

Research Coordinator: Razvan Stan

RESEARCH REPORT

Social Consequences of the Post-communist Deindustrialization Process -The Case of Jiu Valley Romanian Mining Region-

Paul Cengher, Adina Faraon, Nicoleta Ivan and Adina Negraru, who are students at National School of Political and Administrative Studies, contributed and directly participated in all the stages of this research

Introduction

The main objective of our research was to explore the social transformations brought in the Romanian Jiu Valley mining region¹ by the process of deindustrialization, and the ways in which the dismissed miners and their families experienced and answered to those changes.

As a process of large proportions the post-communist deindustrialization is often approached from a macroeconomic and macro-political perspective. The social dimension of this process is mostly eluded both from the public and from the academic discourses, little being known about the effects and reactions brought at personal, family and community levels.

In order to contribute toward filling this gap, this research focuses on the case of Jiu Valley. We believe that this mining region is a privileged site for the anthropological research of deindustrialization because of the strong social impact of this process. Whether during communism Jiu Valley was a “promised land” for the workers who came from different parts of the country, being supported by economic, social and political mechanisms, the post-communist deindustrialization led to a sudden and massive dismissing that was not accompanied by appropriate social protection measures. In only

¹ Jiu Valley mining region is situated in the southwestern part of Romania, in Hunedoara County. The field-research was developed in May 2004 as part of the HESP “Teaching Anthropology. Means and Meaning” program

four years the number of Jiu Valley employees in mining industry was reduced to half (from 41482, in 1995, to 18390, in 1999), while the number of population remained almost constant (from 171698, in 1995, to 167873, in 2000).²

Seen as a necessary “shock therapy” the massive dismissing was triggered by several governmental ordinances that were issued under the pressure of international monetary institutions and were legitimized by the necessity of transition from a central-planned to a market economy. Especially in monoindustrial regions, as is the case of Jiu Valley, these measures brought unintended social-economic consequences. Instead of restructuring of industry we find deindustrialization. Instead of professional re-conversion and creation of new working places we find unemployment and ‘black labor’. Instead of institutional re-integration we find informal coping strategies.

The exploration of the social, cultural and economic changes that took place in Jiu Valley at community and everyday-life levels required a social-anthropological approach and research methodology. Life history interview was the main method we used. The interviews we held with dismissed miners and their families provided valuable insights about their life experiences and about the coping strategies that they developed. The access to the non-discursive aspects of workers’ lives was facilitated through observation, with different degrees of participation. Finally, the data regarding the evolution of Jiu Valley total, active and dismissed population provides a “structural” context for understanding the deindustrialization process.

The research findings of this report are structured in two main chapters. The first chapter focuses on the experience of dismissals and on the effects brought at class, community, family and personal levels. The second chapter explores the coping strategies that were developed by dismissed miners and their families and the nature of the social networks that sustain them. The following chapter summarizes the research findings and focuses on several theoretical and methodological implications. In the context of the strong didactic emphasis of our program, the last chapter describes the activity of the students involved in this research and sustains the role of the fieldwork research in teaching anthropology.

² National Coal Company, Petrosani.

I. Becoming Non-Miners. Class, Family and Identity Transformations under the Deindustrialization Process

In order to understand the social impact of deindustrialization on the lives of Jiu Valley dismissed miners and their families, a short reference to their past social and professional life is necessary. To become a dismissed miner (*disponibilizat*) meant not only to lose a working place but also to lose a social statute and a strong professional identity. The transformations were profound, a whole way of life being changed.

During communism, Romanian miners occupied a central place in the legitimization strategy of the party-state (*the cult of labour*). Although in over-inflated terms, the miners' professional and social lives were present in the political and journalistic discourses. In these discourses they were considered "heroes" of the working class, responsible agents for the communist evolution of the country. Various local ideological strategies as the "labor contests" and the "honor posters" (*panourile de onoare*) strengthened this image.

Beside this ideological construction, the particularities of profession contributed to the creation of an occupational identity especially in the case underground workers. Mine was a main site of social integration before the beginning of the deindustrialization process. A key role was played by the institution of *ortacie*. As one former miners told, to be *ortaci* meant to be fellows but also to be brothers. The dangerous and difficult work underground created close-knit social relations between the work-mates that were continued at the surface in various socialization and reciprocal-aid activities.

