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Homogeneity vs. Heterogeneity: An Identity Crisis of the Communities in the Jiu Valley

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The history of the Jiu Valley has gone through multiple stages that have polished the identity of the communities. The development of mine exploitation has attracted immigrants from all over the country and from abroad. This has led to the emergence of two types of local identity communities: the natives and the newcomers. The relations between them have influenced the strategies used in building their constitution of identity. This paper focuses on the idea that these two types of identity are directly responsible for the degree of community homogeneity. In this respect, the natives belonged to a homogeneous community, with one dominant source of collective identity, while the arrival of the newcomers transformed the community into a heterogeneous one, with pluralistic sources of identity. These aspects reflect in the identity narratives which can be found in the Jiu Valley nowadays. The analysis of these narratives shows a common history, filled with tension, negation, disappointment and acceptance.

Keywords: *community deconstruction, constitution of identity, collective identity*

1. Introduction

Jiu Valley is a micro-region in southwestern Transylvania, Romania, in Hunedoara County, located in a valley of the Jiu River, between the Retezat and Parâng Mountains. The region is considered entirely urban and includes three cities: Aninoasa, Petrila and Uricani, three municipalities: Lupeni, Petroșani and Vulcan, and, therefore, no rural areas (Kovacs 2020).

The Jiu Valley used to be considered Romania's biggest coalfield and its history has gone through multiple stages that have polished the identity of the communities. We cannot talk about the valley's mining history without noting the

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authentic “melting pot” that was created in the area, in a sequence of social experiments that accompanied the utopia of industrialization and the progress it was supposed to support (Felea 2017). For this very reason, the region is nostalgically called the “Little America” by some people, nowadays (Kideckel 2004, 44).

2. History

The *Momârlani* people are said to have been the first inhabitants of the mountain settlements, long before the coal land attracted people from other areas of the country and from the entire Austro-Hungarian Empire, centuries before the Jiu Valley became the most urbanized area of Hunedora. The descendants of the Dacians, as the *Momârlani* are called, have preserved old traditions that are fascinating for those who visit their places. The *Momârlani* people built their houses just as their Dacian ancestors did, their traditional clothing was similar to that of the Dacians depicted in the scenes of Trajan's Column, and they buried their dead in the gardens of their houses, so that their souls could rest in peace. Today still, even if their community is becoming smaller and smaller, the *Momârlani* build their houses perched on the tops of the hills, just as they were found by the Austro-Hungarian industrialists who invested, in the nineteenth century, in the opening of the first mines from the Jiu Valley (Guță 2016).

But what exactly brought the Austrians to the Jiu Valley? The mining, the need for energy resources, the rigor of oil exploitation to support the imperial industrialization plans and iron metallurgy from Călan, Hunedoara, Oțelu Roșu and Reșița (Felea 2017).

In just a few decades of the second half of the nineteenth century, the utopia of industrialization planned in Vienna was taking shape. Budapest assumed the administration of state affairs, so the operation was predominantly Hungarian. Dozens of workers' colonies were erected to open the mines. They were preceded by Italian workers, brought from the north of the peninsula, specialists in building tunnels, railways and cutting wood. They were followed by the Hungarian officials and the German, Czech, Slovak craftsmen, but also the cheap Ruthenian labor or the Romanians from the Apuseni area, where the gold mines either closed with resounding bankruptcies, or reopened with the contribution of adventurers who paid the laborers very poorly (Felea 2017).

When in 1870 the first train entered the station in Petroșani, bringing miners from all corners of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, the *Momârlani*, received them with awe mingled with fear (Andras 2020). And they preferred not to work as mining workers, nor did they interfere too much in the life of the mining colonies. At most, they agreed to deliver specific products (milk, cheese, meat, etc.) to the new settlers; these economic exchanges were, however, limited and rather sporadic. Organized trade was mainly the attribute of merchants of Jewish origin, who established a prosperous and significant community in the Jiu Valley (Felea 2017). Starting those moments, the train was about to bring more and more miners and leave the Jiu Valley loaded with coal to fill the blast furnaces of the Empire's steel plants. 120 years ago, the Jiu Valley was “the flower of coal mining of the Austro-Hungarian Empire” (Andras 2020).

