarianism, this act of protest meant far more. It became a crucial, existential choice and a catharsis.

Since 21st of December, the city centre of Bucharest turned into an *axis mundi*, magnetically attracting an increasing number of people. Day and night, there was an ongoing pilgrimage, while time had been suspended. That was the prime arena of the revolution.

Gradually, the urban space achieved completely new social and psychological dimensions through different forms of space appropriation and configuration, patterns of interaction, and new forms of communication. Thus, instinctively rushing into the street, immediately after that particular signal of breach when the situation was still extremely risky and reversible, people gathered together (re)discovering the exhilarating feeling of community and the temptation of liberty:

'We began to shout: We want liberty!; Without violence!; Timisoara, [...] we knelt; [...] and everything was beautiful: friends, acquaintances, we kissed each other, we hugged each other, joyfully' (worker, 27 years old):

[In the University square, a lot of people, with a flag with the emblem cut off]: 'Then, I began to cry, we met each other, everything that we couldn't say openly so many years, to tell instantly...I think it was a sort of shock' (students, 22 and 27 years old)

At the narrative level, the frenetic, breathtaking quality of that time is expressed through short, elliptical sentences.

Yet, there had been a spectre of the Timișoara bloody repression in the air, making the atmosphere both tense and exhilarating. On behalf

¹ Irina Nicolau (coord.), *op. cit.*, 15-17.

² *Ibid.* p. 18, worker 27 years old.

of the dead of Timisoara, people in the street knelt, lit candles, prayed, staying in circles, instituting islands of sacredness. The urban space was controlled and strictly delimited by military forces. Barriers of riot-shield bearers blocked the main crossroads to the city centre. The potential for confrontation between the protestors and the military forces led to a dynamic of space appropriation by different form of delimitations: from a symbolical belt of carnations on a bridge, inviting to non-violence, to proper barricades and escalation of violence. 'Our barricade' and 'theirs'; the space markers reflected the us/them dichotomy. However, these borders were many times trespassed, as ritual attempts to convert the hostility of the situation into a non-hostile one, since 'the crossing of frontiers and thresholds is always hedged about with ritual'.¹ Therefore, some of the people in the street, mostly youngsters, approached the soldiers in a friendly and humorous manner:

'Those who were the most courageous went to the first line [to the USLA troops] and gave them cigarettes; they told them: actually we are staying here to take your shields and to sledge on them.' (Photographer, 20 years old)

Since then, a ritual of giving had been gradually instituted, carrying different meanings and symbolic effects in 'maintenance or alteration of social relationships'², primarily between soldiers and population.

Other protestors had forced the soldiers to face reality and to realize that the people in front of them were neither hooligans, nor foreign agents or enemies, as Ceausescu's official discourse had labelled them, but they were likely to be their own friends or relatives. Virtual kinship relations had fostered, therefore, an identification of those involved in a sheer illegitimate confrontation. The mystified definition of the situation had been thus challenged:

'In front of a USLA barrier, well built soldiers, in their military service; people ask them, the classical questions: don't you have brothers at home, don't you have parents, how can you do this?: one of them with a very tough face, was utterly overwhelmed, he turned back and went away; there was a group of people who were insistently asking him: man, look at us, I might be your brother, I might be your chum, perhaps we had a beer together.' (Student, 27 years old)

These types of questions became very common, as attempts to personalize the relationship, and moreover, as a powerful form of

¹ Edmund Leach, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

² Raymond Firth, *Symbols: Public and Private*, Ithaca NY, Cornell University Press, 1973, p. 402.

questioning the military forces' consciences¹. Even after several scenes of violence had happened, there was still a bizarre mixture of intermittent hostility and non-hostility between the demonstrators and the military forces, until the beginning of firings and the bloody repression from the night of December 21 to 22.

