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Alexandru Iorga: Interests, Resources and Social Security. Case study: The Danube Delta, Romania

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This paper is based on his research proposal concept and should be considered a rough draft.

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Abstract

In this paper I discuss my Ph.D. proposal concept by framing an alternative theoretical and methodological approach to investigating the Danube Delta and by presenting some insights from my previous fieldwork. During the communist period, the Danube Delta was the best area for fishing, obtaining new agricultural land, hunting, and harvesting bulrushes by employing the local labour force. Nowadays, however, the situation has changed: access to the region is becoming increasingly restricted due to the establishment of protected areas; privatization processes and concessions are also affecting the region. The main problem is seen to consist of poaching, especially when linked to corruption. Moreover, the Danube Delta has become a very popular tourist destination and numerous outside investors have various interests in the area.

The question of the project is: how are local and external interests shaping the local population's access to the Delta resources and thereby influencing the inhabitants' social security? The larger significance of this project is to shed light on whether social security is being provided to the local population, i.e. whether inhabitants of the region are still able to access and earn their living from these resources, and whether formal and/or informal mechanisms are involved in determining access to and allocation of the resources. By proposing a new conceptual framework and a complex qualitative methodology, I aim to achieve a better understanding of the roles and meanings of water and land in the contemporary Danube Delta.

1. Introduction

Access to resources in post-socialist Romania is a topic of major concern with complex and profound implications for the average citizen's life. It is obvious that the 'economic and social disparities between [as well as within] the regions are constantly growing'.¹ If the problems of resource access are more visible in other regions, it is because the issues concern only land and woods and the territory is quite accessible. In the Danube Delta, however, the problems are less visible because the significance of water is continually changing (from a resource to an infrastructure, from access to it to access through it, etc.).

During the communist period, the Danube Delta was the best place for fishing, obtaining new agricultural land², hunting, and harvesting bulrushes by employing the local labour force. Nowadays, however, the situation has changed: access to the region is becoming increasingly restricted due to the designation of protected areas; privatization processes and concessions are also part of the equation. The main problem appears to be a combination of poaching and corruption. Poaching is practiced by locals, tourists, fisherman from private fisheries and concessionaires, especially in fishing but also in hunting; all of these groups have different motives. Moreover, the Danube Delta has become a very popular tourist destination and many outside investors have various interests in the area. The most important one is land, however, because anyone who manages to acquire land is guaranteed access and use of the water; in addition, landowners benefit from a few financial amenities given by the state. To furnish a comparative perspective, I will try to establish the history

¹ Fishing Operational Program, Romania, p. 6, http://www.mapam.ro/pages/piscicultura/programul_operational_pentru_pesceuit_ro.pdf, accessed 10 October 2008.

² I'm referring here to polders, i.e. land regained from the water that is very fertile.

of intervention in the area – by the state before 1989 and by the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve Authority (DDBRA) since 1990.

Since its creation in 1990, the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve Authority (DDBRA) has been a political, legislative and ecological topic of dispute. Generally, most of the concerns about the area have focused on economic and political issues, with little regard for the inhabitants. The DDBRA was, from the very start, developed as an ecosystem requiring economic and environmental management. The local population was overlooked, and when their presence was noticed, they were regarded as potential enemies whose interests were contrary to those of the state or environment. The needs of the Danube Delta inhabitants were marginalized and even ignored by the laws that govern access to economic opportunity by administering and exploiting natural resources.

2. Research Objectives

The project aims to document how people experience transformations of property rights³ and access (in the sense developed by Ribot and Peluso⁴) to land and water resources.⁵ It will focus on two main issues: 1. the analysis of the current local situation (resources, welfare, life and economic strategies, etc.) and 2. the associative capacity in a de-development⁶ context after 1989. This de-development context has redefined the meaning of notions such as resources, community, agency⁷, etc. I will outline the history of state intervention before 1989 and the actions taken by the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve Authority (DDBRA) since 1990 and compare the impacts of these interventions. The specific objectives are: to analyse the status of productive resources from the actors' perspective; to identify the involved local state actors and their position in the power web (focusing on the local distribution of power); to identify the processes at work in the participation of local state actors in resource management; to identify how social security is locally translated and enacted by local state actors and villagers; and to identify and describe the mechanisms of access.

