

# Bananas and Oranges of Christmas Past: Subject Formation under (Post)Socialism

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## Bananas and Oranges of Christmas Past: Subject Formation under (Post)Socialism

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MARIA PERSU, DEC 22 2021

“Je voudrais manger une orange. Pourquoi une orange et non pas six?”<sup>[1]</sup> My secondary school French-language education in Romania was marked by this repetitive game. Each child would be assigned a number which represented a quantity of oranges. When your number was called out, you had to quickly reply and pass the duty to someone else. Although the origins of this game we obsessively played are still unknown to me, what I do know is that my grandmother, a village school teacher, had used it herself as a memory game for her pupils since the 1960s. What struck me about this was not how the peculiar exercise was passed down through generations of pedagogues until no one really remembered how it started, but that it was practiced back when regularly eating *six oranges* was a distant fantasy for ordinary Romanians. For multiple decades under state socialism, oranges, together with bananas, represented a precious gift for every child as they were only distributed to the population around Christmas.

Quantities of tropical fruit haunted me even further when, working for a Bucharest-based culture magazine in 2019, my editor came back from an interview about the Romanian Revolution with a story concerning someone else's grandma. Her interviewee recounted the moment when a rare shipment of bananas arrived at their neighbourhood grocery store in the 1980s. On that very special occasion, the grandmother ate so many bananas that her face swelled up so badly she required hospitalization. Passing by two carelessly thrown away banana peels on the pavement around Christmas of 2019, I began to wonder about the affective shifts that come with socioeconomic transformations, their invisibility, and, if I am allowed, their theoretical fruitfulness.

What can the practices surrounding banana and orange consumption reveal about the formation of the ‘Romanian’ (post)socialist<sup>[2]</sup> subject? By setting up this puzzle, I aim to arrive at a culturally, historically, and geographically situated understanding of the processes through which the subject as *Self* is formed through discursive practices in relation to its constructed *Others*. Approaching these phenomena from a poststructuralist perspective, my study develops its arguments inductively (Søndergaard 2002, p. 189). They are empirically rooted in qualitative data including textual and visual archival materials, as well as four one-hour oral history interviews, conducted in March-April 2021.

The paper unfolds as follows. Chapter I reviews the academic marginalisation of everyday life experiences in the study of Eastern European politics until the mid-1990s, arguing that the cultural analysis of consumption is one important way in which the personal and the political can be understood in tandem. I adopt Michel de Certeau's theoretical perspective on consumer tactical resistance, complementing Foucault's account of power. Chapter II tackles the rather contested role of methodology in poststructuralist works, revisiting de Certeau to argue instead that making one's methods explicit is in fact a requirement if one treats knowledge as situated. The chapter then explains how I defined discursive practices and their role in subject formation, how I collected the archival materials, and approached the interviews. Chapter III represents the final analysis, where the following argument is developed.

As a policy, restricting access to bananas and oranges pertained to the biopolitical strategies of the Romanian socialist regime which envisioned the individual subject as belonging to an efficient ‘national’ social whole. Discursively differentiated from indigeneous fruits, bananas and oranges were constructed as symbols for a foreign and socially dangerous *Other*. Their symbolic harmfulness was at the same time generated by their capacity to signal

# Bananas and Oranges of Christmas Past: Subject Formation under (Post)Socialism

Written by Maria Persu

the perpetuation of social hierarchies within socialism. Conversely, at the popular level, consuming bananas and oranges was a way through which individuals performed their desire to encounter a geographical *Other* located outside Romania's territories. While food shortages and economic hardships continued well into the '90s, the euphoria generated by the December 1989 Revolution erased these histories for some, understanding the postsocialist subject as one that had to reconstruct themselves from ground zero. At the same time, the 1990-1996 press reflects some of the discursive continuities between socialism and postsocialism. On a theoretical level, I arrive at the conclusion that the subject is formed through a multiplicity of discursive practices, through which the *Self* is differentiated from its *Others*.

## Beyond the Socialist Monolith. A Descent into Ordinary Culture

Given the geopolitical tensions between the 'West' and 'East' following the Second World War, the field of Eastern European studies – especially in the United States – was strongly influenced by the strategic need to produce knowledge about 'Soviet' intentions in the 'international arena' (Naimark 2019; Verdery 1996, p. 11; Cervinkova 2012). Ethnographic interest in Eastern Europe was limited and its main focus rested on state-level practices (Cervinkova 2012, p. 156; Halpern and Kideckel 1983). The security or the simply macroscopical perspective on Cold-War Eastern Europe often fostered either a disinterest towards Eastern European personal experiences or the simplistic portrayal of Eastern Europeans as masses engaged in a tacit but homogenised search for freedom from totalitarian power (Cervinkova 2012, p. 156; Mateoni and Gheorghiu 2012, p. 11). Consequently, individual and collective forms of resistance and complicity with the regimes remained largely understudied until the late 1990s and early 2000s (Verdery 1996). In the more recent literature<sup>[3]</sup> on Eastern European (post)socialisms, one answer to these overall monolithic perspectives on individual and collective experiences has been found in the study of consumer culture (Mateoni and Gheorghiu 2012; Gille et al 2020; Breun and Neuburger 2012). One of the main theoretical staples in the study of (post)socialist consumer cultures has been Michel de Certeau's book *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Massino 2012; Dietrich 2020; Mateoni and Gheorghiu 2012; Zakharova 2013).

