

Neoliberalising Human Resources: The Case of a Marginal Trade Union

Dragos Simandan

Geography Department, Brock University, 500 Glenrindge Avenue, St. Catharines, Ontario, L2S
3A1, Canada, simandan@brocku.ca

To cite this paper: Simandan D 2004 'Neoliberalizing human resources: the case of a marginal trade union' *Akademios* I (2), pp. 7-26.

ABSTRACT

This paper introduces several theoretical tools for the analysis of the geographies of institutional transformation and inter-institutional competition under neoliberalism, through the case study of a peripheral trade union from Western Romania to which the author has had a privileged epistemic access. The first part of the paper discusses the truth-effects arising of this access, the second summarises the theoretical background of the research by means of the metaphor of 'polymorphous chorologies', the third excavates the history of the trade union through a five-fold grid of concern (including money and material resources, emotions, political networking, scale performance, and know-how), and the final, concluding part, theorises the failure of this trade union, and pleads for a form of active reflexivity in the practice of research.

Key words: truth effects, polymorphous chorologies, scale performance, place formations, embodiment, trade unionism

1. Truth effects

It has been unusual and somehow awkward for me to research and write this paper. The topic – the history of a local union from western Romania – is much more personal than it seems, because one of the key actors (actants) in this parochial saga has been my mother, who has worked all her professional life in trade unionism (in 2001, she managed to obtain an early retirement). It is also personal because I was myself involved in what has going on in the life of the city of Arad, the centre and main arena of this union. I left the city in 1996, to study for four years for my first degree in geography, at Cluj-Napoca, and then left Romania altogether, in 2000, to do a PhD in the UK. Nevertheless, the story of this trade union has often ‘haunted’ me, feeling that I have -one day- to write about it. When I say ‘I have to’, an entanglement of ethical issues and opportunities for a ‘hot’ research agenda lurk in my mind. I feel that the study of trade unionism in post-communist Romania has a lot to offer for understanding postsocialist transformations, the specificity of Romania’s transition, the power constellations imbued in place formations and scale performance (Simandan, 2001), as well as for enlarging and qualifying the theoretical and methodological agenda of the economic geographies of labour, in general (Martin, 2000), and of unionism, in particular (Herod, 1998, 2000).

From a methodological point of view, I have to say from the onset that I am much more interested in the intensive-like approach of labour geography, rather than the ‘extensive’ geography of labour. Instead of offering a view from ‘above’ of the whole polymorphous chorology of Romanian unionism, I chose to narrow down to a tiny bit of it and to situate my knowledge claims, both in terms of immersion in the story re-told here, and in terms of restricting my intervention to the tools of intensive, qualitative methodologies. Among these, I would begin by mentioning my ‘observant participation’ (Thrift, 2000) as a) inhabitant of the city where the manifest effects of this trade union have unfolded, b) member of the family of one of its key actors (my mother), status which has offered me the chance to ‘grow up’ with the multiple (biased, but / therefore ‘authentic’) stories of the multiple episodes of the union, as lived and perceived by my mother, c) occasional visitor of the ‘headquarter’ of the union, a large room with tables, chairs, a telephone, and

an old-style mechanical typing machine. This aside, to enrich my understanding of the multifarious dimensions of the research topic, I also used oral histories, in depth interviews and focus groups (done in August 2001), and a large amount of archival work. The latter has been possible because the union has been so small, with few power positions, my mother's included (to be sure, in Romania access to information is particularly difficult, as institutions assume the lack of transparency to be 'normal'. Furthermore, the legislation defends their tendencies to hide information away from the intruding eye of the researcher).

The structure of the paper is quite straightforward. These *introductory notes* concerned with situating my knowledge claims and specifying the methodological take, are followed by a *sketchy account* of my theoretical (ontological and epistemological-cum-political) position, which explains why I melt the normally-expected paragraph setting the background of my research within the Romanian context, with the bits of that 'narrow' research of the OFTU. Indeed, the depiction of what has happened in Romania since the fall of the communist regime in 1989, and of the cultural and economic profile of the city and county of Arad – the arena where this labour union has enacted, more or less conspicuously, its performances- penetrate *the main body* of the paper, which is about the birth and becoming of the Organisation of the Free Trade Unions (from now on OFTU), Arad. This is analysed from a critical geographical perspective, as enmeshed in place formation, scale performance, network (re)building, and the reproduction of fragile political-cum-economic regimes of transition.

The account allows for some opening lines of dialogue with the literatures of economic geographies of labour and trade unionism, urban social geographies, geographies of power and resistance (Sharp, Routledge, Philo, and Paddison, 2000), embodiment and performativity (Thrift, 2000a, 2000b), Gregson and Rose, 2000, Dewsbury, 2000, Harrison, 2000), legal geography (Blomley, 1994), as well as with the East European theorists of postsocialist transformations (Mungiu, 1995, Barbu, 1998, Tismaneanu, 1992, Pasti, Miroiu, Codita, 1997, Daianu, 2000, Sava, 2000, Kolodko, 2000). Some *conclusions* will follow.