³ See Verdery, Katherine: Property and Power in Transylvania's decollectivization, in: Hann, C. M. (ed.): Property relations. Renewing the anthropological tradition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 160–180; Verdery, Katherine: Seeing Like a Mayor. Or, How Local Officials Obstructed Romanian Land Restitution, in: *Ethnography*, 2002 (Vol. 3), No. 1, pp. 5–33; Hann, Chris: Introduction: The embeddedness of property, in: Hann, C. M. (ed.): Property Relations. Renewing the anthropological tradition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 1–47; von Benda-Beckmann, Franz / von Benda-Beckmann, Keebet: Struggles over communal property. Rights and law in Minangkabau, West Sumatra, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology Working Papers No. 64, 2004.

⁴ Ribot, C. J. / Peluso, N. L.: A Theory of Access, in: *Rural Sociology*, 2003, (Vol. 62), No. 2, pp. 153–181.

⁵ Berkes, Fikret: Property Rights and Coastal Fisheries, in: Pomeroy, R. S. (ed.): Community Management and Common Property of Coastal Fisheries in Asia and the Pacific. Concepts, Methods and experiences, Manila, Philippines, International Centre for Living Aquatic Resources (ICLARM), 1994, pp. 51–62, here p. 51

⁶ Meurs, M. / Ranasinghe, R.: De-Development in Post-Socialism. Conceptual and Measurement Issues, in: *Politics & Society*, 2003 (Vol. 31), No. 1, pp. 31–53

⁷ 'Purposeful action. This term implies that actors have the freedom to create, change and influence events.' Bilton, Tony (et al.): *Introductory Sociology*, 3rd edn, London: Macmillan, 1996, p. 654.

3. Questions

The guiding research question is: **How are local and external interests shaping the local population's access to the Danube Delta resources and thereby influencing the inhabitants' social security?** The following related questions will be considered:

- Are the local state actors considered mediators or subjects of disapproval?
- Comparing local and non-local interests, what are the mechanisms and strategies that structure access to productive resources?
- Considering that 'some actors pool their power, forming bundles of owners, workers, or beneficiaries acting in concert to assert greater control or to maintain their resource access'⁸, what are the gains of participation that motivate local state actors to act?
- How is social security linked with access to natural resources?
- Which mechanisms related to property rights and the management of resources contribute to ensuring or threatening the social security of the Danube Delta villagers?
- What are the strategies influencing their social security and how are they structured?

4. Methodology

Data collection will be based on fieldwork conducted within the community; this work will consist of formal and informal interviews, participative and direct observation, and photography⁹. The research will seek¹⁰ to include villagers, local state actors, authorities from DDBRA and state authorities in order to obtain different perspectives that can shed light on the interplay of protected areas, local state authorities, access to resources and the social security of the local inhabitants.

5. Background and literature review

Generally, there is a relatively rich body of literature on the topic of poverty in Romania, but the subject is approached in terms of quality of life or social work/assistance; social security is not addressed. In addition, poverty is seen as a problem in itself, and scholars tend to deal with its consequences rather than with its causes. There is also a growing body of literature on the topic of common pool resources and access to these, but the research is limited to land and wood (forests) issues and does not quite touch upon social security. Furthermore, certain Romanian property and access laws, such as 18/1991, 1/2000 and 247/2005, have brought significant change to the rural structure, affecting the landscapes and household strategies as well as forcing people to deal with new problems and develop new mechanisms for obtaining social security.

⁸ Ribot, C. J./ Peluso N. L.: A Theory of Access, in: *Rural Sociology*, 2003, (Vol. 62), No. 2, pp. 153–181, here p. 173.

⁹ I.e. reflexive photography (photo-elicitation technique).

¹⁰ A multi-sited ethnography will be conducted (see Marcus, George E.: *Ethnography in/of the World System. The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography*, in: *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 1995 (Vol. 24), pp. 95–117).