'The tanks have demolished the barricade, people have burnt our barricade [...] after a while, people have already spoken with them, amicable relations; on tanks they spoke with them like at a picnic: How are you? They were smoking, one could move freely... [when he came back in the square, after midnight] there were beer and candies in a lorry, the cars were burning, that yellowish light, with beer... it was like in a Latin revolution, I said, man, it is exactly our style ... [until] they began to fire, those are firing, so this is not a game any more' (Worker, 27 years old)

Paradoxically, the accounts of that night, as a moment of high crisis – when tanks crashed barricades and protestors, hundreds of people were killed and even more wounded filled the hospitals – are not accurately recalled; the facts are mixed up, a lot of images are juxtaposed. Moreover, that moment seems to be avoided in most of the testimonies recorded in 1990. Even if the interviewees were explicitly invited to speak about the moment of firings, they described it in a fatalist key, by indefinite, vague or confusing terms to refer to the repressive forces they confronted that night:

'Barricade at Dalles, barricades of armoured cars; beyond them *terrorists*, here us [...] at the Inter[continental], a tank is crashing the barricade; through the hole made those have entered and are beginning to fire at people; Who was shooting...? Who might have been...?' (Students, 27, and 22 years old)

What is striking in this account is the use of the term *terrorists*. The term itself made history in the Romanian revolution context, having highly ambiguous and slippery semantics. It was firstly used in Ceausescu's discourse to define the revolt from Timișoara, labelling the street

¹ These aspects of identification and personalization of the relationship between soldiers and population at that time might have now a particular relevance in the context of the revolution trials. In spite of the face to face relations in the street, even after more than a decade from those events, some of the army officers put into trial for the casualties of the revolution up to December 22, claimed that they had been misinformed that protestors were foreign agents; or there is a tendency to affirm that people in the street were mostly hooligans and drunkards. I noticed these tendencies also when I participated in several sessions of the trials of the revolution from Cluj, in April–May 2001.

protestors in these terms¹, to be subsequently taken over, after Ceausescu's fall on 22 December, by the new (political and opinion) leaders of the revolution and publicly launched on television, in order to define the highly elusive enemy of the Revolution (always in capital letters). And, at that stage of the revolution, it had powerful and damaging effects, as we will see later. Therefore, bearing in mind the chronology of the events, in the witnesses' recollection about the night of 21 December, the moment of confrontation with the repressive forces, the very term of 'terrorists' seems to be premature and dissonant. At the narrative level, it was obviously used retrospectively, from a perspective charged with subsequent grasps of the events. For the memory is never a mere reproduction of the past events, but a re-construction from the present; as Halbwachs put it, 'the mind reconstructs its memory under the pressure of society'.²

In spite of the face-to-face encounters between protestors and the repressive forces, the 1990 testimonies systematically avoid the identification of those military forces involved in the repression. As a narrative strategy, they were impersonally and pejoratively called 'ăia' (them). In the context of the beginning of 1990, soon after the entire odyssey of the Romanian revolution had been meaningfully accomplished, – namely after the glorious fraternization of the army and the common fight against the ubiquitous threat of 'terrorists' as the common enemy –, one hardly might admit that the same victorious army was previously involved in the bloody repression. This has been one of the many difficult memories related to the Romanian revolution, extremely painful and uneasy to cope with. Such avoidances meant a sort of relief from flagrant cognitive dissonances.

From fratricide to fraternisation

Therefore, most of the testimonies tend to silence the moment of confrontations during the night of December 21. The accounts jump indistinctly to the day of 22 of December which is recalled as 'a proper day for doing a revolution', the frenetic day of the Army fraternisation

¹ Officially, the events from Timișoara were defined in Ceaușescu's speech from 21 December 1989 in the following terms: "actions with terrorist character, organized and provoked in close relations with reactionary, imperialist circles". "The Army was attacked by terrorists groups" (in: *Scântea*, December 21, 1989, p. 1.)

² Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 51.

with the protestors. Again, the compulsion of going down to the centre meant a kind of magnetic fascination. In the morning, after the traces of the previous repression being insistently cleaned, there was a transient, tense incertitude and fear in the air. This state of mind had influenced and shaped patterns of collective behaviour and social interactions.