2. Polymorphous chorologies

It is just for theoretical clarifications that the paper includes this paragraph, as I believe that the inside /outside, text / context divide is more of our own making than real, 'out there'. Therefore, I prefer to use the concept of (operational) scale (the adjective 'operational' helps avoiding confusions with the traditional classifications of scale in methodological scale, geographical scale, and cartographic scale) understood as 'contexts' collapsed within a given unit of analysis. Romania and the county of Arad have shaped and have been shaped by (not to significant extent, but an overdeterminist perspective, e.g. Gibson-Graham, 1996, would not put too much on the hierarchy of influences!) OFTU, and in analysing it I am analysing the alleged 'contexts'. The aforementioned 'unit of analysis' is in fact the epistemological language for speaking of what constitutes a 'polymorphous chorology', term by which I try to capture the interplay between epistemology and ontology, moving beyond the representationalist / mimetic manoeuvre that separates us, the knowing subjects, from the objects of enquiry, from the reality 'out there'. Polymorphous chorology is also a convenient trope for encompassing the recent critiques of actor-network theory, and for doing away with a mode of thinking that still separates between things and processes, stasis and change, (Cartesian) subject and object, agency and structure.

Polymorphous chorology is an ontology and a way of seeing which maintains that:

- a) Power is everywhere, but not everything is power;
- b) There is overdetermination, but only some determinants are significant in a given constellation of interactions; the stake of overdetermination lies not so much in understanding / accounting for what has happened so far, but in the inherent impossibility to rigorously anticipate what is 'around the corner' (Thrift, 2001);
- c) Events and happenings cannot be divorced from routines and everyday practices; they do not bring radical novelty and Otherness only, but also the old, the heritage, cumulative causation, path dependency. They are both *inputs* to flows of change / networks, but also *outputs* of those very same flows / networks;

- d) Agency is not separable from structure: structure makes agency and agency (i.e. the capacity to have effects) makes structures;
- e) Social reproduction is not stasis, or something opposed to revolutionary change. Social reproduction is itself change, a change that occurs at the intersection of events and creativity with heritage, with what was before, may it be burden or asset. It is only the *trompe l'oeil* of transitional models (i.e. dividing the historical time in different 'periods' separated by thresholds that mark a shift from one historical regime / 'order of things' to a novel one, that has little in common with what was before) that leads us take unquestioned the idea that there is such thing as relatively homogenous, 'static' historical periods;
- f) Time is space is difference – rather than looking how these three assumed ontologically distinct things interact, we would do better looking at how they equate with each other (e.g. how space is difference, how difference is space, the difference that space makes, the space that makes a difference, etc);
- g) The grids of regulation are not inescapable and are heterogeneously performed by humans, offering sites of resistance, windows of opportunity, enabling potentials for undermining other grids of regulation. Capitalism itself is not something 'universal'. In Thrift's words (2001, p. 378):

...the new political economy is being constructed through new spatial forms that are not just incidental to some supposed overlaying capitalist dynamic, but are what capitalism is.

- h) In the same spirit one has to rethink neoliberalism, and my empirical investigations in its 'cultural circuit' in Romania are convergent with Peck and Tickell's attempt to re-theorize it (2002, p.126):

...neoliberalism's potency stems from its character as an institutionally-reproduced rule regime: perplexingly, neoliberalism is neither an extraterrestrial force nor is it conveniently bounded in institutional terms; it is a complex combination of, inter alia, structural power, normalized rule regimes, discursive practices, codified norms and policy conventions, and hegemonic (North Atlantic) geopolitical and geoeconomic interests...neoliberalism's contradictory (*sic*) political-economic nature is mediated by its demonstrated capacity to morph into different institutional forms, across space and scale as well as through time...neoliberalism's capacity for internal transformation and political reproduction may have previously been underestimated.

- i) Reality is not completely transparent, we cannot get to know it by just conscientiously following prescribed rules of the right scientific method. Our knowledge is inescapably situated and is a matter of power and gains / losses constellations. In order to know something, we necessarily restrict our spatial-temporal diagram, through being immersed in the opening of one project, opening predicated upon the closure of other virtually possible cognitive projects (see also Hetherington's and Lee's, 2000, use of the 'blank figure');
- j) Our knowledge endeavours are largely inscribed by the assumption of mirroring the world, and to a much lesser extent by the fascinating perspective of materialist semiotics and virtualism (Miller, 2000). As performers of stabilised truth regimes, we are not only knowledge seekers, but also knowledge effectors: we generate truth-effects, as Foucault would have put it. And truth-effects generate us (see also Butler, 1990, 1993, 1997);
- k) Polymorphous chorologies are anything but neat ontological constituencies. The lubricating function of networks is troubled by their intransitivities (Law, 2000), blanks, heritage functions, which all make the 'network' (or rather polymorphous chorology) a rough constituency;
- l) Everything is context-sensitive, including the immutable mobiles. Contexts are always already within and the concept of operational scale is intended to capture the inside ness of the outside, as necessary step for subsequent political undertakings;
- m) Everything (including discourses and representations) is performance and performance is everything. Scale is also performed (Simandan, 2001), and makes the subject formations to be spatial. Instead of Cartesian subjects, we are archipelagos of dividual actants, fluidentities (Doel, 1999);
- n) 'The nonhuman' is more an analytical category, which makes social science possible. Understanding /explanation that ignores it is anything but geography (see also Whatmore, 1999).