### *Consumption as part of a nanophysics of power*

For a long time, consumption was the Cinderella of critical theories in relation to her more visible and less morally ambiguous sister, production (Baudrillard 1996, p. 199). This subsection grounds the discussion of consumption's active sociopolitical role in de Certeau's sociology of everyday life, regarding it as both a critique and continuation of the Foucauldian project that aims to make the workings of power visible (Marks 1999; Reynolds and Fitzpatrick 1999).

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1995, p. 26) develops an understanding of the political where power no longer simply equates to the force possessed either by the state or the members of the dominant classes. Power represents instead a set of minuscule strategies – “constantly in tension, in activity” – that is exercised in all social relations (Ibid., p. 26), a “microphysics” that equivocally and unstably flows into “the depths of society” (Ibid., p. 28 & 27). Moreover, power is not simply a *negative* set of forces – power is creative, since it represents “one of the conditions of knowledge” (Ibid., p. 27). Through power-knowledge, bodies and subjects are politically and historically constituted (Ibid., p. 28). The Foucauldian notion of power may allow us to understand how the socialist subject was produced via specific institutional techniques, to avoid conceptualising party ideology as one totalizing force.

Still, how far into the social *milieu* does the Foucauldian account of power permit us to plunge? Centering his analysis on institutions, such as prisons and factories, and their noticeably productive activities, Foucault overlooks the *nanoscopic* level of the physics of power: that of everyday life, where the ordinary individual operates by performing everyday acts of usage or consumption (de Certeau 1988, p. xiv). By this omission, the individual upon which institutional techniques are inflicted seems to get stuck in power's web with little possibilities to influence it (Marks 1999, p. 127). Thus, popular(in)subordinations remain theoretically obscured.

Conversely, Michel de Certeau (1988, p.xii) proposes that everyday consumer operations (such as cooking, shopping, reading, watching television) represent a “hidden” production, “scattered over areas defined and occupied by systems of production”. Consumption therefore pertains to a secondary mode of meaning production that is

# Bananas and Oranges of Christmas Past: Subject Formation under (Post)Socialism

Written by Maria Persu

devious, dispersed, since it has been constructed as a strictly private or domestic activity (Ibid., p. xii). Through consumer practices, the meanings given by the socioeconomically dominant producers of objects can be subverted as one puts them to use (Ibid., p. xii). Consequently, de Certeau believes, for instance, that a study of TV representations is incomplete without addressing how these representations circulate within society, how viewers experience and interpret them and how they use them (Ibid., p. 31).

To illustrate how consumers ascribe novel meanings to objects, we can consider the example of the oat-based coffee substitute invented in Romania when coffee became too expensive to import during the economic crisis that started in the late 1970s (Perianu 2009). Limiting the access to an imported good as culturally central as coffee can be seen in a Foucauldian sense as restricting the hedonistic dimension of the nourishment act in order to construct the individual as a political 'agent' responsible for the economic future of society. Nevertheless, the story remains incomplete if we do not take into account how Romanians symbolically rejected the coffee substitute. Presented by its creator, coffee-roasting factory manager Alecu Radu, as a 'healthier' alternative to coffee (Oprea 2010), the product was instead pejoratively nicknamed *Nechezol*, where "nechez" comes from "a necheza" [to neigh], referring to the substitute's main component, oat, traditionally used to feed horses (Perianu 2009, p. 7). The suffix "-ol" allegedly denoted its chemical provenance, satirising first lady Elena Ceaușescu's portrayal as Romania's leading chemistry researcher (Traicu 2009).

To refer to such acts of popular nanoresistance, de Certeau (1988, p. xix) distinguishes between *astrategy* and a *tactic*. A strategy is grounded in "a calculus of force-relationships" and exerted by an authoritative institution as the subject of "will and power" over its less powerful *others* (Ibid., p. xix). By contrast, the ordinary individual does not have a clear-cut strategy. Hence, the practices of the consumer or the user are defined as *tactical*/antidisciplines. Unlike strategies, the formation of tactics does not rely on a proper delineation between its subject and "the other as a visible totality" (Ibid., p. xix). Playing on a terrain imposed by foreign forces, the consumer "does not have the options of planning general strategy and viewing the adversary as a whole within a district, visible, and objectifiable space" (Ibid., p. 37). Everyday tactical procedures, part of the "ways of operating", represent benign forms of trickery, maneuvers, and small victories "of the 'weak' over the 'strong'" (Ibid., p. xix). Through them, individuals and groups "manipulate the mechanisms of discipline" by conforming to them "only in order to evade them" (Ibid., p. xiv).

