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## The New Soviet City and the Role of Cultural Work in Identity Construction of Migrant Workers (Case Study: Victoria City, Romania)

Daniela Spînu (Dumitru)<sup>a</sup> \*

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<sup>a</sup> *Phd. Candidate, Doctoral School of Political Science, Faculty of Political Science, University of Bucharest, Bucharest, Romania*

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### Abstract

**Problem statement and purpose of study:** According to Kotkin (1995), the building of the new socialist cities served, apart from the geopolitical, demographic and industrial objectives, as a micro political process of creating the new man. Soviet concepts of urban planning imagined, almost mythically, how the whole of society would change. Following the slogan “Build a plant and civilization will follow”, like Magnitogorsk, Nova Hutě, Dimitrovgrad's or Visaginas, the birth of Victoria City, due to the internal mobility of workers, remains one of the most interesting social experiments. This issue however is still under addressed in the Romanian literature, the most recent debates being those of the 70s. The aim of this case study lies in trying to observe the means by which, in the absence of a common history, traditions and customs, the socialist powers tried to ensure the integration of migrants into the new community and their identity reconstruction.

In this new space of socialism, for newcomers such concepts as evolution, reconfiguration, belonging, and redefinition become key elements. How can you have an identity when living in a new city with no past, no traditions and customs?

**Methods:** This article addresses the role of “cultural work” in the construction of a sense of belonging to the newly created community. Therefore, it will analyse documents from the local archives in combination with the analysis of a series of personal photos of the first internal migrants in Victoria.

**Results and conclusions:** Manifested in various forms, from the production and interpretation of music, professional dancing, theatre, painting and sculpture, this kind of *proletkul* was meant to be a substitute for the lack of a genuine tradition, producing a new social lifestyle and thus a new identity. In this respect, apart from their ideological pattern, our analysis of relevant personal photos suggests the conspicuous role of socialization as a tool for transmitting values and behaviors, underlying the construction of identity in a new social context. Although the ideological lines imposed what Clark (1993) called “the theatricalization of everyday life under socialism” (p.35), it will be interesting to observe, in a further investigation, how far the ideological practices overlap with migrant’s informal life.

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\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +40 721 492 955;  
E-mail address: [daniella.spinu@yahoo.com](mailto:daniella.spinu@yahoo.com)

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## 1. Introduction

Apart from their geopolitical, demographic and industrial objectives, the building of the new socialist cities served, according to Kotkin (1995), as a micropolitical process in the creation of the new man. The soviet concept of urban planning imagined, in an almost mythical manner, how the whole of society would change. Following the slogan “*Build a plant and civilization will follow*” the birth of the town of Victoria, like that of Magnitogorsk, Nova Hutě, Dimitrovgrad's or Visaginas, remains one of the most interesting social experiments, due to the internal mobility of workers.

In this new space of socialism, such concepts as evolution, reconfiguration, belonging and redefinition became key elements for the newcomers. After all, how could you have an identity when living in a new city with no past, no traditions and customs?

Socialist industrialization transformed the new cities into what Domanski (1997) called “socialist construction sites, places of socialism” (p.175), new residential areas being built around factories and plants.

In Victoria, this historical experience brought society to a new starting point. The birth of the community as a result of the generated labour mobility is eloquent proof of the victorious process of “becoming”, a *mutatis mutandis* around which concepts such as “conquest” or “building” are forged.

However, for the actors of the socialist internal migration the idea of travelling involved, according to Said (1990), issues of memory and the lack of continuity between past and present. According to Said “for a migrant, habits of life and work in the new environment occur against the memory of things that happened in the other environment” (Said, 1990, p.366). In Fitzpatrick's (2005) view, reinvention involves a process of both reconfiguration (“a new arrangement of data about oneself”) and discovery (“a new interpretation of their significance”) (p.3).

The duality of redefining the new socialist man inside of the newly created community involves “strategic decisions” and “ontological reflections” which make the genesis of issues such as ‘who am I?’ and ‘how do I insert myself into this new world?’ into the central axis of the debate concerning identity, (re)definition and social change.

Mobility can be translated, Seaman argues (1996), as the migrant's constraint to adapt to the new lifestyle, redefining the meaning of “home”, giving meaning to a “new community of foreigners, creating a common bond with those who share the same experience [...] giving the impression of a past collective heritage”(p.53). At this level of analysis the concept of “cultural work” becomes a compelling theoretical axis.