This spectacular economic growth was then tempered by the First World War. After the War, the Romanian capital took over the mining business, but continued to call on foreign, skilled labour, even though the Hungarian administration was replaced by the Romanian one (Felea 2017).

After the Second World War, during the period of galloping industrialization, it continued to be an essential element of industrial development. After nationalization in 1948, the population increased and the ethnic balance began to reverse in favour of those coming from the provinces outside the Carpathian arch (Andras 2020).

With the industrialization of Romania, the extraction of coal was resumed by the communist regime. Paradoxically, the communist government had a beneficial effect on the cultural life of the Jiu Valley (Codreanu n.d.). Because the valley was considered a "Disciplinary Battalion", children from families of intellectuals, teachers, priests, doctors and owners of Hungarian origins were considered inconvenient - for two reasons, the socio-political and the ethnicity – were exiled here. However, the exiles (artists, doctors, teachers, priests) developed the cultural life of the Jiu Valley with wonderful spiritual power. Cultural, theatrical, folklore bands, a colony of plastic artists and a photo club were established, and thanks to the existence of the mining university - which was established in the meantime - a metropolitan cultural life flourished in the towns of the Jiu Valley (Andras 2020).

So, the 1950s were marked by the (re)start of exploration activities, in order to (re)start the industrial exploitation of pit coal from the 1960s. This brought many well-paying jobs, pubs, and a lot of sports clubs. The various factories in the Jiu Valley that were involved in the exploitation of coal were proud of their own teams

in: football, volleyball, handball, chess, archery, bowling, judo, wrestling, ping-pong, tennis, skiing, gymnastics, rugby, and rock climbing (Codreanu n.d.).

However, in the 1970s, the massive relocations of the population from other areas dramatically changed the ethnic configuration of the area, a fact that was also reflected in the cultural life (Andras 2020). The 1977 strike hastened certain social measures that were also fuelled by some reservations of the communists of a nationalist orientation in the Ceaușescu administration, who did not see with good eyes the mixture of nationalities in the Jiu Valley. As a result, certain communities were diluted by encouraging the repatriation of German and Jewish minorities, while the "Romanian element" was strengthened by bringing labour from other regions of the country, especially from Moldova. These actions, known as *Operation 5000, 7000*, or *9000*, were responsible for the displacement in the Jiu Valley, especially in the 1980s, of over 40-50 thousand people, under the pretext of the need for labour (Felea 2017).

After the 1989 revolution, the massive demolition of the mining industry was thought to be a premise of the European way, and the *mineriades* offered an unheralded opportunity to achieve it in a hurry. In most of the mining areas from the Jiu Valley, considered "mono-industrial" in socio-economic theory, the mines were demolished without putting anything in their place (Andras 2020). A region that has been defined for so long by coal was now reduced to almost nothing.

3. Community identity – homogeneity and heterogeneity

The above short history of what happened in the Jiu Valley exposes some of the reasons that led to the emergence of two types of local identity communities: the natives and the newcomers. By interviewing members from the Jiu Valley in the past year, I came to discover and realize that the relations between them were tense from the beginning, aspect that influenced the strategies used in building their constitution of identity.

My idea is that these two types of identity (the natives and the newcomers) are directly responsible for the degree of community homogeneity. In this respect, the natives belonged to a homogeneous community, with one dominant source of collective identity, while the arrival of the newcomers (in-migration) transformed the community, little by little, into a heterogeneous one, with pluralistic sources of identity. These aspects are reflected in the narratives of the people from the Jiu Valley with whom I had the opportunity to discuss. The analysis of these narratives

shows a common history, filled with tension, negation, disappointment and acceptance.

So, what exactly is a community? As explained by Gene Barrett, community is a primordial type of social organization situated between family and kinship and society-at-large. It has an intrinsic association with place. And place is used to socially construct space, whether we are talking about an urban neighborhood or a rural village (2015, 182).