What did such small victories look like in the socialist everyday? Drawing theoretically from de Certeau, Dietrich (2020, p. 117 & p. 106) investigates East Germans' creative adjustment to the conditions of a shortage economy by a case study of Navel orange scarcity in the 1980s. Standing at the intersection between bare necessities, given their assumed richness in Vitamin-C, and luxury goods as they were available only at Christmas time, 'good' Navel oranges had a strong symbolic value for East Germans (Ibid., p. 105). Since they represented an important "political present", together with bananas, their scarcity brought a wave of mass discontent of which the Politburo was fearfully aware (Ibid., p. 115). The tactical procedures devised by East Germans in order to procure good oranges included both legal and illegal practices, such as petitioning the government, hoarding, queuing, contacting connections in the FRG, and bribery (Ibid., p. 117).

Similarly, Massino (2012) employs de Certeau's notion of "making do with what the system provides" (de Certeau 2002 in Massino 2012, p. 242) in investigating how Romanian women coped with food rationing in the 1980s. Women put together meals out of an "odd array of seasonings, inferior meat trimmings, and ersatz and imported foods", including canned Vietnamese shrimps, chicken wings, claws, and heads (Massino 2013, p. 242). Another struggle for Romanian women in the 1980s was securing infant formula, having to resort to procurement tactics such as organising trips to Hungary or relying on the black market (Ibid., p. 243). How did these subverted symbols, subtle antidisciplines, and tactics of subsistence transform with the fall of socialism in Romania? The next chapter addresses the methodological approach that I developed in order to study consumer practices together with historical transformations.

## On Methodology: To Write the *Everyday*

According to Hansen (2006, pp. 1-2), many poststructuralists avoid explicit discussions of methodology, considering 'method' to be a feature of positivist works that cements the researcher's position as an 'objective' epistemic

# Bananas and Oranges of Christmas Past: Subject Formation under (Post)Socialism

Written by Maria Persu

authority over the social world (Ibid., p. 1; Aronowitz and Ausch, 2000). Conversely, de Certeau gives methodology an important place in his cultural and historiographical investigations (Highmore 2006; Reynolds and Fitzpatrick 1999). In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau understands *writing* as part of the disciplining apparatus of Western modernity, fundamentally marked by a knowledge economy based on “the scriptural” (de Certeau 1988, p. 131). Producing written scientific knowledge of the social world has had the overall effect of ordering and normalizing everyday experiences, sidelining the voices of the *popular* (Ibid., pp. 131-132). Thus, to neglect the procedures through which one constructs a study of ordinary life is to risk reproducing the same mechanisms of marginalisation (Highmore 2006, p. 2). Considering knowledge as *situated* within, rather than outside, the boundaries of the political and the ethical, the researcher must be aware of the ways in which they are entangled in social flows of power themselves (Ibid.).

With this in mind, this chapter is structured into two parts and walks the reader through the two main methodological challenges I tackled in conducting and writing my research, at the same time giving way for a self-reflective process to emerge<sup>[4]</sup>. First, I establish the meta-methodological relation between discourses, subject formation, and everyday practices. Second, I argue that combining archive research with oral history interviews allowed me to examine the relation between orality and the scriptural, between presents and pasts, between types of discursive formations.

## *Discourse and consumer practices*

In the *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault defines discourses as historically and socially situated “practices that form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault 1972, p. 49 & p. 117). Most commonly, these fragments are interpreted in the political science literature as referring strictly to the “*linguistic* conditions that enable certain objects to emerge” (Lundborg & Vaughan-Williams 2015, p. 19, italicisation mine). However, that the linguistic domain represents just one form of discursive practice in the Foucauldian sense is clearly revealed by how the philosopher-historian incorporates, in works as diverse as *Madness and Civilization* (1988) or *Discipline and Punish* (1995), discussions of paintings, of architectural designs such as the panopticon, and of material techniques that are imposed over the body, whether medical or punitive. In scrutinizing the workings of power, Foucault in fact explores “the interplay between the material and the linguistic” by looking at a diverse set of practices that “render things visible as well as articulable” (Lundborg & Vaughan-Williams 2015, p. 19).

Therefore, what I propose here is a loose and metaphorical understanding of ‘speak’ in the *Archaeology of Knowledge* definition, emphasising the ontologically formative nature of discourse as a social practice that pertains to the domain of power-knowledge (Lundborg & Vaughan-Williams 2015). A discursive practice can be linguistic, visual, and/or material, institutionalised or dispersed, extraordinary as well as ordinary – its chief characteristic is that it contributes to the constitution of subjects and objects. Therefore, what de Certeau calls ‘ways of operating’, including the consumer tactical procedures I have spoken of in Chapter I, represent discursive practices. These techniques are ‘arts of making’ (arts de faire) that lie at the intersection between “thinking” and “using” (de Certeau 1988, p. xv). For example, to understand how ways of operating are a way of knowing as much as they are a way of doing, we may think of Romanian women’s culinary subsistence tactics as an art of nourishment, understood as producing new culinary knowledge by reorganizing old recipes and the subsequent gestures of the cook (Giard 1998). Perhaps it is also illustrative to remember that, as I narrated in the introduction, this whole investigation commenced with a memory game, a banana-related intoxication, and a sidewalk encounter with two banana peels. My study’s genesis story suggests how interest for academic inquiry itself can originate in ordinary personal experiences, that their sociological relevance goes beyond the strictly descriptive (de Certeau 1988, p. 65).