What difference would the above theoretical lens produce when deployed in an empirical analysis? I will tackle and experiment this in the following paragraph, where context is seen as within my unit of analysis (the historical geography of OFTU).

3. Power-geometries of inter-unionist competition

Under the communist system, labour unionism was reduced to a monolithic, obedient, and politically-naïve organisation: ‘The General Union of Trade Unions of Romania’ (GUTUR, in Romanian UGSR). All people who were working were its members, and it was politically instrumentalised as a tool of control and propaganda of the unique party: The PCR (i.e. The Romanian Communist Party). In the wake of the Revolution of 1989 (when dictator Ceausescu and the communist system were violently removed), GUTUR was dismantled and a myriad of small trade unions, located at the level of each economic unit (factory, agricultural associations, etc.), emerged and started to forge alliances and mobilise power, in their search for institutional consolidation.

To be sure, the social order of the Ancient Regime has been disrupted by an event – the Revolution- that brought about novelty, but this is not to say that events are nothing more or less than ‘radical Otherness’ (Hetherington, Law, 2000). This event did not emerge out of nothing, but was the outcome of a particular configuration of causal relations, configuration that engendered the failure of the communist social order (see also Smith and Swain, 1998). Furthermore, the profusion of trade unions and their conflict over power, unionizable workers, and legitimacy, were performed by people with their own interests, seeking positions of leadership and monopolies over more or less peripheral crossroads of the fast-changing social network. I say ‘fast-changing’ and not ‘new’ because a lot of what was before 1989 remained unchanged, or suffered just rearrangements in the postcommunist assemblages of social reproduction. Novelty in this case is a synonym for ‘re-arranged’, which in turn, is not necessarily synonym with ‘dislocated’.

The inter-unionist fight / competition unfolded at different intensities and within specific power-geometries (Massey, 1993), but there are, I suspect, five main threads that have woven its fabric: *money and material resources* in general (the general agreement was that the assets of the former GUTUR be distributed to the new unions in direct proportion

with their number of members), *knowledge* (in the form of specific know-how about unionism and legal matters), *emotions* (and the early 1990s have repeatedly displayed the visceral at the heart of the public space), *political networking* (the establishing of privileged relations with certain political parties), and *scale performance* (referring to both the *geographical scale of inter-union alliances* – e.g. local-horizontal, or national-vertical- and to the ‘*maximising scale effects*’ strategies, such as intense propaganda, or violent strikes).

The Organisation of Free Trade Unions, Arad was born on 19th of June 1990 (the achievement of legal status), having as founding members fifteen small unions. The date of birth is not without symbolism, as a few days before, the whole country was on the political edge, given the violent miners’ ‘strike’ from the Jiu Valley and their devastation of numerous public institutions in Bucharest. The trajectories of these two unionist groups (one –OFTU, the second- The League of Miners’ Unions from the Jiu Valley) ever since represent the two ends of the broad spectrum of unionisation in post-Communist Romania. The first has chosen to play according to the rules and without ‘maximising scale effects’ strategies. The second has chosen the much more successful path of playing against the rules and for the imposition of new rules, and has done so through the practice of ‘illegal violence’ (Campeanu, 2001) and through cleverly challenging scale relations by defying in practice the alleged spatial ‘fixity’ of labour (Simandan, 2001).

The OFTU was a means of survival for the former staff of the GUTUR, the ‘giant’ union dismantled after the Revolution. Shifting from one regime of work –safe, routinised, predictable-, to a new regime – unsafe, unpredictable, requiring proactive behaviour and rapid reactions- was not easy task for them, and the *emotions* embodied in these transformations (fear, anxiety, the boldness of the desperate) had been witnessed by me daily, by discussing the agitated contours of change with my mother, one of the ‘brains’ in the materialisation of OFTU. And this latter remark brings about another thread of the fabric of postcommunist unionisation: the power of expert-*knowledge* in the dynamic of the early 1990s. The GUTUR staff survived the transformation in virtue of having the knowledge in such important matters as the legal regime of unionisation, labour

organisation (e.g. collective bargaining), and social protests, the working of the administration in this field, the bureaucratic details that lubricate an efficient unionist network, etc.

The emergence of a considerable number of very small unions (basically, immediately after the Revolution, each plant had a distinct union, and sometimes within the same plant there were several unions, especially as a result of embodied and emotional conflicts between too many would-be leaders) induced the formation of an ad-hoc group of unionist leaders who didn't have any experience or previous preparation in this area. They needed the expert knowledge of the not too numerous GUTUR staff. The formation of alliances of small unions has been in a large measure the result of this need, the GUTUR staff being the driving force in selling their own expertise for the price of securing a job in the new unionist alliances arousing those early years. My mother has been in this position, and using the rhetoric of 'the larger the union, the more successful it would be' and putting a lot of energy and insight in a sustained campaign of propaganda, she managed to increase the initial number of unions member of OFTU, from 15 (founding members), to 63 in 1993.

