

Analytical sequencing of empirical research through recursive cartographies: a case study of a Romanian village

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Only when appropriated (or, more precisely, expropriated) do places become closed-in and closed-down sites – which, failing to be genuinely spaced-out, are spread thin in a technological landscape consisting merely of positions and distances, bare locations and barren relations. Such a wasted (and wasteful) site-scene lacks region and is destitute of depth. Yet places abound even in this blasted, desolate wasteland. Here, too, places are spread out...To spread out in places is to leave (behind) the extensiveness of homogeneous infinite space and to inhabit a new kind of space, one that is heterogeneous and open, genuinely spaced-out. If such space is everywhere open it is open precisely in places, for it is in them alone that space attains poignancy and plenitude...And if it is granted to us to see the limitless openness of that space, we shall see it most surely in the undelimited localities of our concrete bodily movements, that is to say, in our most engaged experiences of being-in-place. (Casey, 1997: 341 – 342)

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INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

In the first part of this chapter I explain the tool of recursive cartographies, a way of seeing that encompasses the promise of critically doing geography, without inscribing lines of demarcation between the realm of ‘nature’ and the realm of ‘culture’ and without underplaying either the political or the difference that place makes (see also Simandan 2001, 2005, 2006, 2009a, 2010). This theoretical tool is then put at work in the second half of the chapter through an empirical analysis of what was at the time one of the most media attention grabbing events in Romania - the discovery of the largest deposit of gold in Europe, at Roşia Montană, a village² in the Apuseni branch of The Carpathians (Simandan, 2002).

The interest of the media in this still unfolding story has been due not so much to purely economic considerations, but rather to the social, cultural, and environmental ramifications sprouting from this tangled affair. Since the exploitation of the gold requires the relocation of the village, and since at least some of the inhabitants still have strong attachments to their place (household, land, neighbours, public spaces), it has not been certain at all whether ‘Roşia Montană-Gold Corporation’ would eventually succeed in starting mining. My analysis brings out the dilemmas underwriting the potential reconfiguring –through mining - of this ‘hot spot’ on the map of Romania, by means of ‘recursive cartographies’, a way of seeing that can easily be used in many other research contexts.

² To be more exact, Roşia Montană is the name of both a village and of the commune of which it is a part (together with fifteen other villages). The commune Roşia Montană is one of the administrative subdivisions of Alba county.

RECURSIVE CARTOGRAPHIES OF SPATIAL FORMATIONS

One of my long standing research interests has been in describing the dynamic of European peripheries in ways that account for my positionality and that do not reinforce either the culture *versus* nature way of thinking or the space - place dichotomy (on this latter goal, one ambition was to bring empirical substantiation and theoretical richness to the imaginative account of Edward Casey, 1997; see the quotation opening this chapter).

The theoretical lens was labelled 'recursive cartographies' (Simandan, 2001) for two reasons. Firstly, by 'recursive' I pointed to a relational way of thinking, in the sense that it is the relationship between things that is of primary importance and shapes the 'fluidities' (Doel, 1999) of those things, and not, as we usually conceptualise, the things, which (then) produce the relationships between them! Putting the same issue in other words, things are the outcomes of relationships, and not vice-versa. The key aspect to emphasise here is that 'recursive' should NOT be taken as a synonym for dialectical. Secondly, the signifier 'cartographies' was chosen for its provocative ambivalence, its subversive position as an intermediary or messenger between epistemology (cartography as a discipline, in search for reliable knowledge), methodology (the map-making as craft and skill, as locus for the manufacturing of novelty, as a way of 'dwelling', as an expression of 'fabricated' knowledge, as a means to do power) and ontology (the world as a maximally detailed map that cartographers hope to mirror, knowing better than anyone else that the mirror will always be precarious and that what they mirror is an unsolvable and intriguing

mixture of the world and of themselves). Lurking within 'recursive cartographies' then, is what Derrida has called translation and transformation (Derrida, 1981: 20):

In the limits to which it is possible, or at least appears to be possible, translation practices the difference between signified and signifier. But if that difference is never pure, no more so is translation, and for the notion of translation we would have to substitute transformation; a regulated transformation of one language by another, of one text by another.