Equally, these initial stories of bananas and oranges made me think of this study as “a history of the present” (Foucault 1995, p. 31), where my investigation represents a diagnosis of the present as much as it constitutes an incursion into the recent past (Garland 2014). As Foucault’s starting point was in the contemporary, my research began with “a certain puzzlement or discomfiture about practices or institutions” that are now taken for granted (Ibid., p. 379). Straightforwardly highlighting this interplay, I coupled archive research with four oral history interviews. This allowed me to confront written discourses with personal accounts (LeGreco 2014, p. 13), constructing a constant dialogue between the present, memory, and the past (Smith 2001, p. 20). The next two subsections explain how I approached archives and interviews separately.

# Bananas and Oranges of Christmas Past: Subject Formation under (Post)Socialism

Written by Maria Persu

## Archives

I consulted two main types of archival sources, almanacs (1968-1990) and newspapers (1990-1996). Under the socialist regime, almanacs were annual popularisation publications concerning politics, science, culture, lifestyle, and entertainment. The topics I followed in both the almanacs and the newspapers were nutrition and food commerce, how these were represented in articles, ads, and caricatures. In the period when I was searching for archival materials from before 1989, access to libraries was restricted due to Covid-19. My tactic was then to rely on antiquity shops, building my own personal collection in the process. This also influenced my decision to consult almanacs over newspapers, since the almanacs I found were in better condition. My 'collection' was supplemented by that of Camera Arhiva (cameraarhiva.com), an online research platform that documents everyday life in Romania between 1947 and 1989. In total, I selected eight almanacs for closer analysis. What struck me about the almanacs was the colorfulness of the covers and illustrations. This contradicted my visual representation of socialism as dominated by gray, gloomy imagery. Another document that I selected from Camera Arhiva was the 1980 guidebook *In Defense of a Rational Diet* [Pledoarie pentru o alimentație rațională]. With regards to the 1990s, I tracked down fruit-related documents: opinion pieces, news about price fluctuations, and caricatures about the on-going food shortages from three main national newspapers published in the period 1990-1996: *Adevărul* (left-wing), *Libertatea* (tabloid), and *România Liberă* (conservative). I specifically tracked down fruit-related documents. This part of the collection process was conducted at the Central University Library in Bucharest.

## Historical interviews

This subsection discusses the selection of interviewees, access to the field, the interview format, and how I approached their analysis. Since my interest was to confront multiple perspectives with one another, the sampling strategy that I adopted was a "purposive" one (Starks and Trinidad 2008, p. 376). The main criterion was age: participants had to have been at least 15 years of age in 1989 to remember at least the 1980s well. From planning one interview to the next, I constantly asked myself what perspectives I was potentially neglecting (Lofland et al. 2006, p. 92). As an example, since the first two participants were both women in their late forties-early fifties, the last two were men that grew up in the 1960s. Two of the participants, Călin and Dumitru, had also lived abroad<sup>[5]</sup>. Călin, who is now a fresh fruit and vegetable importer, lived in Italy for ten years in the 1980s-1990s. Dumitru lived in the United States for a bit over a year in the mid-1980s.

Access to the participants was obtained easily, using my broad social network in Romania to identify potential participants. However, one limitation that emerged was that, given my Bucharest-based upper middle-class upbringing, all participants were originally from Bucharest and had a university degree. Even though my national and linguistic background eased my access to the field, other differences between myself and the participants challenged the dichotomy between 'insider' and 'outsider' (Mandyanike 2009). The large age gap between us meant that, on some occasions, my participants assumed that I knew little of the subject: I was an 'outsider' to the times. Sometimes, I appealed to my family's stories about the 1980s and 1990s in order to probe certain remarks and establish common ground.

The format of the four one-hour interviews, which took place on online video platforms<sup>[6]</sup>, can be best described as oral history – the interviews had a low degree of structure since their purpose was to unravel personal narratives about the past, descriptions of daily livelihoods, desires, and aspirations (Kapiszewski et al. 2015, p. 194). I assumed the role of a curious, active listener (Ibid., p. 194). After the two introductory questions, which concerned age and residence in the socialist period, the main questions I prepared inquired about memories of everyday life in different periods and how the participant imagined life outside Romania at the time in Western or non-Western territories. While the possibility of intersecting between postsocialist and postcolonial lived experiences is taken seriously in recent anthropological debates (Cervinkova 2012; Owczarzak 2009), what I observed about the consumer culture literature is that it overwhelmingly falls short of addressing Eastern European meaning-making in relation to non-Western geographies<sup>[7]</sup>. Given that banana and orange supply chains are by definition global, I was curious to see whether they may have symbolically participated in constructing Eastern European representations of non-Western *Others*. Additionally, I prepared three archival documents to discuss with the participants, in order to test whether they triggered any memories, including an ad to the socialist fizzy drink Cico discussed in the main analysis.