## 2. Methodology

In order to observe and analyze the role of the “cultural work” undertaken in the communist period in constructing the identity of migrant workers, we have chosen as our case study the city of Victoria, located in the southern part of Transylvania, approximately 100 km away from the city of Brasov. The construction of the I.V Stalin Chemical Plant in Victoria led to the transition from wooden shacks to collective apartment buildings. If in the beginning laborers lived inside the Chemical Plant, as in an enclave, the construction of the new soviet-designed apartment buildings allowed the socialist leadership to entice (through various ideological and economic means) workers from every corner of Romania to settle and work in Victoria. The birth certificate of the town dates from 1954, when it becomes “the first new town erected on the map of the Popular Republic of Romania” (Scinteia, 27 April, 1965).

Attempting to develop upon the role of "cultural work" in the construction of a sense of belonging to the newly created community, we will analyze documents from the local archives, while also undertaking an analysis of a series of personal photos of the first internal migrants to Victoria.

Meinhof and Galasinski (2000) argue that personal photo analysis plays a discernable role allowing individuals to locate themselves "both diachronically and synchronically, within their place and community" (p.327).

### 3. "Cultural work" as concept

"Cultural work" as concept has been widely applied in both sociology and political science. Scholars such as Hoffman (1994) addresses this issue from the perspective of a "civilizing process", a "soviet effort to install new cultural norms by everyday life" in order to reshape the whole society, they are attaching this notion to the changing status of peasant migrants (1994, p.16).

Others such Neil Edmunds (2004), Anna Ferenc (2004) or Lynn Mally (2000) pinpoint in their analyses the role of music in the creation, proliferation and socialization of a so called "culture of the future". In their further analysis, Hoffman (1994) and Mally (1990) mobilize the concept of "agitprop brigades" as part of "cultural work", becoming a kind of instrument in the implementation of government programs, "interprets who transformed the bureaucratic jargon of state initiatives into a language that average people would understand" (Mally, 1990, p.146).

"Cultural work" was also framed in terms of labor hygiene, family life, sexuality or leisure (Hoffman, 2003).

Nevertheless, beyond the fact that they relate to a common concept, all are focused on the analysis of archival documents, life histories, approaching this subject from a macro perspective. Although the visual production of cultural work remains one of the most important parts of the "political turmoil, being more effective as long as [it] presents more specifically to the people the problems and tasks that stand before them" (*Scinteia*, 18 May 1952), these studies do not include photographs, and even if they do, they serve only as illustration.

Taking this approach as our starting point, this article focuses on the analysis of internal migrants' personal photos in order to understand not only the manifestations of "cultural work" but rather its message. As an instrument for the transmission of social norms, migrant's photos of the '50s, '60s, in the context of a newly created community, with a young population whose average age was 38, become a very important axis in the promotion of ideology. Therefore, their message plays a discernable role in the identity redefinition process; these photos becoming living proof of a new life. This hypothesis is supported by one of the articles published in *Scinteia*. Detailing the appearance of three photos about the Soviet peasant life, it argues that "peasant workers can see in the pictures, how the Soviet peasants have built a new and happy life" (*Scinteia*, 8 August 1949, p.2).

### 4. Forms of cultural work and their message. Guidelines for identity reconstruction

The new Soviet cities were seen as "laboratories" for moulding a new lifestyle centred on the idea of "cultural work". In explaining the role of these activities, Steve Phillips (2000) brings into play the concept of socialization. It is a priority axis in building the sense of belonging whereby "popular cultural activities served a range of functions, they were a source of information, they provided entertainment. They were a useful form of escapism and they offered opportunities for socialization" (p.126).

Building a new socialist culture, Zvorykin (1970) says, outlines the "spiritual life of society", a culture created by man, but structurally different from the one created by nature. Defined as "an aggregate of the material and spiritual values produced by the creative activity of man in society through the application of the specific qualities possessed by him alone – the capacity for purposeful work, speech, thought and artistic activity" (Zvorykin, 1970, p.10), the socialist culture illustrates his progressive appearance.

The harmonious development imposed by the new lifestyle, a new style that bears the mark of the new man, was undertaken in pursuit of historical objectives (the evolution towards communism), contributing to the emergence of new forms of education, a "side of socialist creative individuals" (Zvorykin, 1970).

In brief, Deema Kaneff (2004) says, culture became the equivalent of "aesthetic education", a form connected "with socialism and individual happiness" (p.158).

Manifested in various forms, from the production and interpretation of music, professional dancing, theatre, painting, sculpture, the aim of this *proletkult* which was derived from the goals of socialism, was to contribute to "the completeness of life under socialism" (Kaneff, 2004).

The construction of Victoria City, during the burgeoning period of the socialist ideology, determined the retrieval of these ideological lines in the project of (re)defining the 'worker's spirit'.

