

JILL MASSINO, *Ambiguous Transitions. Gender, the State, and Everyday Life in Socialist and Postsocialist Romania* (New York, Oxford: Berghahn, 2019)

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Jill Massino is an associate professor at the University of North Carolina Charlotte and is part of the “new wave” of western and overseas historians whose preoccupations circumscribe to the historical research conducted on the topic of Romania. We could say that this “new wave” of historians characterises the generation of the new millennium. The historiographic horizon of the research and contributions made by Jill Massino contains a thematic array that approaches the history of Romanian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, of Eastern Europe in the modern and contemporary age, the issue of the Cold War, the issue of gender identities, the issue of memory as a historical discourse during the socialist and post-socialist periods. In this light, her historical research subjects gained a certain depth of historiographic analysis and interpretation, since the social phenomena are understood in their dynamics, in a “state of flux”, and integrated into a dense network of determinations and influences that are political, social, economic and cultural in nature. The dominant in her interpretations is the perspective of the comparative history of socialism, of a “national” history reconstructed from the viewpoint of the evolutions from the general history of the socialist block, and from capturing the particular historical facts that are individual and circumstantial and their integration in the historical phenomenology that characterised the evolution of the Romanian society and the society in Eastern Europe in the past century or in the beginning of the third millennium. Thus, Jill Massino’s historiographic texts are part of a genre of history that explores a diversity of primary historical sources (from archival documents to propaganda and oral history) used for the problematisation-type historical reconstruction. Jill Massino proved to be receptive towards the dialogue between history and the social sciences, sociology, anthropology, in order to decipher the nuanced significance of dense past reality and of a complex life that is filled with contradictions and ambiguities.

The book entitled *Ambiguous Transitions. Gender, the State, and Everyday Life in Socialist and Postsocialist Romania*, published in 2019, represents and exemplary proof of the aforementioned features. The subject of the book centres on defining the woman’s identity within socialism in Romania, from the perspective of the communist state and its policies, from the perspective of the transition after 1989, but also from the perspective of the dynamics of the daily lives of those who lived in socialism and postsocialism. In the author’s concise terms, the subject of the book is described as “This book seeks to shed light on these complexities, contradictions, and ambiguities through an analysis of socialist policies, media representations, and women’s life stories in Romania from the advent of socialist

rule to the present” (p. 3). In other words, the book aims to reconstruct the project of the identity of the socialist woman, as defined by the propaganda of the socialist state, the political practices, but also form the viewpoint of the life experiences of the women in Romania at that time. Through her book, Jill Massino aims to illuminate “the centrality of gender in the politics and practices of socialist state making, examining how ideas about women and men influenced policymaking and social organization, and how, through both persuasive and coercive means, the state mobilized women for the purpose of socialist modernization” (p. 4). This type of historical problematization widens the interpretation sphere for socialism in Romania, since it no longer appears merely as an imperative imposition of the party leadership, of the repressive instruments and of the foreign (soviet) factors, but as a “negotiation” between these institutions and the citizens. In other words, the woman is not merely the research subject; she represents an agent “who made choices, albeit under limited and at times highly restrictive circumstances” (p. 4).

The structure of the book is extremely ingenious in its endeavour to explain “the relations between ideology, policy, and social practice” (p. 19). The author investigates the condition of the woman within the Romanian space from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the consolidation of the communist regime, of the means by which the socialist state defined the modern woman. In fact, the book compiles the life sequences of the woman in socialist Romania, beginning from a certain cultural tradition, remodelled by the strategies of the socialist state in different social contexts: the woman as part of the youth group, the woman as part of the workforce, the role played by the woman in the couple relations, within the family and the household, the woman from the perspective of maternity and of the relations with the demographic policies of the regime, with the repressive policies regarding the abortion ban and the limitation of divorces; the volume also examines the consumerist policies as substitutes or as a compensatory discourse in defining certain “new models of womanhood, often influenced by Western styles” (p. 23). The final part of the book is dedicated to the status of the woman in the transitions that occurred at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the transition from “socialism to pluralism”, a period that reveals the same ambiguities – on the one hand, a loss of the social security women had under the socialist regime and, on the other hand, the gain of fundamental freedoms (of expression, association, movement and, last but not least, sexual freedom).

The reconstruction of the historical issues presented above is supported by a historical research based on a series of diverse primary sources (“on numerous primary sources” – p. 12). These sources include the legislation of that time, the statistics, media culture, film or the studies in the field of social sciences. The propaganda of the communist regime deployed through the representative media institutions, “*Scînteia*”, the main newspaper of the communist party, or the magazine “*Femeia*”, the official magazine of communist women, represented the

main marks approached by the historian. The archival collections of The Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party, the minutes, reports and debates complete this horizon of historical sources. In their analysis, the author is convinced that they have a selective nature and that they “offer particular and partial perspective on the past” (p. 14). Another source is represented by the letters addressed by the working people to the party members and its leaders, as well as to the radio stations abroad (Radio Free Europe), letters that emphasise the daily problems of the Romanian citizens. A great importance in this enumeration of the sources that facilitated the analysis and the historical interpretation is held by the oral histories – over one hundred such interviews made beginning with 2003, particularly in Bucharest and Braşov. The critical approach to these oral sources and the methodological outlines prove the accuracy and complexity of the historical reconstruction endeavour undertaken by Jill Massino. The oral sources regarding life under socialist regimes allow for the reconstruction of certain social phenomena which, in the absence of such sources, would have remained “blank spaces” in the knowledge of the past; they thus describe an alternative history, or a counter-history but, just as the official sources, they must be integrated into the historiographic discourse through a critical approach by the researcher (“oral histories, like official documents, necessarily represent particular constructions of the past”, p. 17). A significant aspect of appealing to oral sources is that they provide the opportunity of understanding socialism as a lived, humanised experience: “the pleasure of work or purchasing a car or household goods, celebrations with family and trips to the seaside, frustrations in finding good childcare and healthy food, difficulties in dealing with sexist colleagues or spouses, fear of unwanted pregnancy” (p. 18).

The problematization of the historical reconstruction of the woman’s identity in socialism and postsocialism in Romania from the perspective of the state propaganda discourse, of the political practices of its institutions, of the life experience shared through the oral history interviews, opened a perspective of analysis and interpretation that emphasises a comparative endeavour with the similar phenomena from the Soviet Union, Poland, Hungary or the German Democratic Republic. Similarly, Jill Massino resorts to a series of concepts that enriched the models of historical interpretation of the socialist regimes, such as “welfare dictatorship” (Konrad H. Jarausch), “socialist citizenship” (Jan Palmowski), which dislocate defining the socialist regimes as “totalitarian” regimes, which is a limited and much too general view. Likewise, by focusing the research on the aspects pertaining to daily life (“a central site of analysis as well as a methodological approach of this book”, p. 7), Jill Massino proves to be the promoter of approaching what is regarded as “totalitarian interpretations of communist systems, which focus on their coercive, violent, and repressive aspects (...). everyday life considers how ordinary individuals engaged with power, including negotiating a range of different relationships to suit their needs.” (p. 8)

In conclusion, the book proposed by Jill Massino, a contribution that represents two decades of historical research, from the author's first encounter with Romania, in 1999, proves that socialism "was not simply about security and economic stability but also identity formation and collective belonging" (p. 24). The ambiguities in the title of the book underline the complexity and inherent contradictions of the two transitions on which the author focuses her historical approach – the transition to socialism, on the one hand, and the transition to pluralism, on the other hand, from the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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