# Bananas and Oranges of Christmas Past: Subject Formation under (Post)Socialism

Written by Maria Persu

My initial scope was to stick to the chronological order of the questions. However, sometimes the participants made connections between different times and circumstances, suggesting how memory has no “ready-made organization” (de Certeau 1988, p. 86). For instance, when I mentioned the Cico ad to Bianca, a student in 1989, she told me about the “invasion” of soda machines after 1989. I then asked about her memories of the 1990s and only later came back to the days of the Revolution after she reflected on her friends’ heated political debates at the time. The uniqueness of every interview encounter further confirmed to me that doing qualitative research should be treated as more than just data ‘extraction’ from the social world, as knowledge co-forms between researcher and participant (Pachirat 2015, p. 29).

The activity with which poststructuralists engage in their analyses can be described as hunting for storylines, where a storyline represents a “condensed version of a naturalized and conventional cultural narrative, one that is often used as the explanatory framework of one’s own and others’ practices and sequences of action” (Søndergaard 2002, p. 191). An additional reason behind conducting interviews was that I wanted to explore the contrast between how storylines are developed in written language versus in speech. Regarding the *everyday*, de Certeau (1988, p. 70) argues that stories represent “the container of narrativity for everyday practices” – they accommodate the allegorical or metaphorical fragments and remnants of the ordinary past (Ibid., p. 70). In the interviews, stories emerged more vividly than I believe text could now capture. Through their orality, they were truly a “*cuisine of gestures and words*, of ideas and information, with its recipes and its subtleties, its auxiliary instruments and its neighboring effects, its distortions and its failures” (de Certeau and Giard 1998, p. 254). Trying to textually capture their richness, my role of a careful listener continued as I transcribed the recordings, seeking to preserve each participant’s speech particularities. In both the transcripts and the translated excerpts, I added ellipses to suggest the participants’ pace, signaled reactions such as laughter and interjections, and maintained their colloquialism.

## A Fruit-infused History of (Post)Socialist Subject Formation

This chapter aims to show that the discursive practices surrounding bananas and oranges allow us to understand the multiple and heterogeneous ways through which the (post)socialist subject was constituted. I treat the state-restricted access to bananas and oranges – which predates the penury of the 1980s – as belonging to a set of biopolitical strategies aimed at constructing a ‘Romanian’ subject that was responsible for the wellbeing of a homogenous and self-sufficient social whole. Placed in opposition to indigenous fruits, bananas and oranges symbolically represented a socially dangerous *Other*. Conversely, at the popular level, the procurement and nourishment tactics attached to bananas and oranges were a way of expressing one’s desire for a geographical and most often indeterminate *Other* located outside Romanian territories.

As the 1990s progressed, the construction of the new ‘Romanian’ *Self* was intimately related with reimagining a postsocialist consumer culture. The practice of travelling abroad implied the attentive inspection of newly discovered *Others’* everyday lives and consumer habits. Drawing on the analysis, my theoretical conclusion in Chapter IV will be the following. Subject formation represents a continuous and complex process that involves institutional, collective, and individual discursive practices through which the *Self* is temporally and geographically constituted in relation to a multiplicity of constructed *Others*.

### *Rare human-fruit encounters. Biopolitics of nutrition and consumer tactics under socialism*

The 1960s and early 1970s were remembered by my two older participants as a period of increased personal wellbeing, being able to enjoy ‘luxury’ goods such as coffee and caviar. Călin associated the epoch with one vivid memory from his childhood. Strolling the Magheru Boulevard in Bucharest, one was greeted with the pleasant smell of freshly brewed coffee:

“When I was a child, there was an Armenian, you know. He made coffee. So I was a child, I was with my mother, I remember... And the moment when you passed by the shop with its door open the smell of coffee practically engulfed the street. Believe me.”

Dumitru similarly remembered the Leonida shop, located on the same boulevard, where “you could buy a sandwich

# Bananas and Oranges of Christmas Past: Subject Formation under (Post)Socialism

Written by Maria Persu

with Manchuria caviar”. However, what was missing from this culinary landscape were the bananas and the oranges. According to both Călin and Dumitru, they were available only during the Christmas holiday even before the 1980s shortages. Romanian anthropologist Vintilă Mihăilescu (2020, p. 31) adds a peculiar fact to this banana-free picture: although most Romanians could practically almost never have bananas outside the late-December window, the Guinness World Records Book listed Romania as the world’s biggest banana exporter in the 1970s. Given Romania’s trade cooperation schemes with African republics, the Romanian government offered weapons in exchange for large shipments of bananas, which it then sold on the international market (Ibid., p. 31).

This seemingly contradictory decision on behalf of the Communist Party leads me to the chapter’s first theoretical incursion. Leaving aside the financial motives behind the act of re-exporting the bananas, the act of not distributing them locally can be understood as discursively pertaining to the biopolitical strategies of the state, techniques that were central to constructing the ‘national’ body as a homogeneous social whole (Kligman 1998, p. 4). More precisely, they are part of the biopolitics of nutrition. According to Foucault (1978, p. 139) biopolitics is one of the two main ways in which power is exerted over the body in European modernity, alongside the anatomo-politics of discipline. Whereas disciplinary techniques optimize the body’s capabilities and its socioeconomic efficiency, biopolitical ones administer the “mechanisms of life”, the biological processes of populations (Ibid., p. 139). While the concept of biopolitics is foremostly addressed with regards to racial and eugenic policies (Prozorov 2014), Treitel (2008, p. 2) takes up the example of the 19th century nutritional ‘science’ developed by Max Rubner – intersecting physiology with economics – as another way through which control over populations is operationalised in the name of defending the rational functioning of society.