The local archives from 2 March 1946 (Victoria Chemical Plant's Archive Nr. 31/1945-1946) mention the division of sporting and cultural activities into three groups: administrative, sports (athletics section including, hiking, biking and bowling) and cultural (music section including choir, instruments, chamber music, pop music, literary department, library, theatre, game casino - "specifying chess, backgammon, etc." (p.59) - and publications, including the departmental conferences and popularization courses, cinema, screenings).



**Fig.1: Representation of the agitation brigade, Plant's Club 1956**

The photo above reclaims a piece of the cultural activity in Victoria, at that time still called Ucea. At the first reading, the agitation brigade brings together young elegant representations of the new man, socialized into a new culture that will produce "persons capable of and willing to build a communist society" (Cash, 2011, p.56).

The picture is even more valuable because, as Pierre Bourdieu (1990) asserts, "it objectively determines the meaning which a group confers upon the photographic act as the ontological choice of an object which is perceived as worthy of being photographed, which is captured, stored, communicated, shown and admired" (p.5).

Looking more closely, it articulates a different perspective, that pertaining to the fact that "the real objects of photography are not individuals, but the relationships between individuals" (Bourdieu, 1990, p.24).

The young people represented embody social roles, expressed through clothing: a tie, a suit, a skirt of a different colour, all are symbols of what Kotkin (1995) deems to be "whether a person was a shock worker or a shirker, an award-winner or a breakdown-prone" (p.224).

Becoming part of the identity construction process, Susan Grant (2013) and Tommy Proctor say, the clothes develop into relevant social and political tools, able to generate "multiple meanings for both wearers and viewers simultaneously empowering an individual or a group with a sense of identity and dividing people according to status" (p.19). Victoria Bonnell (1999) adds that posture gestures, emotional expression and attire are all indicators that "prescribe" patterns of behavior.



*Fig.2: Embroidery courses, 1958*

Amateur artistic activities such as embroidery courses take place in the club, organized and supervised by professional artists, all with the purpose of “spreading political and scientific knowledge, bringing people into contact with art and literature, encouraging amateur scientific, technical and artistic effort, and organizing leisure-time pursuits” (Zvorykin, 1970, p.24).

From the earliest age (see Figure 2) from the nursery and primary school children (the uniform symbol) to the new socialist women, all are socialized “through culture” and “in culture” (White, 1990) in accordance with the PCR ideas (The Romanian Communist Party) whose logo is the mainstay of representation.

For “Institutions of cultural enlightenment,” activities such as those represented above contributed to “improving the quality of life and reducing social inequalities” (White, 1990, p.20). On this occasion, the photographs are an index of identification and social integration, “a sort of ideogram or allegory” (Bourdieu, 1990, p.36) recording a quasi-ritualistic model “most frequently reduced to a pure sign, intelligible only to someone who holds the key to it” (Bourdieu, 1990, p.27). The effort to produce an ideal-type culture, radically different from that one produced in capitalism, includes the establishment of amateur theatre programmes for the young workers (Kotkin, 1993).



*Fig.3. Amateur theatre representation, 1963*

Zvorykin (1970) states that mobilization in these cultural activities marks a window of opportunity allowing individuals to take part in the creation of cultural values and not just in their passive consumption. He argues that “such activities help raise the cultural standard in the country by increasing the knowledge and

understanding of art in those taking part, by revealing new talents and by spreading artistic culture amongst the people at large”(p.44).

The new socialist lifestyle promoted, through such activities, the disintegration of the relations “of dependence or inequality between people in family and social life” (White, 1990, p.20).

The new socialist man, the embodiment of physical perfection, moral integrity and spiritual wealth became an integral part of the ‘cultural renewal effort’, being subjected to the attention of the Party who was constantly concerned with the development of socialist culture. As Zvorykin argued, this type of new culture caught “ the removal of all obstacles, the fullest possible realization of every person’s potential abilities, the aesthetic education of all workers and the development, amongst the people, of a genuine comprehension of all that is best in culture and art” (1970, p.49).

Guided by these codes, the new man will be inspired to work, happy, morally and spiritually fulfilled. For the workers coming from internal migration from all over the country, belonging to these groups led to integration in the city’s environment and, in the absence of a specific culture, to identification with the traditions of the surrounding areas. This pattern is clearly exhibited through the traditional costumes worn during dance competitions.



*Fig. 4, Folk dance team representation, Plant’s Club 1956*

All these cultural representations, expressions of a socialist lifestyle, came to light perfectly on the occasion of May 1st celebrations that involved, Kotkin (1993) says, “a highly coordinated procession in which people marched in hierarchical groupings based on their place of work” (p.11).



*Fig 5: May 1st workers’ parade, 1952.  
11<sup>th</sup> Department of the I.V Stalin (Victoria) Chemical Plant*

The picture of the “11<sup>th</sup> Department” of the Chemical Plant’s workers is *par excellence* what Mitchell would call “a meta picture” or “a piece of movable cultural apparatus” (Mitchell, 1994).