'On the second day, the second amazing fact, it was at the crack of dawn, I was going again to the city centre. Groups of people were going in the same direction, people didn't say anything, we were looking at one another [...] people tried to pretend that they were going to work, it means that old fear, [...] and the moment when we gathered together in a greater number, we suddenly began to shout; we had seen that we were many, all of us we had actually come on the same purpose, people were coming from everywhere; we began to talk with the soldiers; "The Army is with us!" We were shouting from everywhere; the terrorists, – I call terrorists those antiterrorist-fighters, with helmets and shields, for they were the most frightening – the terrorists were running away'. (Students 27 and 22 years old)

At that very moment of high reversibility, shouting 'the Army is with us' was not a mere slogan, but an invocation, a *performative utterance*¹ meant to produce the envisaged effects. All the ritualised approaches to the army (through ritual giving, identification, humour) had ultimately, *symbolical effectiveness*:² the army fraternized with the people.³ What is more, during the whole revolutionary process, the performative utterance 'The army is with us!' has developed in time different meanings and connotations, depending on the different stages of the revolution. Thus, until December 22, this invocation had fostered the Army fraternization with the street protestors, afterwards it was intensively chanted in the public squares to reinforce this achievement, and also, it was invoked as a sort of protection against the frightful unknown terrorists and the confusing rumours which spread around. After the end of the revolutionary situation, at the beginning of the 1990, when for the first time the role of the army in the repression was more vocally put into questions, the slogan "The Army is with us!" became

¹ See J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1976.

² See Claude Levy Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, New York, Basic Books, 1963.

³ The pressure of the crowds in the street, as well as the news of the Army Minister 'suicide' – all these on the background of the profoundly irreversible changes in Central Europe – had definitely influenced the decision at the high level of the army to disobey an almost defunct regime.

politically instrumentalized in order to dissuade the attempts to search for those responsible for so many victims, both in the repression of the uprising and after the state breakdown.

Undoubtedly, the 'fraternization' was crucial to the fate of the revolution. I would consider it not only as a particular moment or turning point in the loyalty of the army but more broadly, as a process and a gap at many levels of society. Abruptly or gradually, it represented a shift of world visions and attitudes, both at the institutional and private level.

Within the state institutions the attitudes towards this change ranged from the state of expectancy of those who, throughout the period of changes, beginning with the Timisoara revolt up until that day, had been cautiously (or cowardly) expected to see what would happen with that ambiguous and reversible situation and only then they opportunistically hurried to expressed their loyalty to the revolution; to the radical shift, which occurred literally over night, as in the attitude of the repressive forces. From fratricide to fraternization, the case of the Romanian army is paradigmatic.

In other repressive institutions¹, as the political prison, Jilava, where protestors had been arrested in 21 December and spent the night there, dramatic shifts, with a touch of grotesqueness, occurred:

'At Jilava it had been hell: only whimpers and roars, the investigation [...] they treated us awfully until 12 pm when they began to ask: how do you feel? [on the 22 of December, being released] the chief of the prison: "from now on will be good both for us and for you; now be gentlemen, ladies first." Many girls, having bruises, crying, they waved kisses at us. Those executioners, during the night, had shifted completely...' (Ethnomusicologist, 67 years old)

In the meantime the 22nd of December, the day of fraternization meant an explosion of joy and solidarity, which revived a profound sense of community, between soldiers and people, even a state of *communitas*, as 'the quick' of human interrelatedness'.² Again, a reinforced ritual of gifts

¹ Shifting attitudes at institutional level and especially in the Securitate and Militia remain to be explored further. At that time, Securitate played a very ambiguous and covered role. Until December 22 the Interior Minister forces were more visibly involved in arresting the protestors and in supporting from the second line the military forces in charged with the repression in the streets. Moreover the Securitate representatives were also involved in secretly filming the entire evolution of the events. At the beginning of 1990, when the trials of the revolution opened, few representatives of the Interior Minister were sentenced only for their involvement in illegal arrestment of the protestors.