Similarly to what Rubner prescribed, in 1982 the Communist party ratified The Scientific Nourishment of the Population Programme [Programul de alimentație științifică a populației], a project meant to ‘scientifically’ determine the appropriate caloric intake for an individual based on age, height, gender, and profession (Mihai 2016). Dumitru, a resident doctor at the time, remembered a wave of menu-style publications aiming to propagate the scientification of nutrition. For him, they represented a mode through which the regime “justified the product shortages on the market”. A close examination shows how these strategies went beyond masking the food crisis of the 1980s. Rationalising nutritional habits can be seen as biopolitically regulating both productive and reproductive activities in constructing the social body as a homogenous whole.

On the one hand, the role of rational nutrition in producing a lucrative and efficient ‘national’ social body is suggested in physician Nicolae Feraru’s 1980 book *In Defense of a Rational Diet*. The language used by Feraru machinises the lived body into an object of economics, the central principle of the rational diet being a calculus of energy production and energy expenditure (e.g. pp. 20-21). In the book’s first annex, Feraru divides caloric intake per kilogram based on the energy expenditure characteristic of every profession: a well-functioning body of an office worker requires a low amount of calories (35-40 cal/kg per day), whereas physical laborers such as miners and chimney sweepers are to consume at least 50-60 cal/kg per day.

On the other hand, in *Scînteia Almanac* (1968) the reproductive aspect of biopolitics is suggested in a healthy eating campaign directed towards women: “Your suppleness is measured in kilograms!” [Suplețea dvs. se măsoară în kilograme!]. Vegetables and fruits are a source of “vitamins” and “health”, “pleasant” to eat, and fat-neutral. Taken alongside the regime’s ‘pro-fertility’ policies such as the 1966 abortion ban (Kligman 1998), here the feminine body is constructed as the basis for the perpetuation of a ‘healthy’ socialist society. Through her reproductive and moral health, each socialist modern woman carries the responsibility for the future of the social whole.

However, the social body could not be homogenised on the basis of ‘nationality’ without it being delineated from an *Other* (Kligman 1998, p. 33). In the realm of nutrition, the dichotomy between local and imported fruit stands for the distinction between the national and the foreign. The fruit-related nutritional guides in both *In defense of a Rational Diet* and the 1985 *Health Almanac*’s [Almanahul Sănătatea] article *In the family’s fruit bowl* [În fructiera familiei] detailed the nutritional values and biographies of ‘indigenous’ fruit such as strawberries, cherries, peaches, and walnuts, leaving aside the inaccessible bananas and oranges. The flavours and vitamins of tropical fruits are replaced by the orange- and lemon-flavored national beverage Cico, as an ad in the *Cinema Almanac* [Almanahul Cinema] of 1974 shows. The result of “complex research”, Cico is a “revigorating”, “diabetes-conscious” and a

## Bananas and Oranges of Christmas Past: Subject Formation under (Post)Socialism

Written by Maria Persu

“vitamin-rich drink”, which contains “All of nature’s health/ All of the sun’s strength/ In one bottle!”. A national substitute for *the tropical*, consuming Cico is therefore constructed as part of the practices that engineer ‘Romanian’ society as self-sufficient.

Casting a glance outside the borders of Romania in Moscow’s 1970s, consuming non-indigenous fruits as an act against the ‘national’ social body is revealed in one Russian professor’s account of eating her first banana at a private dinner, only to be later accused by an acquaintance of being “unpatriotic” for such an exercise of privilege (Caldwell 2009a p. 12). Because bananas and oranges were inaccessible, they were socially dangerous not only due to their foreign status, but also because they could easily expose the social differentiation that permeated socialist society. In Romania too, being able to procure ‘luxury’ foods like bananas and oranges could signal such differences. Alina remembered that her uncle who worked in a development institute had access to special shops where he could buy rare products such as Pepsi. Bianca and her cousins relied on her grandma’s friends that emigrated to Germany in order to enjoy chocolate eggs and bonbons.

The undesirability of bananas and oranges as dangerous foreign *Others* in institutional discursive practices is transformed precisely in its opposite at the popular level. Whereas biopolitical strategies determined people’s general nutritional conditions of life, individuals and groups actively developed coping tactics, arts of nourishment that can be seen as symbolizing one’s care and desire for an unknown *Other*. For instance, as bananas only came green and unripe, individuals created alternative ways to ripen and preserve them. Three of the participants remembered slightly different procedures with which their parents came up. Alina’s mother would store them on the top of a wardrobe and ration them between Alina and her sister (“We would look up, agh... how we craved for a banana or an orange”). Călin’s mother would wrap the bananas in newspaper pages and put them on the stove to speed up the ripening process. Bianca’s parents would hide the bananas inside a wardrobe, to let them ripen in the dark and protect them from Bianca’s appetite:

“I don’t know why I was so obsessed with bananas... I remember how my parents would procure them, *when* and *how*, queues and interventions, they came back from time to time with a banana bunch. They were ten to fifteen [individual bananas]. And they were green. And they would place them inside the wardrobe to ripen them. I don’t know why inside the wardrobe, in the dark. To ripen them, I don’t know. It was a *method*. And I didn’t have the patience [to wait] and I was so desperate that I would ransack through the wardrobe and I would eat them unripe, they didn’t even have time to ripen (laughs)! I would get a puckered mouth, but I wanted the bananas!”