Viewing this from above / nowhere (or solely from the cold inscriptions making an archive), one neutral / external observer would take the process of unionist alliance building to be very normal, the result of quest for larger influence, but from within / below, the things reveal to be more messy, mundane, and emotional (and see Halford and Savage, 1997) or, in sum, an embodied performance of a 'cultural circuit' (Thrift, 2001) of unionism that tries to reproduce itself with minimised damage, from one 'rule regime' (Peck, Tickell, 2002) to another (the postcommunist regime).

With regard to political networking and scale performance, OFTU has adopted the perdant strategy of *neat discontent*. Its official documents stated from the very beginning the total political independence of the organisation, this attitude being grounded in idealist principles of unionism in general. Though politically independent (i.e. not supporting a certain political party), OFTU was involved in the business of politics,

trying to interact with the political class at two levels and for two main purposes. The first and most prominent level was the local and regional one. Organised at regional scale (incorporating many, but not the majority of the small unions within the county of Arad), the power of the union and its weakness have depended on the power of the local and regional levels of regulation within the national grid of regulatory rules and practices. And their power has been quite weak ever since the Revolution, although the general trend has been towards increasing their roles. However, OFTU was involved in negotiating with local and regional authorities specific problems such as food provision, housing, fuel provision, fighting criminality, better local and regional protection for disadvantaged social groups, etc. Furthermore, the local and regional authorities have served as representatives of the central government in the territory, quality in which they have been approached for issues pertaining to the negotiation of the guaranteeing of the workplace, of the minimum level of income, for establishing central corrections between inflation and the workers' income, etc.

It has to be said at this point, that at least in the period 1990-1996, the Romanian transition was quite different from what has happened in other East European countries, in that instead of shifting from communism to a period of shock therapy, and then to a regime of leftist concerns, elected with the hopes to re-equilibrate the social cleavages and injustices arousing during and after the shock therapy, in Romania it was a shift from communism directly to a leftist government, made mainly of former communists disguised in social democrats. Analysts have in general agreed (e.g. Daianu, 2000) that the very timid reforms undertaken in those six years had rather been the result of *globalising* forces which imposed their agendas in the governmental strategies, as *price* to be paid if the country wants to become integrated in the European Union and the NATO, than the outcome of sincere political will for reform of the hitherto political leaders (many of whom came back to power in 2000). For trade unionism, the significance of this specific mode of transition has been multifarious, but the first thing to signal is that this very mode of transition was itself largely influenced by the strong unionist movements and their forging of political alliances. Fearing the revolt of the people, (revolt that could have taken two forms: first, public violent outbursts, second, electoral punishment), the

political class, driven by the desire of maintaining its power positions unthreatened, has adopted a ‘two steps forward, one step back’ policy, the steps forward (forward the implementing of neoliberalism and the opening of the economy to the global economic actants) being imposed by external pressures, the step back being the necessary compromise with internal social movements fearing the consequences of the shift to neoliberal capitalism.

In all this period, therefore, the political power of the central government had been particularly high, and the solution to most problems raised by unions was to be found at the central, rather than the local and regional level.

OFTU has been disadvantaged from the onset by its horizontal structure, but has attempted to play its agenda at the national level also, by becoming member of broader alliances of unions, with national influence. The first of this was CNSRL, but its involvement at central level in deep political entanglements and its merger with FRATIA, decided without consultation with the local levels, has led the OFTU leaders to leave it in September 1993, and to become a founding member, at the end of the same year, of another large unionist confederation, CCSN, which has proved to be rather ineffective in the last period. Meanwhile, other vertically structured unions, with direct representatives at central level, and who have chosen to be politically involved, have been more effective in protecting the interests of their members and in mobilising vectors of unionist power whenever disadvantageous decisions have been taken.

However, as it was mentioned before, OFTU has been performing the business of politics, not only at two main levels (local-regional and central, with the focus on the former), but also with two main purposes.

The first was ‘substantial’ – to defend the interests of its members at various levels of governance, but partly for reasons already discussed (e.g. lack of effective alliances at national level), partly for reasons to be debated later on in this paper, it has failed to defend the most important things: the jobs and the income of its members. The second - making sure that OFTU is very *visible* in the media and among politicians and entrepreneurs - was ‘superficial’, propagandistic, but from the point of view of the OFTU

staff, as substantial for securing the future existence of the organisation (and of their own jobs) as the first purpose. Let me draw here a parallel with what political theorist Barry Hindess (1996; see also Clegg, 2000) considers two opposed conceptions of power: one is the *simple capacity* concept of power, rooted in the work of Hobbes (in this view, power is the capability to act), the second is the *legitimate capacity* concept of power, rooted in the work of John Locke (in this latter view, power is about having the legitimate right to act). For the case of OFTU, the two purposes of vigorous public interventions have interacted in curious constellations, in that the search for institutional power has been based mainly on maintaining legitimacy and advertising it in the media, but with the cost of a diminished capacity to act effectively for its members. To be more specific, the OFTU staff has seen the most influential source of legitimacy as the political independence of the organisation, but whereas it has undoubtedly provided legitimacy in comparison with other, politically affiliated unions, it has also contributed to undermine its simple capacity power. In turn, the felt and perceived lack of capacity power is, in a long run, the most influential undermining factor of legitimacy and overall power altogether.