Beyond limiting ourselves to the simplest understanding of photography as “nothing [more] than lines and shapes and colours on flat surfaces” (Mitchell, 1994, p.49), the image involves a series of symbols and texts. Seen through a sociological lens, this photography captures the major ceremonies that Bourdieu calls “behaviour that is socially approved and socially regulated, that is, behaviour that has already been solemnized” (Bourdieu, 1990, p.24).

Into this rigorously established hierarchy are added portraits of leaders that are held with care and pride by the working people. Lenin, Engels, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej appear in an iconography of power as workers carrying their effigies as at religious processions.

The analogy between the soviet leaders’ portraits and saints’ icons appears in the dialectic of Victoria Bonnell (1999) as a manifestation of the sacred. For the orthodox believers, these sacred images transmit, in fact, the very truth, the divine revelation, which leads to the fact that “the power of saints was thought to be especially concentrated in their icons which in time of need or on ritual occasions were used for special blessings” (Bonnell, 1999, p.4).

Thus, the Soviet policy images do not refer to institutions, still, promoting sacredness as part of a system of signs, requires a certain type of imaginary capable of transforming the consciousness.

## 1. Results and Conclusions

The work brigade agitation, the popular amateur theatre, folk dance competitions, embroidery classes or events such as the occasion of May 1st, all these cultural activities, as the core of *proletkult*, played a decisive role in initiating processes like social change and migrants’ identity (re)definition.

Framed, remanufactured and mobilized to the so called “new socialist city”, the Moldavian, Dobrogean or Oltenian worker, or the peasant from the neighbouring villages created and assumed a new identity on stage, a kind of *homo ludens*, becoming a witness of what Clark (1993) called “the theatricalization of everyday life under socialism”(p35). He learned “to glorify the communist lifestyle, to follow this moral and behavioural template, to promote the view that the communist way of life is right beyond any doubt as well as to discredit capitalist values” (Zemtsov, 2001, p.12).

The message of the new socialist lifestyle, without traditions, was propagated through the concept of “invented traditions”. Considered to be “a set of practices which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past” (Hobsbawn, 2012, p.1), they exercise, in Hobsbawn’s (2012) dialectic, three functions.

First, invented traditions betray a desire to complete Anderson’s “imagined community”, using social cohesion. In Victoria, this cohesion was achieved, as in most of the Soviet satellite states, by a concentration of the discourse articulated around the working class identity. The image of the new hero worker, says Bonnell draws attention to “the conscious workers who were the chosen people of Marxism –Leninism” (Bonnell, 1999, p.2).

At this level the second function comes into play, in other words, to establish and legitimize the institutions, statuses and relationships of authority, the motto of the directions being ‘the dictatorship of the proletariat’.

However, the analysis of the relevant personal photos suggests that the socialization function is a tool for transmitting values, behaviours, underlying the construction of identity in a new social context. Starting from this pattern, it would be interesting to see in a future analysis, to what extent these ideological practices overlapped with the migrants’ daily life.

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In the new street sex work and displaced it to suburban EU member states, which overall have the areas of the city, therefore increasing invisibility - lowest percentage of migrants in sex work, isolation, and vulnerability of sex workers migrants originate nearly exclusively from the (Bernstein 2007). neighboring countries, most of which are Since early 2000 governments also increased Eastern European and Central. Asian non-EU control over the indoor sex industry, as for states. It also engenders and necessarily result in improvement of migrant relies on the dualism between forced and voluntary sex workers' working conditions or their entry into prostitution, identifying migrant element to rights is best seen in the case of the women as victims of trafficking. Keywords: City, communication, cultural adaptation, integration, socio-cultural community, urban sociology INTRODUCTION The identity of an individual affects society through acts committed by individuals, who form groups, networks, organizations and institutions. The subject under investigation is the transformation migrant workers' identity in the modern metropolis, as well as the specifics of city life. Especially important is the question of how individual identity is created, the cultural forms through which society symbolizes this identity and, especially, the rate at which this happens. Migrant follows the rules of behaviour and cultural norms specific to their new place of residence, identifying with the relevant community. Migrant and cities: Research report on recruitment, employment, and working conditions of domestic workers in China. Type: Working paper. This study on domestic workers in China was conducted under the EU-China Dialogue on Migration and Mobility Support Project, a collaboration between the International Organization for Migration and the International Labour Organization, funded by the European Union. It examines the current situation of domestic workers in China with a focus on the case study of Beijing, including domestic workers' recruitment, employment, working conditions, social security, accessibility to legal protection, and complaint mechanisms.