For some, consuming bananas and oranges was linked to a discovery of or desire for life elsewhere. In his first ‘Italian’ days, one of Călin’s discoveries was that bananas and oranges did not represent seasonal goods, but that they were available all year round in the supermarkets, where the participant makes a direct distinction between an *us* and a *them* based on the accessibility of these goods: “In *our* country, there were enormous queues for oranges, citrus fruits, and bananas (...) For the first time, I saw [in Italy] that in *their* country, seasonal goods no longer existed like they did in ours.” That the arts of nourishment travel through both places and times is made evident by how Călin, currently working in the fruit and vegetable industry, reasoned that today’s industrialised ways of ripening bananas are less healthy than the DIY tactics of his parents: “In this way they would ripen, it was the more *natural* way, I think, compared to what is happening today. Now they use a gas, they say it is organic. But... anyway, I don’t know how organic it is in the end”.

For anthropologist Vintilă Mihăilescu (2020, p. 31), who like most Romanians only travelled abroad after the Revolution, bananas were in the horizon only in his childhood dreams of a utopian *elsewhere*: “somewhere, far away, there was a beautiful and kind world, where people ate bananas”. For Bianca, Latin America and Africa solely represented “the place the bananas came from (laughs)”. African and Latin American *Others* are differentiated from the Romanian *Self* on the basis of an exoticised enjoyment that was inaccessible to her: “They were happy people that had plenty of bananas. This was my only representation vis-a-vis those countries”. The constraint upon more detailedly conceptualising *life* outside the nationalised social body was reflected in Alina’s account of her “middle class” upbringing, confessing she was unable to conceptualise everyday experiences outside the socialist context at the time: “Actually, I thought this is how all my life would be, you know? You couldn’t see the way out”.

# Bananas and Oranges of Christmas Past: Subject Formation under (Post)Socialism

Written by Maria Persu

## *The (dis)continuities of a revolution*

Alina described the months following the Revolution as a period marked by a complete state of euphoria, using a metaphor of 'darkness', implicitly standing for socialism, versus 'light'. According to Alina, whose economic situation did not improve immediately after the fall of the regime, "[the shortages] continued, but there was this effervescence after the Revolution, when practically we could see the light." Bianca appealed to another insightful metaphor to describe the early 1990s: "[it was] you know, like tearing apart a dam... And torrents of water poured down into nature."

Although the economic crises persisted, reinforced by some of the economic reforms such as price liberalization (Ciocănel 2016, p. 43), the Revolution and the abundance in consumer goods that followed removed the perceived barrier placed on the individual subject's desires, triggering the search for a completely novel understanding of the *Self*. The portrayal of the Revolution as a rupture point in history brings to mind de Certeau's idea of modern revolutions representing projects in which the whole of society seeks to start from a *tabula rasa* state in recreating itself "with respect to the past, to write itself by itself", and in effect remake history entirely (de Certeau 1988, p. 135). In Bianca's case, the rewriting of herself by herself in her everyday life consisted in overindulging in her favorite foods, "chocolate eggs, chocolate, bananas". Bianca treated these acts as "logical" – they persisted until she "calmed down [her] accumulated frustrations and cravings", which subside as "one quickly forgets that zone of frustration and restrictions". Consumer enjoyment represented a way through which the subject reconstructed themselves in relation to what was perceived as a novel social reality.

Alongside experiencing tastes in new ways and quantities, the practice of travelling abroad contributed to the rapid absorption of new elements to be incorporated into one's sense of selfhood. Bianca described her first trip abroad to Switzerland as an epiphany, closely paying attention to, but being unable to grasp, the refinery of Swiss consumer habits: "I couldn't even... perceive it, represent it to myself. Quality, refinery, taste, *good* taste. I didn't know, I couldn't have formed them for myself before, I didn't have any other points of reference". A similar realisation surmised in journalist Viorel Sălăgean's first encounter with Turkish consumer culture described in the 19/08/1990 edition of *Adevărul*, in the article entitled *There is also the Turkish Model* [Există și modelul turcesc]. The title puts Turkey on a par with Western Europe in terms of its exemplarity. Sălăgean describes the cosy grocery shops of Istanbul, their attractively presented bananas, salami, pistachio, and ice-cold drinks, alongside clothing stores so elegant that the Romanian tourists "do not know what to ask for". Consumption under the present conditions implied a *knowing* about the social world that needed to reshape itself – it could be partially acquired through encounters with new geographies that were positively perceived as role models.