Water and fishing represents one of the most important natural resources in Romania, but up to now it has not been fully exploited (coastal water and fisheries, for example, are practically unknown, except for isolated cases). In the Danube Delta, this resource is far more important, because it sustains a significant part of the population; indeed,

in [the] Danube Delta, fishing is the most important activity, closely followed by sheep and cattle breeding, and traditional agriculture. Besides the fact that there are no official data, there are about 1500 fisherman [among the] 15,000 inhabitants. [The] Danube Delta represents one of the few European areas [in] which people truly rely on fishing.¹¹

For a better understanding of the Danube Delta, it is necessary to consider a few details: first, there are various legislative layers involved (including the usual ones that are found everywhere as well as special ones, such as a biosphere reserve), each of which requires a different response from those affected. Second, decentralization programmes have transferred the responsibility and administration of resources to local governments, which has led to the sudden emergence of more important and powerful local actors. Third, against the background of a 'lack of tradition in cooperation between local partners'¹² in the area, commune associations appear to be a strange thing. Finally, while natural resources are easily identifiable, the main resource here is a matter of ambiguity (i.e. it is a natural productive resource, a form of access (to the infrastructure) and the subject of ecological protection, etc.).

While the DDBRA is oriented toward developing sustainable strategies concerning the conservation of deltaic ecosystems (yet ignoring the human element), the County Council is strictly concerned with financial issues. The latter holds the property rights to land¹³, polders and old fisheries and uses them in order to become better situated in the power networks. Locally, the case of the Murighiol commune (Tulcea County), whose administrative area consists of land, deltaic forests and surface water, has become commonplace: It was declared a reservation area, but the inhabited area was excluded from the arrangement, and its residents are forbidden access to the old territory and its resources. Last but not least, the development politics proposed by the County Council and DDBRA, even when they did not contradict each other, have had a negative impact on the villagers' situation.

Theoretically, the relationship between local state actors¹⁴ and the County Council is one of cooperation, but in reality, it is one of dependency, since the Council is in charge of distributing funds. Behind this ambiguous process there is a political preference criterion that structures the power relations between the institutions. The weakness¹⁵ of local state actors¹⁶ inside the formal and

¹¹ Pop, L. (ed.): A Diagnosis upon the Welfare in two Communities. Murighiol and Crişan, Tulcea County, University of Bucharest: Unpublished Report, 2005, p. 22.

¹² Ibid., p. 23.

¹³ Many villagers do not own land and they have no property rights on it, despite the fact that they have houses that were built more than 30 years ago (according to Romanian laws, they should already be the owners of this land). These kinds of situations are decreasing social security for the inhabitants.

¹⁴ Thelen, T. / Cartwright, A. / Sikor, T.: Local State and Social Security in Rural Communities. A new research agenda and the example of post socialist Europe, Paper developed out of discussions at the workshop 'Access to productive resources and social security in rural Hungary, Romania and Serbia', Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Manuscript, 2006.

¹⁵ Verdery, Katherine: Theorizing Socialism. A Prologue to the 'Transition' Source, in: American Ethnologist. Representations of Europe. Transforming State, Society, and Identity, 1991 (Vol. 18), No. 3 (Aug.), pp. 419–439, here p. 426; Verdery, Katherine: Seeing Like a Mayor. Or, How Local Officials Obstructed Romanian Land Restitution, in: Ethnography, 2002 (Vol. 3), No. 1, pp. 5–33.

informal networks¹⁷ can affect the community on a long-term basis because it allows exogenous interests, i.e. politically-based ones, to take priority over the local inhabitants' needs.¹⁸

In order to understand how resources¹⁹, property²⁰ and people are managed at the local level in the Danube Delta, a definition of rights and access is necessary. The concept of access, as conceptualized by Ribot and Peluso, is 'the ability to benefit from things – including material objects, persons, institutions or symbols'.²¹ However, in this particular case I will distinguish between *property*, *rights*, and *access* and between *technical access* and *ability*. As Măntescu and Vasile have suggested, technical access is the response to a context enforced from outside and not developed from social relations like ability is. Technical access is generally defined by external circumstance, conjecture or environment rather than individual ability. Ability is an inherent attribute of individuals, developed over time, cultivated in a social context, and a part of individual sociality.²²

¹⁶ Verdery, Katherine: Seeing Like a Mayor. Or, How Local Officials Obstructed Romanian Land Restitution, in: *Ethnography*, 2002 (Vol. 3), No. 1, pp. 5–33; Thelen, T. / Cartwright, A. / Sikor, T.: Local State and Social Security in Rural Communities. A new research agenda and the example of post socialist Europe, Paper developed out of discussions at the workshop 'Access to productive resources and social security in rural Hungary, Romania and Serbia', Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Manuscript, 2006.