Seen through the prism of recursive cartographies, the (re)production of a village, region, or country (or of any spatial assemblage) is the unfolding of the interactions of three ontological categories: first, there are uniform, regular or *rhythmic processes*, such as the day - night cycle, the succession of the seasons, the migration of birds, the political calendar (elections every four years), the financial and economic grids of regulation, the set of laws operating in a given area at a given time, the cycle of the educational system (dates of entry, exams, holidays), the major bank holidays, etc; second, there are random, unpredictable, non-rhythmic processes, *events*, 'happenings', which once in a while provoke storms in the dull fabric woven by the first ontological category. Things included here range from a political assassination, to a heavy shower, to a phone call, to an earthquake, to a financial crisis, to the birth of a child, to the meeting of somebody or something new, etc. Third, there is the local or regional heritage or *legacy*, that is, that which already constitutes a given place, the pre-given or background on which the first two ontological categories unfold. In turn, this unfolding of rhythms and events recursively changes that background,

or, (in line with Casey's perspective), spaces (used here as a verb, not as the plural of space) and opens the 'initial' place. Obviously, places are not bounded, for they are nothing but active and co-produced tangles of (apparent) fixities and flows (see also Thrift, 1999; May & Thrift, 2001; Tuan, 2004; Sack, 2004; Cresswell, 2009; Smith et al, 2009; Kearney & Bradley, 2009). In Serres' words (in Latour & Serres, 1995: 26):

Winds create flows of air in the atmosphere; rivers make flows of water across land; rain, snow and hail are flows of water through the air...one element passes through others and they, conversely, pass through it. It supports or it transports. These reciprocating fluidities create such a perfect mixing that few places lack at least some knowledge of the state of the others. They receive this knowledge by means of messengers.

To take the case of the Romanian settlements, although they were all subjected to the utopian engineering induced through communist practices of governmentality (i.e. the 'uniform' homogenising *rhythms*) all across the country, they encountered and responded to it in different ways, according to what they had already been (*legacies*), before the regulation of the communist regime (Simandan, 2004). The same can be said when studying their different reshaping in the wake of the Revolution of 1989 (some were more affected by deindustrialisation than others, etc) or of the country's access into the European Union (the allocation of European funds across regions has been far from even, etc).

This simple three-fold way of seeing (legacies, rhythms, and events) will be deployed in what follows to unpack the economic, environmental, and cultural conflict associated with the discovery of gold at Roșia Montană.

ROȘIA MONTANĂ – LEGACIES, RHYTHMS, AND EVENTS

Roșia Montană is a 3,900 inhabitant village in the Apuseni branch of the Carpathians, and more specifically in the so-called Gold Quadrilateral. Apparently, it is Romania's oldest village, having had an uninterrupted history of more than 2,000 years. The Romans called the place *Alburnus Maior* and, from its inception, the rationale for this imperial settlement had been the exploitation of resources, especially gold. While the Roman *legacy* is no longer conspicuous in the local landscape, the same is not the case for the *legacies* of the 18th and 19th centuries, present and ontologically active in the rural settlement by means of more than one hundred houses, all declared historical monuments. The surrounding area is famous for its natural beauty, although the aggressive and environmentally unfriendly mining practices of the communist period left several scars.

The inhabitants call themselves 'moti', and so does a large fraction of the population of the Apuseni Mountains, as they encompass a historical – cultural region called 'The Country of the Moti', reputed for its spirit of independence and patriotism. What I have described so far is the legacy

component of the recursive cartographies producing and reproducing the place called Roşia Montană.

A more careful analysis of this heritage allows the identification of specific strands interacting with each other and producing the overall legacy of the past. The first of these strands is the underground, rich in gold, silver, vanadium, molybdenum, arsenic, bismuth, nickel and titanium. According to the Roşia Montană Project of GRD Minproc Limited (using the Canadian National Instrument 43 – 101) the measured resource is 138.08 Mt at 1.5 g/t gold for 6.85 Moz gold, the indicated resource is 163.78 Mt at 1.1 g/t gold for 5.92 Moz gold (subtotal of these is 301.85 Mt at 1.3 g/t gold for 12.77 Moz gold), and the inferred resource is 50.80 Mt at 0.8 g/t gold for 1.38 Moz gold. The deposit is a set of sub-volcanic intrusions embedded in Cretaceous sediments in the form of either disseminated gold-silver mineralisation or vein hosted gold-silver-minor base metals mineralisation, with the observation that it is associated with large amounts of pyrite³, an unfortunate fact which raises technological, environmental, and, economic concerns. If exploited as anticipated (500,000 Oz per year over a seventeen year mine life) the net profit would be at least 1.1 billion American dollars.