The tendency towards discontinuing and deconstructing a former historical and personal path cohabitated in the press discourses with a sense of confusion towards the epoch's uncertainties. Thus, as a political goal, the protection of the social body from what was foreign materialised in both old and new ways. In the *Libertatea* newspaper of 22nd December 1990, one article by Viorel Chifu laments the price increases for products such as grapefruits and oranges. While Chifu supports these measures for "indigenous" fruit, he remarks ironically that by raising import fruit prices "we have proposed for ourselves to better the economies of all the countries with which we come into contact" (italicisation mine). The perpetuation of the dichotomy between local and imported, between national and foreign, is indicative of the continuities between socialist and post-socialist discourses.

In the 25/07/1996 edition of *România Liberă*, Ion Drăgănoiu describes the new 'Romanian' political condition as that of a "banana republic". Here, the syntagm refers to more than just Romania representing a 'failed modern state'. Through the use of a sequence of metaphors, the author sets the temporal scene of postsocialism in a negatively *othered* primitive time, placing the 'new' Romanian subject outside 'modernity': "... the majority of the population shakes the trees instead of ploughing the fields. 'To plough' is a general term for doing something useful, productive, which brings about revenues, instead of just shaking down the gigantic banana tree that the gigantic bellies of new and old party activists have climbed up (...). The small and delicate question is who brought us into the state of a banana republic? In Ceaușescu's time, we at least knew that bananas came at Christmas time". Unsustained by a clear and determinate project, the political class of postsocialism is unable to efficiently order social realities – *unlike* 'Ceaușescu', here a personalising synecdoche for 'Romanian' socialism.

# Bananas and Oranges of Christmas Past: Subject Formation under (Post)Socialism

Written by Maria Persu

Overall, whereas state practices under socialism biopolitically constructed bananas and oranges as dangerous *Others*, for ordinary individuals tropical fruits stood as symbols for a desired outside world. The Revolution was, on the one hand, perceived as enabling a terrain upon which the subject could reconstruct themselves anew. On the other, some of the narratives I discovered in the 1990-1996 press proved the simultaneous discursive continuities between socialism and postsocialism.

## Conclusion

My dissertation inquired about (post)socialist subject formation by undertaking an analysis of the discursive practices surrounding bananas and oranges as scarce but longed-for consumer goods under socialism. By undertaking this research, I aimed to bring my contribution to the political study of Eastern European consumer cultures. The analysis of consumer practices alongside institutional ones enables us to make visible the ways in which power and resistance manifest themselves in the *everyday*. Bananas and oranges represented my entry pass into the rather obscured world of (post)socialist everyday practices. Their singularity unlocked a plural universe populated by a plethora of objects, institutions, concepts, symbols, and geographies, standing in relation with one another, a universe through which I have tried to narrate the uncertain trajectories of the 'Romanian' (post)socialist subject.

The multiple ways through which (post)socialist subjects were constituted leads me to the following theoretical conclusion. A locus where multi-levelled discursive practices intersect, operating in the *micro-* and *nano-*domains of power-knowledge, the subject is in a continuous process of transformation. Subject formation involves a perpetual struggle (on behalf of institutions, groups, and individuals) to establish a graspable rapport between the present *Self* and *othered* times, geographies, and identities. It involves negative and positive differentiation, both fear of and desire for the *Other*. The plural modes through which a subject is constituted arose by the means of the singular and the repetitive. I arrived here by analysing the discursive practices that historically surrounded just two fruits, the banana and the orange. They symbolically hid behind them what de Certeau and Giard (1998, p. 256) observe more generally about everyday culture:

"Ordinary culture hides a fundamental diversity of situations, interests, and contexts under the apparent repetition of objects that it uses. Pluralization is born from ordinary usage, from this immense reserve that the number and multiple of differences constitute."

## End Notes

[1] "I would like to eat an orange." "Why one and not six?"

[2] I use the term (post)socialism to refer to the 1960s-1990s period in Romania for two reasons. First, it is inclusive of both periods under study, preceding and succeeding the 1989 Revolution. Second, by subsuming the two under (post)socialism I avoid assuming a historically teleological trajectory from communism to Western capitalism in Romania (Ciocănel 2016, p. 41). When used, the parentheses in (post)socialism stress the political confusion characteristic of the 1990s as a decade (Verdery 1996, p. 10).

[3] In the 2000s-2010s, e.g. the volumes *Food and Everyday Life in the Postsocialist World* (2009), *Revoluția română televizată* (2009), *Communism unwrapped* (2012), or *The Socialist Good Life* (2020).

[4] Where self-reflexivity is "a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researcher's positionality as well as active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome" (Berger 2015 p. 220).

[5] All of the participants' names are pseudonyms.

[6] I asked each of the participants which video call platform they preferred. These were Zoom (1), Microsoft Teams (2), and Google Meets (1).

# Bananas and Oranges of Christmas Past: Subject Formation under (Post)Socialism

Written by Maria Persu

[7] With the exception of Caldwell (2009b).

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**Almanacs**

# **Bananas and Oranges of Christmas Past: Subject Formation under (Post)Socialism**

Written by Maria Persu

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