² Victor Turner, *The ritual Process*, Chicago, Aldine, 1969, p. 127.

had conveyed then meanings of thankfulness and hopes. There were unforgettable moments, whose stories still preserve the highly emotional atmosphere of those days

[Beyond the Royal Square people were shouting] "The Army is with us!" These ones had put down their guns; general enthusiasm, ecstasy; they lit a cigarette, relaxed [...] people invaded them, they got up on the tanks, throwing food, oranges to the soldiers; I burst into tears; it bursts me even now; people were kissing the soldiers, hugging them; Well, this is the story.' (Worker, 27 years old)

An old world had succumbed; a new one was to emerge. In the 'betwixt and between', social metaphors of both 'dissolution, decomposition and growth and transformations'¹ had emerged. Rituals of destroying, as well as a cluster of discourses attempting to mark and to organize the new world, proliferated then in the public sphere. The crowds who ascended the building of the former Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party (CC), a former forbidden space, 'began to throw, to break, to tear the party's emblems; as it usually happens in a revolutionary time'. 'At a certain moment everybody rushed to speak; [...] it was crazy, all kinds of proclamations' (Worker).

For the revolution meant also a breach at the discursive level. The previous overwhelming wooden language of the communist ideology was shattered. The long lasting silence and fear imposed in the totalitarian period made people feel a sudden compulsion to speak frankly and freely, to express publicly their thoughts, and to become vocal, even if very difficult to articulate a new natural language.

On the other hand, in the confusing struggle for power, two main alternative spaces of discourses were at stake: the balcony of the former CC, at the Palace Square (the place where Ceausescu used to hold his contrived speeches had been reconverted), and the television. They became symbolic places, forums of discursive practice. The highly contradictory and competing discourses, the performative utterances conveyed there, information and misinformation, proclamations, and abundant rumours spread over, barely configured a desperate attempt to order in the vacuum left by Ceausescu's fled. Actually the chaos of the transition to an undefined new world was totally reflected there.

Going out into street as an existential choice

From the very beginning, on 21 of December, going out into the street was essentially a matter of choice. Many people made it, either

¹ Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*, p. 99.

instinctively or after a long, painful deliberation. The tense alternative to go out or to stay home was ultimately a crucial existential choice. Consequently, the street – as an open space, dangerously exposed, a space of risk-taking and contestation of political regime – versus the home – as a closed space of fear, of escaping reality – became the symbolic dimensions of the city. That opposition admitted a third possibility: the pavement as a limbo, a transitory space of insecurity, anxiety, and indecision. Surprisingly, the symbolic dimension of the street has been a recurrent theme in the realm of narratives of the revolution. The tense perception of space still persists as flash-bulb memories, not only in the 1990 testimonies, where it is overwhelmingly recalled, but also in more recent narratives.¹ While at the individual level, going out in the streets was a transforming experience, as a collective action it had political efficacy.

‘The way to the demonstration had been the most terrible moment in my life.’(Students)

‘And then I ran away...I ran away from home into the middle of the world, to the Intercontinental. For such a long time I’d wanted to go out, to shout; I had been feeling embarrassed...[...] but that very day I went out: at the rear lines, to the middle, on the lateral, then even in the first lines, in the front of that cordon at the Intercontinental [...] Once Liiceanu said: “there are people guilty by silence, guilty by avoidance, and guilty by participation”...so, I went out then ...’(Ethnomusicologist, 65 years old)

‘I went out there, to the Inter, because some friends of mine had told me that people were dying there’ (an amateur photographer, 20 years old)

Confronting these kinds of testimonies one can see different ages, slightly different deep motivations, but the same need to be there, in the middle of the world, where violent death had transformed the ordinary space of the city into a sacred space. For some of the mature people who had spent their adulthood in the midst of totalitarianism, going out in the street was a sort of therapy for long lasting internalised fear, for complicity and culpability. Being there, facing death and experiencing solidarity might have been ultimately, a ritual of expiation. Although there was an