³ The weathering of pyrite during mining activities results in sulphate, which leads to acid mine drainage. The most important environmental concern, however, is tied to the MacArthur-Forrest process of gold cyanidation, the established technique for the extraction of gold from low-grade ore. Cyanide is highly poisonous and the risk of cyanide leakage from the gold mine is a major concern.

The second strand in the legacy of the village is the ‘natural’ landscape, praised as a ‘heavenly site’ by admiring tourists from all over Europe. The third is the Roman period, present through the ruins that lie under the village. Importantly, these include the recently discovered twenty altars with inscriptions to Roman gods. This component is of a high symbolic significance, given the nationalist sensibilities of the Romanians living in the contested land of Transylvania (all Roman ruins are discursively enrolled in the argument that Transylvania is the cradle of the Romanian people, a nation born from the mixing of the conquered tribes of the Daces with the Roman conquerors; see also Simandan, 2004, 2006). The fourth strand of legacies encompasses the aforementioned houses from the 18th and the 19th centuries, explicitly referred to as historical heritage and protected accordingly. Finally, a fifth strand one needs to take into consideration is the place as a whole, as a local universe produced as the successive generations exfoliated (Gil, 1998) their lives and deeds there. The journalists’ interviews with local people revealed that many of them have an intense sense of place, that they are affectively invested in the site where they and their ancestors have dwelled (for a more detailed discussion of the relation between hot, emotional cognition and economic growth, see Simandan, 2009b; see also Thrift, 2008 and Pile, 2010).

Several *events* at the turn of the millennium have dramatically changed both the traditional local *rhythms* of this place and its national and international reputation. Local lore has it that communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu was aware of the rich gold deposit at Roşia Montană, the area having been systematically investigated by Romanian geologists for

decades. Some claim that he himself cancelled his initial plans to start the exploitation, because of the strong opposition of the local population. Whether this claim is true or not remains to be seen; the solid fact is that in 2001 the Romanian media began to dedicate ample coverage to the then newly announced discovery of the most important gold deposit in Europe, at Roşia Montană. Journalists have literally invaded the village and actively contributed to the discursive construction of the ‘Roşia Montană affair’. It is a story of gold and of sense of place, of hopes and fears, of past and future; in other words, it is a story that sales well⁴.

The main tension in the story arises from the inconvenient fact that the gold ore is located right under the built area of the village. “Roşia Montană – Gold Corporation” is the name of a mixed venture in which the Romanian state has 19.3% of the shares (Minvest), local businessmen have 0.7%, and the Canadian company ‘Gabriel Resources’ holds the remaining 80%. Roşia Montană – Gold Corporation made tempting offers to the local people to get them to accept to re-locate their houses and dwellings, so that the exploitation of the deposit becomes possible. However, some of the locals have resisted this pressure and one significant subsequent *event* consisted in the creation of an organisation specifically dedicated to fighting against the plan to start the exploitation. The

⁴ The strong biases distorting these stories make them interesting objects of study in themselves. Compare, for example, the documentaries “Gold Futures” by Tibor Kocsis (where the locals are romantically depicted as fighting corporate capitalism, when in fact many of them have been lured by financial temptations and have chosen to sell their properties to Roşia Montană – Gold Corporation) and “Mine your own business” (a documentary partly funded by Gabriel Resources; the evil in this documentary is represented by the foreign environmental activists whose fight has delayed the beginning of the mining, and hence blocked the local residents’ way out of poverty).

Alburnus Maior Association includes not only many of the inhabitants of the village but also other sympathetic people from the Apuseni Mountains.