The manifestations of identity can be both individual and collective. Individual identity is represented by the social construction of the self: self-image, social worth and sense of belonging. Barrett further points out that community-based interests and norms shape the self:

> feelings of authenticity and rootedness come to reflect memory and place, a sense of social worth evidences community standards and expectations, a sense of honor is closely tied to duty and work. The self internalizes not only a sense of place but, through the assumption of roles, reproduces status, power and property relations. Individuals validate to themselves and others the identity they have internalized and want to project it to the community (2015, 191).

Collective manifestations of identity include but are not limited to common traditions, rituals and customs that emerge through long-standing patterns of interaction, collective struggles and shared history (Barrett 2015, 191).

Community and its way of life are related to symbols of local significance such as: food or speech, local heroes and sports teams, dress, music, dance, festivals, religious practices and sanctified spaces associated with sacrifice and martyrdom. Such symbols are above reproach and elicit emotional responses when challenged. Their power lies in their ability to transcend social divides (Barrett 2015, 192) and "as long as people do not press the symbols too hard for their precise meaning, they enable the reality of difference to be presented as the appearance of similarity" (Cohen 1985, 164). But although some symbols can function to unify community, channeling conflict into safe, system-maintaining activities, other symbols preserve boundaries, erect barriers and reproduce exclusion (Barrett 2015, 192).

Community identity has some fundamental variations. Based on the degree of community homogeneity, we can outline a typology in this respect. Homogeneous communities are characterized by one dominant source of collective identity, and usually this is place based (like the Momârlani people, for instance,

who even today like to build their houses perched on the tops of the hills, same as they were found by the Austro-Hungarian industrialists who invested in the Jiu Valley in the nineteenth century). It incorporates a sense of heritage manifest in long-standing traditions. Heterogeneous communities, by contrast, are defined by pluralistic sources of identity based on religious, ethnic, or class affiliations, which interact with place-based sentiments over time. In-migration to established neighborhoods or towns (like the *Operations 5000, 7000, 9000* that brought people to work in the Jiu Valley from all over the country) and new multicultural communities exemplify heterogeneous communities (Barrett 2015, 192).

Considering the fact that all communities have symbols that can attract wide-based identification and loyalty, it is important to observe under which circumstances they become manifest, what functions they serve, and who identifies with them. This is important because we have to distinguish backward-looking symbols from forward-looking ones (Barrett 2015, 192).

4. Examples from interviews

Using a few examples from the interviews I took in the Jiu Valley, I attempt to show how their homogeneous community slowly transformed into a heterogeneous one, with the arrival of the newcomers.

At the beginnings, the people from the Jiu Valley felt a sense of solidarity within their community and they were very proud of it. They claim that they have not seen in any other part of the country this feeling of special solidarity like they had. As I mentioned in the first part of the article, after the discovery of coal, when the industrial exploitation began, specialists from all corners of the empire were brought in the Jiu Valley. As a consequence, a multi-ethnic community was created and people learned to overcome ethnic prejudices, mistakes and generalizations like "all Hungarians are like this, all Germans are like that". It was a feature of the Jiu Valley that has been preserved to a small extent. There were many nationalities, especially until the First World War and people learned to live together: "There was more room for everybody. They had more room for each other," an interviewee mentioned.

Later on, at the peak of communism, as *Operations 5000, 7000, 9000* were implemented, and people from all over the country came to work in the Jiu Valley, things started to change. What were the effects? It had primarily a demographic effect. There was an unusual growth in all the coal mining cities from the valley.

And although they started to get used to this change, especially since they had that kind of education that transcended ethnic prejudices, their sense of solidarity was not that hard to shake anymore.

One interviewee remembers how:

> The fact that people came from so many areas, somehow left a not-so-great impression on us, the older residents of the Valley. Because there were so many people, they did not follow the rules of the community, they defied any rules of good behavior, they screamed, they fought, it didn't matter what time it was.