¹ There are several participant’s testimonies from Cluj or from Bucharest that I recorded since 2000 which clearly recall, as in a slow motion picture, the psychological implications of the moment of stepping down from the pavement to the street, a moment perceived as a highly irreversible decision: ‘and when I stepped down I felt like there would be no return’ (Doru Maries, interview 2006 Bucharest). Ultimately, these kind of gestures made a difference in terms of people’s agency and mass mobilization.

awareness of this profound meaning, some people found it painfully difficult to make a decision. Being in between seems to be a distinct state of mind, correlated with certain categories of age and gender, objectified in attitudes and behaviour, and visible in spatial configurations:

'On 21st of December, there was a sea of youngsters who were howling, shouting slogans; we, *the middle generation*, were howling, crying, kissing; we were not going to the midst of the street, we were in *an intermediate position*, between the endangered street and the institute where we could have sheltered; we were *somewhere in between*.' (Art historian, 40 years old)

The option of going out in the streets or staying home tended to be gendered, as well. While men were supposed to make up their minds to go and fight, women were expected to stay home or to go back to their hometowns to tell the story of the street. To trespass this stereotype was even more difficult:

'And men had a sort of glorious halo and they were discussing with each other how to send us back... go back at least you to tell; I didn't want to go back home.' (Student)

In the tense feeling of not being able to overcome an inner constraint, a woman felt that she might be partly absolved by delegating men to go in the street:

'The boys had left home about 2 or 3 times; you have the impression that you calm down a bit, that you give them something and they leave with it, so that you are absolved by a half of the guilt. It seemed to me that it was the essential moment of your life as human being; I was desperate, I had been living a terrible desperation. (Art historian, 40 years)

There was a time of reflexivity, of harsh evaluation of one's entire life. In the highly charged psychological dimension of the urban space at that time, going back home turned into an introspective questioning of the meaningfulness of life. Ultimately, for everyone, no matter of age, gender, profession, being there had an existential value:

'I will never be able to make up for lost time the fact that I hadn't been there, that evening; you can't make up for it even if you die.' (Student, 26 years old)

However, the Romanian revolution as a popular revolt has a distinct generational feature: it was called a 'youngsters' revolution'. Besides its political use in the official discourse, that had a deeper significance as subjective experience. Those who instinctively went out in the street were mostly adolescent and young people between 17-30 years old. Their enthusiasm, bravery or unconsciousness was so contagious that made many other people follow them. And nowadays, if one goes to the

Heroes' Cemetery, one observes that most of the graves there bear those young people's names.

Going out into the street and facing death meant overcoming *fear*. This word appears frequently in the accounts. There were even slogans insistently shouted in December 21 and 22: 'We are not afraid anymore!'

The fear experience was gendered and generational; it was cultural, therefore. Different types and strata of fear were experienced then. The young people's fear was rather 'a physical fear, like that of an animal, [felt] when people died by us'.¹ Whilst some middle aged people faced that 'old fear' which they had known very well for such a long time, a fear with embarrassing and paralysing effects, the internalised fear, as a significant feature of the totalitarian system. Fear was in the background of everyday lives. Those days revealed it painfully. Most of them recognized it, some of them had tried hard to cope with, but not many of them managed to overcome it. Subsequently, from 22 December onwards, a new pervasive fear arose in the social drama of the revolution: It was 'the great fear' of *terrorists* – very much like that of the French revolution, brilliantly described by Lefebvre.²

That liminal time of crisis fostered a harsh awareness and reflexivity. In the adult participants' testimonies (and moreover in other types of public discourses), at that time *mea culpa* discourses, feeling of shame, embarrassment, culpability for their long passive complicity with the dictatorial regime were expressed. For many people, the younger generation's revolt was exemplary. Definitely, when the youngsters went out attracting other people to fill the streets, they made possible the radical, long time expected, yet unpredictable, even unthinkable change. They brought much-needed relief for the almost unbearable feelings of culpability, which the adult generation had experienced. For them that was a rite of delegated expiation.