The propagandistic activities of OFTU are worth insisting on, for they give a feeling of the helplessness its staff has experienced, and capture well the embodied performance of intra- and inter-institutional relations, of place formations, as well as the coping with the steep slope of decline in the second half of the 1990s. Through propaganda, OFTU has acquired at the local level discursive power and legitimacy. Whenever an important meeting was taking place at the level of the local and regional administration, OFTU asked to be invited and tried to impose on the agenda the most pressing aspects its members were confronted with. When the senators of the county were visiting Arad, they were invited to the OFTU office for debates. Local and national elections have also been good opportunities for making OFTU conspicuous for the public opinion. Although declared politically neutral, OFTU invited the candidates to explain to its members how they would solve their problems in case they were elected.

Place formations include networks of organised celebration of the main symbols and past events that have decisively shaped that place. In the wake of the Revolution of 1989, Romanian public life had as a distinct mark the blossoming of public celebratory events, as places were trying to rebuild their identities after half of century of uniform, strictly regulated (and almost exclusive) celebration of communism. OFTU was involved in these sorts of events, as they were excellent opportunities for establishing a presence, forging networks, being meditated, passing as important by virtue of being around with important people and institutions. There are some spicy details giving a sense of how this propaganda was actually an embodied performance reflecting micro-geometries of power / knowledge within OFTU. Thus, the OFTU leader has always represented the organisation at public meetings and has always signed the official documents stating the position of the organisation, but as he does not have higher education, all these documents -and public participations- were actually written / prepared by my mother, who was working full time as principal counsellor and secretary of OFTU. Reading the official documents of the organisation, and knowing the other, 'messy' side of the story, one cannot but smile at the careful fabrication of these papers.

Coming back to the problem of power, two significant vectors have played the key-role in the reproduction of the organisation: one is money; the other is the distribution and performance of roles within OFTU. In the first years of activity, there haven't been substantial financial problems, as there were many members, people's trust in unionism hadn't yet diminished significantly, and the economic restructuring and the unemployment associated with it were still low (until 1996, the country was under a rather leftist regime, doing some neoliberal reforms because of external pressures). Funding became a major problem towards 1995, when the number of members who were not paying regularly their fees amounted to nineteen out of forty -six unions. This state of affairs became much worse in the second half of the 1990s, and it was both a *major cause* and a *major effect* of the diminishing power of OFTU. To begin with, the number of staff was reduced by the end of the 1990s to a single person, whose income was shaking as it depended exclusively on the fees paid by the unionist members. The accountant and the legal consultant of the OFTU left their jobs because of the organisation's impossibility to

provide them with a decent income. OFTU had to abandon some of the more expensive means of propaganda, and as early as June 1995, its official 'Rapport regarding OFTU's activity between June 1991- June 1995' included a note about the impossibility of the staff to participate at important unionist meetings in Bucharest, because of lack of sufficient money for transportation.

The second vector of power outlined above refers to the performance of roles within the organisation and to the regime of functioning that has shaped its power-geometry. The Founding Act of OFTU stipulates three structures of decision: the Assembly of Representatives, which is the supreme forum, meeting only once every four years, the Managerial Council, meeting once per month (it is composed of all the leaders of the unions that constitute OFTU), and the Operative Bureau, meeting weekly. This structure of power created the appearance of democracy and of effective means of internal control, but in reality, it was a convenient way for concentrating power and favouring the reproduction of the same power relations. The structure that has really mattered is the Operative Bureau, composed of seven members: the president, five vice-presidents, and the secretary. They used to meet every Thursday at 12 o'clock in order to debate the events of the week and to approve the official documents of the organisation prepared by its secretary. But there is more to the story than this dry depiction offered by the archives. To begin with, the already mentioned role of my mother within OFTU reflects the general state of affairs in the Romanian society, in that the promotion of women into 'active life' realised by the communist regime has not largely dislocated the patriarchal values of the traditional Romanian way of being. Women may be active, but for the benefit of men, who happen to hold most decisional positions. The way her work was passed into her boss' portfolio, who was just signing, is illustrative for a mechanism of organisational survival in which the price of maintaining within was conscious *self-erasure* (in 1997, OFTU launched a small journal for propaganda, and although my mother was behind most contributions, her name did not figure in the editorial board).

A further detail that gives colour to the story refers to what was actually happening at the usual meetings held on Thursday. After some preliminary debates, the 'meeting' was

being transformed into a very friendly one, which included food and alcoholic drinks. This is not without significance in the reproduction of the organisation. Confronted with diminishing power, towards the end of the 1990s, that meeting was almost everything that has remained behind the label OFTU. Some leaders happy to be leaders and to enjoy their (imagined) power were still giving life to a body called OFTU by performing the weekly ritual that was symbolising (and was) its existence. A final detail about performance and emotions refers to the role of the visceral in the shaping of alliances between OFTU and other confederations of unions. In a series of in-depth interviews taken in August 2001, it actually emerged that the future of the organisation was not necessarily bleak. It could join a larger union, with connections and influence at the national level. So far, it has not done so, because the OFTU leader would lose his power, and he definitely does not want to.