Another one recalls the following:

> Terrible. A few times I saw them by chance at the train station, you know, the megaphones roared in unison as they came by the thousands. It was something shocking for us. At the end of the 1980s, there were only trains with them in any direction; they didn't know where to take them, where to bring them, where to put them. Come on, the *Operation 3000, 7000*, I think even *9000*? How was it possible for 9000 people to come? I was in elementary school back then and at the time I didn't realize how this affected me. But now, I don't understand why we didn't manage to get the best from everyone. Even if they came from Moldova and Oltenia and from everywhere, we don't manage to take the good part from multiculturalism, I don't know why we lose it. I don't know what we are missing, but it could be fantastic. It's as if we only got the worst. Why? I do not know. I suffer a lot because of this. Because it is indisputable that I can take something good from you and you can take something good from me. We suffer! Too bad... too bad...

The next interviewee laid out:

> During Ceausescu's time, things changed because there was, I can't call them a gathering of people, but there were many nations of people: Moldavians, Oltenians, Hungarians and many others. And that's why I say, they are half breeds. They came, for example, and if at one point the order in the city was natural, they turned everything upside down. That's why not even half of them stayed, they left. The cities that sent people to work in the mines did not give their best people, they tried to get rid of the worst people they had. They came like a tsunami, washed the shore and left.

One more example provided by another interviewee exposed the following:

> So, what was happening... there was no question that coal would not be exploited any further, and there were these *Operations 5,000, 7,000* to bring in labor from other parts. And we saw how this community of people who knew each other was being destroyed by this, I wouldn't say invasion, but a massive bringing of people from other parts, who did not feel at home, because they were not home. And then, they didn't care about this place. Their only purpose was to receive the money and go back home to their houses. And you heard all kinds of terrible incidents in which it was said that they made their fire in the middle of their apartment, that they brought pigs and stayed with them, I even saw how they brought a horse to the first floor of the apartment building and lived with it in the house. (…) We were no longer a community. There was also the fact that there were fewer people in the Valley, and then when they all came from other parts, each with their own customs, normally, that mixture happened. For example, with Catholics in the old days we used to go to the cemetery on November 1st. We would go, light a candle, and then come back home. And suddenly, we woke up with tables placed near the graves. This is a custom brought from Moldova. And this mixture of habits was visibly produced and destroyed our community.

5. Interpretation and conclusions

Gene Barrett explains that a homogeneous community of long-standing settlement may be more likely to invoke backward-looking symbols that build upon a sense of nostalgia for lost traditions. Collective identities that reflect conflict and opposition incorporate past grievances and bring communities together against common outside threats. Oppositional identity reinforces the external othering process by incorporating elements of xenophobia and ethnocentrism, which not only act to absolve locals of wrongdoing but shore up archaic sources of privilege (2015, 192). A fair amount of the people I interviewed seem to be revolted by the fact that their community, as they used to know it, is not there anymore. It transformed, as people who arrived in the area brought their own customs and traditions, along with them.

Heterogeneous communities without deeply shared collective traditions or history of place will more likely invent new symbols (forward-looking symbols) designed to build bridges between disparate segments of the community. In contrast to the exclusionary basis of oppositional identities, these will be inclusive and pluralistic in nature. Rooted in lifestyle choices, individuals can drop in or out

of a particular community without building permanent ties or feeling any sense of duty or responsibility to others in their 'community'. The inclusionary effects of invented symbols are really quite secondary to personal desires and that particular community transforms into an empty shell without structural integrity (Barrett 2015, 193). This is the case of the last decades of the Jiu Valley. It transformed into a place that was artificially created for the sole purpose of mining, a place where thousands of people were brought from all over the country to work. These people came with their own lifestyle ideas and customs, therefore, it is natural that the people who were already for a long time in the Jiu Valley, did not feel that sense of community and solidarity anymore.

Watching how the Jiu Valley communities are going to change and evolve in the future, especially in the aftermath of the coal industry is definitely an interesting aspect to study. Although coal has been extracted from the Jiu Valley for over 150 years and there is still more to be exploited, the narratives of the Jiu Valley have not been sufficiently exploited yet and the history of the Jiu Valley is still being written and will continue to be written for a long time to come. But the question that we really need to ask is: who will remain in the valley in the future?

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