[question] 'What your mother told you about leaving home?' – 'My mother herself sent me there [...]. I remember that she gave me, at Christmas, something which demolished me... a note: "Now, whatever I would told you would be too little. Thank you!" (Students)

¹ Irina Nicolau (coord.), *op. cit.*, 8.

² See George Lefebvre, *The Great Fear of 1789. Rural panic in Revolutionary France*, English translation, London, New Left Books, 1973.

Myth of the father, evil, terrorists

Within the social imaginary realm of the revolution other metaphors and myths are encapsulated. It was said that those who then revolted and died were mostly the so called "Decrețeii", the generation born in '68, a period of a coercive communist pro birth policy, with devastating perverse effects on women's and families' lives.¹

[question] 'Who made the revolution?'; '- The children did it; the million of children from '68. They obliged mothers to make children and now my kid is disabled ...'

In that time of crisis and angst, of violence and death, the spectre of the myth of the father arouse insidiously in the social imaginary of those days, and, like any other powerful myth, it was highly ambiguous. As known, the propaganda of Ceausescu's extravagant personality had long time promoted him as a beloved father, while, in the meantime Ceausescu's politics tyrannically decided on the birth of children against women's will. In a recent book on anthropology of the end of political authority, John Borneman states that 'the death of authority figures such as father or leaders can be experienced as either liberation or loss'. In the same psychoanalytic clue, I would rather say that the experience of such mythic authorities' loss is essentially dual, liberation and loss, exhilaration and devastation. The (secular) charisma of the leaders which embody the myth of the father plays actually on this duality. Times of crisis and angst, of violence and death, the myth of the father became salient. It was reflected also in graffiti and slogans, since Ceausescu was called at that time 'the kids' executioner', while on the walls were scratches like: 'Daddy, how bad you were'; Yet on their execution day, Elena Ceaușescu addressed the soldiers who tied their hands 'my kids', and subsequently, within the terrorist phase of the revolution, among the rumours spread about those elusive enemies, versions of the orphans brought up by the Ceausescu's and, therefore, fanatically loyal to them even beyond death², were intensively conveyed.

¹ In the framework of socialist paternalism and instrumentalization of women's body, the abortion was banned through the decree 770 from 1966, a policy that led privately to "bitter memories". See Gail Kligman, *The politics of reproduction. Controlling Reproduction in Ceausescu's Romania*, University of California Press, 1998. The generation of children born after that year are called popularly 'decrețeii', and it is said that they made the revolution.

² See, for instance, The Observer (ed.), *Tearing down the Curtain*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1990, p. 137.

Within the economy of that phase of the revolution, *the myth of the terrorists* was one of the most powerful and effective political symbols of the revolution.¹ Closely connected with the televised stage, it played a crucial role in the social drama of the revolution. Here I would like to stress its tremendous duality in terms of effects, since any powerful symbol 'is a double edged instrument',² both benign and malign. On the one hand, the fear of terrorists devastatingly produced more victims after the dictators' fall, than the repression itself; on the other hand, it successfully legitimated the new political power. Besides these, it had also some positive perverse effects, since in everyday life, as reflected in testimonies, the great fear of terrorists shaped special patterns of interaction.

When the television monopolized both the making and the representation of the revolution, becoming then its prime arena, instead of the street, those two social spaces complementarily interrelated. The television broadcast became a new compulsive attraction, as 'people were panicking if they weren't in front of the TV sets to find out everything'.³ It became the new *axis mundi*. In the streets people joined around TV and radio sets which were brought up to the windows. Moreover, the television insistently and confusingly launched messages asking people to form a life hedge around it, to protect the vital institution against possible terrorist attacks. Day and night exhaustingly watching the Revolution Life Broadcast and sharing tremendous emotions and confusions became a new form of participation in the (tele)revolution. Even if mediated or illusory, that was a cathartic involvement in the making of those historical events. Undoubtedly, at that stage, the Romanian revolution was purely a media event, as a performance with shamanizing social