4. Theorising failure / the failure of theorising

I mentioned in the brief theory of ‘polymorphous chorologies’ that indeed everything is influencing everything (overdetermination), but also that not all influences are equally important. In what follows, I attempt to systematise the most significant factors that have led to the decline of OFTU in the late 1990s, bearing, however, in mind another point done in the second paragraph: that things are not transparent, waiting there to be discovered and arranged in our grids of epistemic vision, but that blanks, shadows, imbricate flows, our situatedness, and the continually changing nature of things prevent us from making really true the fiction of a representationalist regime of truth. To give an example, I pointed already to the ambiguous and ambivalent role money has played in the chains of causation: the failure to obtain money in enough amounts was both cause and effect of OFTU’s decline. As more than one factor has contributed to the decline, the way we prioritise one’s influence over the others is both the cause and the effect of ... truth-effects.

The observation I tried to make in the above lines is that the failure of theorising has to be introduced as first step when theorising something (in our case, failure). Too much self-

reflexivity is not necessarily paralysing research / theorising. I rather believe that it is of help for the act of (substantive) theorising.

The analysis of the birth, growth, and decline of OFTU has revealed some important *causes of the decline*: a) the horizontal (local-regional) structure of OFTU, in conditions in which the real centres of power were still held at the national governmental level. The unions with a vertical organisation, directed on negotiation at the highest political level, have been much more successful; b) the political neutrality of OFTU, which, although provided legitimacy, has jeopardised the possibility for shameful, but ‘healthy’ arrangements with parts of the political class; c) the personal ambitions of OFTU leaders, unwilling to abandon their positions for the sake of placing the organisation in a much more effective network of unionist alliances.

These aside, the decline took a steeper slope after 1996, when the hitherto leftist government was replaced by a right-oriented one, which took more radical reforms, without however reaching the intensity of ‘shock therapies’. To be sure, the new Prime Minister, Victor Ciorbea, was before 1996 a prominent unionist leader, who then got involved in the political competition. Once at power, he managed to diminish the potential danger of social disorder that could have been caused by unions outraged by the too intense rhythms of the intended structural adjustment. The mechanism created for *taming trade unions* was the so-called ‘Commission for the social dialogue between government and trade unions’. It was organised both at the central and at the local level. The unions had monthly meetings with the representatives of the government in each county, advanced their requests, which were then passed to the central level for finding an acceptable compromise. This was a brilliant mechanism for slowing down the rhythm and vigour of unionist activities, as the whole process of dialogue, negotiation, transmission, and re-negotiation was time-consuming and allowed the government to secure social order in a period when the chief objective was to accelerate the country’s integration in NATO.

The new government undermined unionism in an *indirect* way also, through the outcomes of structural adjustment. These have included the downsizing or even closing of some giant plants, which made the rate of unemployment go high. In some more detail (see

table 1), the previous governments also undertook reforms, so that in 1994 the unemployment rate was as high as 10.9%, but after 1994, during the leadership of prime-minister Nicolae Vacaroiu, the populist measures intended to ensure further electoral support led to an unemployment rate of only 6.6% in 1996.

Ciorbea's government (which begun in the autumn of 1996) abandoned these populist strategies, so in 1999 the unemployment reached 10.4%. The most affected sector was industry: the active population of the country per branches of economic activity encompassed 29.2% in industry in 1996, but only 24.4% in 1999 (with a corresponding increase in agriculture).

In the case of the county of Arad, where OFTU has been based, most of the giant plants underwent major dislocations, with large parts of their workers being fired: in 1990 there were a total of 172 600 workers, whilst in 1999 there were only 106000 left. Among the most prominent giant plants of the communist era one could mention UTA (textiles), which shifted from 5000 employees, to only cca. 100 nowadays, ASTRA (railway cars), which downsized from 10000 employees to less than 4000, ARIS (machine-tool building), which remained with only cca 500 of its initial 7000 employees, IMAR (wood processing), which fired half of its initial 5000 workers, etc. ('initial' means here the starting point of transition: 1990; Arad is a rather old industrial city- and see Sadler and Thompson, 2001). Those left without a job usually 'chose' (or rather the 'situation' has chosen for them) one of the following paths and projects (Hagerstrand, 1982): early retirement, emigration in Western countries, working *illegally* in the 'black / grey' economy, small commerce (favoured by the very short distance to the Romanian / Hungarian border), migration back to the countryside and work of the land, etc.

However, two processes have been particularly relevant for understanding the decline of OFTU: first, the fact that many plants maintained a large number of employees without paying them accordingly: it was like a tacit social agreement: 'we won't fire you, so you won't have to bear the psychological pressure of being unemployed; nevertheless, as the economy is down, we won't pay you properly either'. The hint of this strategy for

understanding the OFTU decline comes from the fact that although there were still enough workers and union members left, they were not really paid, and they were not paying their union quotas either.

The second process of large impact upon the decline of unionisation has been the emergence of *anti-legal, wild capitalist relations* between capital owners and workers within the newly created small and medium size companies. Foreign investors, who exploit the very cheap workforce for the manufacturing of textiles, shoes, etc, own many of them. Although the laws stipulate the right of unionisation for all workers, many of those employed in these new companies fear they might lose their job if they attempt to unionise (there were such cases). In other words, for the OFTU the problem was not so much the diminution of the number of workers, but, on one side, the existence of a large group of pseudo-workers (employed just formally), and, on the other side, the emergence of new companies centred on the exploitation of workforce, including as a means of this exploitation the discouragement of unionisation in the context of the general disrespect of the law.