The association organised protests in Roşia Montană, Corna, Abrud, and Bucium, most notably between the 15th and the 18th of April 2002. Other three relevant *events* in the early years after the discovery of gold were the refusal of the village council of Bucium to grant the corporation a drilling license, the 2003 release of the report of the Romanian Academy, strongly opposing the beginning of the exploitation (Haiduc, 2003), as well as the media revelation that the general director of Gabriel Resources had allegedly been convicted twice (in 1990 and 1994) by the Australian authorities for possession of heroin. This revelation raised questions over the seriousness and reliability of the Canadian company. The anxiety generated by this conflict has been mounting for the local inhabitants. Some of them have withstood the systematic pressure to accept the relocation plans, acceptance equated by many with ‘selling one’s soul to the Devil’. However, by 2006, Roşia Montană Gold Corporation had already bought 60% of the properties required to begin the mining. As for the investors, they have had their own share of anxiety. To give just one example, the general director of Gabriel Resources fought back the media revelations and claimed that no less than sixty two financial institutions from United Kingdom, France, United States, and Australia are stock holders of the Canadian company and that the whole investment would reach four hundred million American dollars, being the largest gold mining investment project in the world. To understand the logic of recursive cartographies in this case study, it is important to note at this point that all

the aforementioned *events* have been partly determined by the *legacies* of the place, whether ‘physical’ (e.g. the gold ore) or ‘cultural’ (e.g. the long historical continuity of human dwelling, from the Romans to the present time). In turn (or recursively) these very legacies have been and will be altered by events such as those described above. The net effect of this dynamic unsettles and disjoints the everyday life of a village that no long ago was said to ‘epitomize the pastoral tranquillity of rural Europe’ (http://www.miningwatch.ca/publications/Rosia_Montana_rls_110302.html). By 2011, the events of the earlier years (2001-2010) have themselves become a *legacy* of proud resistance, but also a testimony to how sites of ‘pastoral tranquillity’ such as the upland landscapes of Romania are enrolled by global forces in the neoliberal logic of calculative rationality (cf. Castree, 2007a, 2007b, 2009).

The lens of recursive cartographies further highlights that a) these events are also partly determined by *rhythms* (grids of governmental regulation, uniform processes that tend to homogenise space and render it stable and predictable, etc.), that b) sometimes novel rhythms arise in the wake of some of these events, and that c) the very decision to introduce a new rhythm (e.g. law, governmental regulation, local bylaw, etc.) is in itself an event. The attractiveness of the investment in a gold exploitation at Roşia Montană is partly due, for example, to the decision of the Romanian government to include this region on its list of disadvantaged regions’. This inclusion means that the region enjoys a special regime/rhythm of economic regulation, designed in such a way so as to encourage massive economic investments (for instance, there are no corporate income tax on

profits, there are no restrictions on the repatriation of capital, and the investors enjoy indemnification against environmental damage provoked by previous economic agents). But ‘rhythms’ may also enter in conflict⁵ with one another, and this was the case when the local council of Roşia Montană approved the new Land Use Plan that allows the gold exploitation in the built area of the village, without having organised a local referendum to see if the local population agrees (the organisation of referendums for issues pertaining to settlement relocation is compulsory according to the Romanian legislation).

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this chapter was to show how to investigate the dynamic of spatial formations at various levels of analysis (village, city, region, country, continent) by means of a simple but penetrating theoretical tool: the metaphor of recursive cartographies. To recapitulate, this metaphor sees the world as the never-ceasing, vivid interplay of three ontological categories: legacies, events, and rhythms. While it is true that they are best seen as mutually constituted and therefore entangled, their conventional

⁵ By the summer of 2010, the main ambition of those who oppose the project has become to add Roşia Montană to the UNESCO World Heritage List. If this plan were to succeed, Roşia Montană would live under a new rhythm – an international regulatory regime that would protect its cultural heritage, would cultivate archaeological tourism, and would thwart the exploitation of gold for the foreseeable future (since gold mining would be a rhythm incompatible with the one entailed by UNESCO World Heritage List protection).

separation remains important for the analytical sequencing of the attack on one's research problem.

This way of seeing the world showcases geographical assemblages as being 'in their making' and gives a substantial temporal dimension to space and place. It also offers the benefit of a simple and memorable vocabulary that leaves behind the society – nature binary way of thinking (cf. Whatmore, 2002), and makes room for more integrated forms of geographical knowledge. For the specific case of Roşia Montană, this metaphor has allowed me to bring out the deeper lineages of the local conflict (e.g. between the desire for development and resource exploitation on one side and the constitutive need for belonging and identity preservation on the other; between economic growth and environmental preservation, etc.) and thereby suggest feasible strategies of resistance and locally-acceptable solutions (e.g. the power of well-organised events to generate a lasting impact on the rhythms that will govern the future trajectory of the place; the stakes of placing the site on UNESCO's World Heritage List, etc.).

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