¹ In a paper that I've already mentioned I developed the idea that the tense polarity of the myth of the Saviour and the myth of the terrorists had a crucial role in legitimising, on the stage of the television, the new political power emerged in the Romanian revolution. The study was based on a content analysis of the first live broadcast of the Romanian Free Television, on December 22, 10.50 p.m. (Sidonia Grama Nedeianu, *Revirimentul simbolurilor in revolutia romana din decembrie 1989, 1997.*)

² Raymond Firth, *Symbols: Public and Private*, Ithaca NY, Cornell University Press, 1973, p. 367.

³ Irina Nicolau (coord.), *op. cit.*, p. 111.

effects.¹ Since all the messages conveyed by the television were eagerly absorbed, it became an essential vehicle of rumours on terrorists.

Even at the beginning of the next year, when the climax of the events had already passed, echoes of the fear of terrorists still resounded in every day life. Narratives about terrorists were an inextricable mixture of sheer facts and extravagant fantasies, of personalized as well as impersonal accounts, of credulity and scepticism. Stories on previous and current experienced fears of terrorists were told with apprehension and (self) irony, as well. It was said that terrorists 'were seen jumping from eight levels block of flats and immediately after landing they were running away'; 'being shot they were instantly disappeared in a sort of thick smoke'². More 'earthly' accounts told about a web of 'underground tunnels from where they got out in the night to fire at population'; they had very 'sophisticated weapons, very high-tech which they could deeply hide before dying' and that they were 'drug addicted'.³ Irrationality, ubiquity, mastering the vertical and the underground world as well, acting in the dark, the terrorists had, therefore, all the malefic ingredients of a political myth recurrently arisen in crisis times⁴.

As always, rumours about terrorists were also spread by the word of mouth through concatenations of persons. Consequently, at that time, other forms of social relations were shaped, rumours on terrorists dramatically damaging social relationships in every day life, and paradoxically establishing new ones.

On January 1990, at the beginning of the new year and a genuine new world, the Orthodox Christian world recently revived within the former official atheistic Romania – as everywhere in the post socialist Eastern Europe where a revival of religious beliefs and revised status of its institutions flourished⁵ –, there was a religious feast, popularly called 'Boboteaza', involving blessing of the waters as a sacred ritual. Amazing rumours were spread then: it was said that 'the holy water (*aghiazma*) was poisoned in the church', so that people were warning those who had taken holy water to throw it away; it was also said, 'at television, that

¹ In these respects, the Romanian revolution life highly matches the definition of a media event as describe by Daniel Dayan–Elihu Katz *Media Events. The Live Broadcasting of History*, Harvard, Harvard University Press, 1992.

² Irina Nicolau, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

³ *Ibid.*, 129–30.

⁴ This is the myth of malefic conspiracy described by Raoul Girardet, *Mythes et mythologie politiques*, Paris, Ed. Du Seuil, 1996.

⁵ Katherine Verdery, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

bullets were found in the ritual food for the dead memory (*coliva*), as well as in other traditional food that people offered and shared at that time'. These rather ridiculous statements triggered at that time a sinister sense of desecration and devilry.