This latter point needs further elaboration (which will be the object of another paper); suffice to say here that post-revolutionary Romania should best be understood as the formation and reproduction of what I call the '*anti-legal society*'. In other words, a survival society in which one chief mechanism for making things go (or keeping the social networks functional) is the disrespect of the law, at all levels. Law is broken not only by villains, but also by police and judges, not only by companies, but also by lay people in their everyday business of life (a CURS survey from October-November 2001, revealed that 64% of the population believed that Romania doesn't have good laws, 73% agreed with the fact that in Romania not all citizens are equal in front of the law, and 84% endorsed the view that laws, may them be good or bad, are not applied!). This tacitly shared mechanism works because the structures supposed to implement and control the legal affairs and to punish those who ignore / break the law, are themselves loci that work because of, and through this mechanism.

The causes of this social pathology are dubious, and entangled in promiscuous combinations such as that between the pervasive remainders of the (reproduced) practices of traditional, pre-modern social groups (based on personal relations and informal, tacit rules), the coping strategies developed by people under the communist regime (underground tactics of making life liveable), and the inherent windows of anti-legal opportunity that inform the muddy spaces of transition almost everywhere in Eastern Europe.

For the fate of OFTU, the anti-legal society has meant *much more* than the hydra of neoliberalism. It is *not so much* privatisation (and structural adjustment) that has undermined its power, as there have been: a) its perdant commitment to (legal) practices of 'neat discontent', by which I refer to traditional ways of unionist activity, as opposed with the other, more successful unions, which owed their triumph to the (illegal) practices of 'scale-maximising strategies' (the most illustrative case is that of the miners' strikes, who went several times to Bucharest and practised 'illegal violence' to impose their point of view); and b) the downsizing and even erasure of union activities by capital owners who have exploited the unpunished possibility to break / not to respect the laws which stipulate rights for the workforce. Without knowing my above thoughts about the most important causes of the OFTU decline and without having too much time to think for an elaborate answer, its leader told me in an interview:

Darling, we lost because of two things: first, because we have been too kind, second, because in this country there is no respect for law.

*

In this paper, I attempted to present the gendered history of a small, marginal trade union, history immersed in the broader saga of postsocialist transformation and of the city and county of Arad in particular. The theoretical framework underwriting my account has been dubbed 'polymorphous chorology', a figure of vision that tries to capture the interplay between epistemology and ontology, the situated and incomplete character of our knowledge, the processual and performative nature of things, and to qualify Actor-

Network Theory, by incorporating some of its recent criticisms, but also some qualifications to these very criticisms (e.g. I distanced myself from the thesis of the alleged ‘radical Otherness of the event’).

At the intersection of theory, methodology, and style of presentation, I proposed a narrative informed by the rethinking of (operational) scale as contexts (e.g. Romania, Arad, trade unionism in general) collapsed within the unit of analysis (OFTU), manoeuvre which could undermine some recent criticisms / reluctances (e.g. Martin, Sunley, 2001) towards the apparent political impotence and theoretical irrelevance of studying not what is structural or at the centre, but the ‘marginal, sensational, transitory, obscure, and symbolic’ (Martin, Sunley, 2001, p. 156).

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank *Ron Johnston, Nigel Thrift, and Adam Tickell* for reading and commenting on an earlier version of this paper and the participants in the *Geographies of Labour* Session, at the Annual Meeting of RGS-IBG, Belfast, 2002, for their insightful comments on my presentation.

References

Barbu D, 1998, “Destinul colectiv, servitutea involuntara, nefericirea totalitara: trei mituri ale comunismului romanesc” (i.e. “Collective destiny, unwilling servitude, totalitarian unhappiness: three myths of Romanian communism”) in *Miturile comunismului romanesc (i.e. The myths of communist Romania)* Ed L Boia (Nemira, Bucuresti) pp 175 – 187

Blomley N K, 1994, *Law, space and the geographies of power* (Guilford Press, New York)

Butler J, 1990, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, London)

Butler J, 1993, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (Routledge, London)

Butler J, 1997, *Excitable Speech. A politics of the performative* (Routledge, London)

Campeanu P, 2001 “Cozia: inainte si dupa” (i.e. “Cozia: before and after”) *Sfera Politicii* **67** pp 1 – 9 (online version)

Clegg St, 2000, "Theories of power" *Theory, culture & society* **17(6)** 139 – 147

Daianu D, 2000, "Incotro se indreapta tarile postcomuniste? Curente economice in pragul secolului" (i.e. "Towards what are East European countries going? Economic currents at the beginning of the century") (Polirom, Iasi)

Dewsbury J-D, 2000, "Performativity and the event: enacting a philosophy of difference" *Environment and planning D: Society and Space* **18** 473 - 496

Doel M, 1999, *Poststructuralist geography* (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh)

Gibson-Graham J K, 1996, *The end of capitalism* (Blackwell, Oxford)

Gregson N, Rose G, 2000, "Taking Butler elsewhere: performativities, spatialities and subjectivities" *Environment and planning D: Society and Space* **18** 433 – 452