¹⁷ See Jones, Andrew: Beyond embeddedness. Economic practices and the invisible dimensions of transnational business activity, in: *Progress in Human Geography*, 2008 (Vol. 32), No. 1, pp. 71–88.

¹⁸ Those facts are based on interviews and personal observations from previous fieldwork (2005, 2008 and 2009). See also Pop, L. (ed.): A Diagnosis upon the Welfare in two Communities. Murighiol and Crişan, Tulcea County, University of Bucharest, unpublished report, 2005.

¹⁹ Thelen, T. / Cartwright, A. / Sikor, T.: Local State and Social Security in Rural Communities. A new research agenda and the example of post socialist Europe, paper developed out of discussions at the workshop 'Access to productive resources and social security in rural Hungary, Romania and Serbia', Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Manuscript, 2006; Béné, C. / Neiland, A. / Jolley, T. / Ovie, S. / Sule, O. / Ladu, B. / Mindjimba, K. / Belal, E. / Tiotsop, F. / Baba, M. / Dara, L. / Zakara, A. / Quensiere, J.: Inland Fisheries, Poverty, and Rural Livelihoods in the Lake Chad Basin, in: *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 2003 (Vol. 38), No. 1, pp. 17–51.

²⁰ Verdery, Katherine: Property and Power in Transylvania's decollectivization, in: Hann, C. M. (ed.): Property relations. Renewing the anthropological tradition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 160–180; Verdery, Katherine: Seeing Like a Mayor. Or, How Local Officials Obstructed Romanian Land Restitution, in: *Ethnography*, 2002 (Vol. 3), No. 1, pp. 5–33; Hann, Chris: Introduction: The embeddedness of property, in: Hann, C. M. (ed.): Property Relations. Renewing the anthropological tradition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 1–47; von Benda-Beckmann, Franz / von Benda-Beckmann, Keebet: Struggles over communal property. Rights and law in Minangkabau, West Sumatra, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology Working Papers No. 64, 2004.

²¹ Ribot, C. J. / Peluso N. L.: A Theory of Access, in: *Rural Sociology*, 2003, (Vol. 62), No. 2, pp. 153–181, here p. 153

²² Măntescu, Liviu / Vasile, Monica: Local Interests and Individual Belonging in Village Forest Commons in Vrancea Mountains of Romania. (1) Village Forest Commons. Community Structures in the Self-Governance Process; (2) The Individual and the Forest Commons, presented at 'Building the European Commons. From Open Fields to Open Source', European Regional Meeting of the International Association for the Study of Common Property (IASCP), Brescia, Italy, 23–25 March 2006.

6. Expected results

The special case of the Danube Delta can illustrate new perspectives concerning the impact of access to productive resources on social security, not only in agriculture and forestry²³, but also related to **water and fisheries** (a topic that has been rather unexplored in anthropological research).

Moreover, most of the inhabitants within/from the protected area do not own any property and are subject to restrictions on landowning, but they continue to make their living from local productive resources, i.e. from fishing and farming, and they even sell property, i.e. land and houses. Although Ribot and Peluso situate access in a series of political, economic, and social mechanisms, my statement is that social systems are also embedded in their biophysical environment²⁴, and thus environmental circumstances can affect access.

Hence, ethnographical research can bring significant contributions to the theory of access²⁵ because it considers access in relation to protected areas as well as strategies to overcome social insecurities by proposing new definitions of access and ability. More precisely, in a situation of lack of property and of such an environment, the mechanisms of access as proposed by Ribot and Peluso have to be reconsidered and/or reassessed.

My project develops field research in a site that I have already visited, but with a new conceptual and theoretical frame, and provides insight into the interplay of protected areas, local state authorities, access to land and **water/fisheries**, and social security in post-socialist Romania.

²³ Sik, Endre / Redmond, Gerry: Coping Strategies in Central European Countries, in: Hutton, Sandra / Redmond, Gerry (eds): Poverty in Transition Economies, London, New York: Routledge, 2000, pp. 267–286.

²⁴ See Kottak, Conrad P.: The New Ecological Anthropology, in: American Anthropologist, 1999 (Vol. 101), No. 1, pp. 23–25.

²⁵ Ribot, C. J. / Peluso N. L.: A Theory of Access, in: Rural Sociology, 2003 (Vol. 62), No. 2, pp. 153–181.