A pervasive suspicion dramatically altered the social relations and the former sense of community that people had recently experienced. The ritual of gift, so symbolically effective in the previous phases of the revolution was now ruined. Stories of people who got sick because somebody had offered them spoilt or even poisoned food proliferated. Soldiers were now cautiously refusing food offerings or asking those who offered to taste it before; at the entrance in the metro stations there were harsh controls even on personal items as lipsticks and deodorants. An oddly new and old wave of suspicion and distrust seemed to infect again the social relations in Romania, as it had been so long in the communist period. Paradoxically those late echoes of the recent great fear of terrorists, which all Romanians had been experiencing since December 22, had also some positive, cohesive effects. In that highly contradictory context, a sense of local community was reinforced. In the communist blocks of flats from Bucharest as well as across other cities of Romania people formed teams to protect the blocks entrances against possible terrorists. Day and night, young and older dwellers spent tiresome hours protecting their neighbours on their watches. On the background of pervasive suspicion, a rather hilarious confusion occurred. Even if later on the facts were recalled and interpreted as such, at that time they were taken for granted and perceived as extremely serious. It meant a form of civic involvement, a personal contribution to an attempt at the restoration of order. Moreover, even the more or less involuntary rumourmongers, who cautiously warned their acquaintances of all kinds of unbelievable dangers, had thus reinforced a new kind of sociability. The fear spread then – like the Great Fear of the French Revolution, which seemed to be in many respects a sort of *déjà-vu* of the Romanian Revolution – had been both damaging and cohesive. Ultimately, the myth of terrorists configured a much-needed social cohesion against a common, even if elusive enemy.

Time(s) of reflexivity

I would say that, at the beginning of January 1990 there was a first wave of collective reflexivity on the dramatic events recently experienced. Perhaps they meant the first exercises of distancing and disenchantment. Random discussions recorded on the street at that time

reflected, on the one hand, the collective attempts to crystallise meanings of those events, and on the other hand, emerging forms of discourse through which those meanings could be cast publicly. An insidious feeling of disappointment was in the air. People became apprehensive about the possible restoration of communism, as the old communists presence in the new political structure was overwhelming. What was hoped and experienced as a definitive rupture with the past, a radical change, proved to be only a wolf in sheep's clothing. It is likely that a certain degree of disappointment might be rather common in the aftermaths of revolutions, as they are by definition, liminal periods of open possibility. Later on, within the endless turmoil of social and economic transition and confusing politics, people gained a grasp of a tragically absurd situation: 'They have died in vain!'

The landscape of collective memory has inevitably changed since then. A decade later when I entered this field, other social interests were at stake: the social identity of revolutionary acknowledged officially by revolutionary certificates, and the long lasting trials for the crimes of the revolution have slightly turned the public memory of revolution into a battle field. Thus, testimonies have been used to fulfil these aims which are far from being politically neutral. By claiming authenticity, asserting the status of victims or heroes, and false and genuine revolutionaries, memories on revolution became therefore institutionalized, as public scripts of revolutionary experiences intensively shaped by the narrative genres they belong to. The debates generated since then triggered rather negative connotations of the revolutionaries, which the public eye has seen either as victims or as sheer impostors and profiteers¹.

Among different genres of narratives on revolution, even the oral history interviews I conducted since 2000 onwards, barely preserved those symbolic elements of revolutionary experience as revealed in the 1990 testimonies. That is why I am taking care to carefully situate them

¹ A diagnosis on the social identity of revolutionary I attempted in Sidonia Grama, 'Social Interests and Revolutionary Identity in the Romanian Revolution from December 1989', in: E. Magyary Vincze, P. Mândruț (coord.), *Performing identities, Renegotiating Socio-Cultural Identities in the Post-Socialist Eastern Europe*, Cluj, Publishing House of the European Studies Foundation, 2004.

The idea of the institutional genres of narratives on the revolution and a description of the public discourses on revolution I developed in a paper given at the International Conference of Oral History, Freiburg, 2005. (Sidonia Grama, 'Memory Features of the 1989 Romanian Revolution: Competing Narratives on the Revolution', 2006, forthcoming.)

within the realm of narratives on the revolution, as previous layers of reflectivity in the making of collective memory.

Ultimately, they might simply speak about the human propensity to revolt, to be – as Foucault put it – ‘outside history and in history, because everyone stakes his life and his death. (...) And that is how subjectivity (not that of great men, but that of anyone) is brought into history, breathing life into it’.¹

¹ Michel Foucault, ‘Useless to revolt?’ in: James D. Fabian (ed.), *Power, Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, London, 2002, pp. 450–452.