Hagerstrand T, 1982, "Diorama, path and project" *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geographie* **73** 326 - 356

Halford S, Savage M, 1997, "Rethinking restructuring: embodiment, agency, and identity in organisational change", in *Geographies of Economies* Eds R Lee, J Wills, (Arnold, London) ch.9 pp 108 – 117

Harrison P, 2000, "Making sense: embodiment and the sensibilities of the everyday" *Environment and planning D: Society and Space* **18** 497 - 517

Herod A, 1998, "Theorising trade unions in transition" in *Theorising transition. The political economy of post-communist transformations* Eds J Pickles, A Smith (Routledge, London) pp 197 - 217

Herod A, 2000, "Labour unions and economic geography" in *A Companion to Economic Geography* Eds E Sheppard, T Barnes, (Blackwell, Oxford) pp 341 – 358

Hetherington K, Law J, 2000, "After networks" *Environment and planning D: Society and Space* **18** 127 – 132

Hetherington K, Lee N, 2000, "Social order and the blank figure" *Environment and planning D: Society and Space* **18** 169 – 184

Hindess B, 1996, *Discourses of power: from Hobbes to Foucault* (Blackwell, Oxford)

Kolodko G W, 2000, *From shock to therapy. The political economy of postsocialist transformation* (Oxford University Press, Oxford)

Law J, 2000, "Transitivities" *Environment and planning D: Society and space* **18** 133 – 148

Martin R, 2000, "Local Labour Markets: Their Nature, Performance, and Regulation", in *The Oxford Handbook of Economic Geography* Eds G L Clark, M P Feldman, M S Gertler (Oxford University Press, Oxford) pp 455 – 476

Martin R, Sunley P, 2001, "Rethinking the 'Economic' in Economic Geography: broadening our vision or losing our focus?" *Antipode* **33** 148 – 161

Massey D, 1993, "Power-geometry and a progressive sense of place" in *Mapping the futures: local cultures, global change* Eds J Bird, B Curtis, T Putnam, G Robertson, L Tickner (Routledge, London) pp 59 – 69

Miller D, 2000, "Virtualism-the culture of political economy" in *Cultural Turns / Geographical Turns* Eds I Cook et al (Prentice Hall, London) pp 196-213

Mungiu A, 1995, *Romanii dupa '89. Istoria unei neintelegeri (i.e. The Romanians after '89. The History of a misunderstanding)* (Humanitas, Bucuresti)

Pasti V, Miroiu M, Codita C, 1997, *Romania- starea de fapt. Volumul I: Societatea (i.e. Romania-the state of affairs. First volume: The Society)* (Editura Nemira, Bucuresti)

Peck J, Tickell A, 2002, "Neoliberalization" abstract , *Annual Meeting of IBG-RGS, Belfast, 2 – 5 January, 'Spaces and sites of regulation' Session*

"Raport cu privire la activitatea desfasurata de Consiliul OSLA in perioada iunie 1991 – iunie 1995" (i.e. "Rapport about the activity of the OFTU between june 1991 – june 1995") – available from author

Sadler D, Thompson J, 2001, "In search of regional industrial culture: the role of labour organisations in old industrial regions" *Antipode* 660 – 686

Sava I N, 2000, *Zece ani de tranzitie in Europa de Est (1990 - 2000) (i.e. Ten years of transition in Eastern Europe (1990 - 2000))* (Editura Fundatiei Culturale Romane, Bucuresti)

Sharp J P, Routledge P, Philo C, and Paddison, R, 2000, "Entanglements of power: geographies of domination / resistance" in *Entanglements of power: geographies of domination / resistance*, Eds J P Sharp, P Routledge, C Philo, R Paddison (Routledge, London) pp 1 – 42

Simandan D, 2001, "Collapsing contexts into polymorphous chorologies of (more than economic) change. A case study in the performance of scale through the urban environment" *Scientific and Technical Bulletin: Series Economic Sciences & Sociology* 4 55 – 86

Smith A., Swain A, 1998, "Regulating and institutionalising capitalisms: the micro-foundations of transformation in Eastern and Central Europe" in *Theorising transition. The political economy of post-communist transformations* Eds J Pickles, A Smith (Routledge, London) pp 25 – 53

"Statutul Organizatiei Sindicatelor Libere Arad (OSLA)" (i.e. "The Regulations of the Organisation of Free Trade Unions Arad (OFTU)") – available from author

Thrift N, 2000a, "Non-representational theory" in *Dictionary of Human Geography* Eds R J Johnston, D Gregory, G Pratt, M Watts (Blackwell, Oxford) 4th ed p 556

Thrift N, 2000b, "Afterwords" *Environment and planning D: Society and Space* 18 213 - 255

Thrift N, 2001, "Chasing Capitalism" *New Political Economy* 6 375 – 380

Tismaneanu V, 1992, *Reinventing politics. Eastern Europe from Stalin to Havel* (The Free Press, New York)

Whatmore S, 1999, "Hybrid geographies: rethinking the 'human' in human geography" in *Human geography today* Eds J Allen, D Massey, P Sarre (Polity Press, Cambridge) pp 22-39