The post-communist changes led to strong class transformation in Romania. From the elite position, the industrial workers, in general, and the miners, in special, became some of the least respected categories. Under the new global context of the transition toward a market economy they ceased to be a strategic class. Their salaries and benefits strongly decreased. As a perverse effect, their protest movements, including their famous marches to Bucharest (*mineriade*)³, contributed to their statute overturning, being accused of provoking political instability and of scarring off the foreign investments.

³ There were 6 *mineriade* that took place between 1990 and 1999.

The deindustrialization process, that took the local social dimension of sudden and massive dismissals, strongly affected the lives of the Jiu Valley miners and their families. From their discourses it clearly resulted the fact that the main tuning point in their lives was not 1990, when the national political regime was changed, but the year 1997 when the first massive wave of dismissals began (36% of mining employees were dismissed in the same year)⁴. This massive unemployment was stimulated by governmental ordinances that encouraged the workers to leave their jobs, offering to buy their contracts at relatively favorable rates (8 to 12 salaries).

Even if the dismissals (*disponibilizari*) were made, in most of the cases, according to the workers' own wills, their "voluntary" character is debatable. Most of the miners missed an adequate representation about the risks and consequences of losing their working places and based their decisions on their communist experience when there was almost impossible to remain unemployed. In their discourses, they often accused the central and local authorities of betraying and lies. As one dismissed miner told us,

I am a product of this society. Not only me but all the others who took *disponibilizari* in 1997. I do not know if I am good or bad, but you produced me. You put me in this situation. I did not choose this way. I (just) chosen the lie you told me. You told me that you give me a working place after nine months.⁵

This quotation also indicates one important dimension of identity change. While before '97 the miners related to the authorities as members of a powerful professional class, beginning with the massive dismissals they changed their relation with the authorities, becoming powerless individuals. In this new context they felt abandoned by the State and its mainstream institutions. As the same dismissed miners suggestively states,

I have no statute. I am not "employed" and I am not "unemployed". I am an excluded one. I am not officially registered. [...] From human I became non-human. I am at the last stage of existence ... I do not know how to call myself.

⁴ In 2000 the Jiu Valley population employed in mining industry was reduced by 58% (National Coal Company, Petrosani)

⁵ M, dismissed miner.

Neither I am garbage, because I should stay in garbage. I think this is what the State wants.⁶

The compensatory salaries received by the dismissed miners proved to be an illusory earning. Most of them loosed these money in a short time. Several structural and cultural factors contribute to their harsh poverty. Among the structural factors a central role was played by inflation and by the absence o working places in the context of the mono-industrial character of the region. The failure to find working places on the official market was also determined by the non-transferable character of mining skills and by the absence of adequate professional re-conversion measures.

Besides these factors, the consumption practices contributed to the increasing of poverty and social exclusion. In order to confirm their social status, many of them bought cars, furniture and electronic equipment. Some of them even displayed conspicuous consumption behavior. Through these practices they broke the central value of hard working and became excluded from the former professional community. In this way, *disponibilizat* meant to become a non-miner, to be blamed by the other miners, to have a stigmatized identity.

The exclusion from the professional community also took place both at the level of discourses and at that of practices. They ceased to be *ortaci*, to be invited to drink together or to be financially supported by their former work-mates. Thus, they loose an important source of friendship and sociality. As one former miner told,

We were like brothers. Although the work and the words were tough, when we got out of the mine we used to drink together. The mine was very dangerous. It sacrificed human lives. My *ortaci* meant brothers for me. We were united and we helped each other. I was telling them: "I'll go on holiday and I need help with money." They helped me with loans. ... But now we are dispersed. Nobody is giving you 5000 lei (1.20 Eur).⁷

Deindustrialization and brought important changes in family roles and gender relations. During communism the industrial workers in general and the miners in particular were ideologically constructed as a symbol of masculinity. Besides, their sense

⁶ Idem.

⁷ S.T. dismissed miner.

of masculinity and responsibility was sustained by the fact that they performed a very dangerous work and by the fact that they were the main economic sustainers of their families. On the other side the women from Jiu Valley were almost absent from the public life and from the public discourses, their roles being almost reduced to the household activities. According to a local joke, for the women from Jiu Valley to be the wife of a miner was the best profession.

The experience of becoming unemployed led to a “symbolic castration”⁸ for the miners from Jiu Valley, to a crisis of masculinity. As one former miner said, “As *disponibilizat* you are disfavored both as men and as friend”. We found cases when the family roles clearly changed, when the woman became the main economic sustainer of the family and the men took care of children at home. In this context we consider that we face a process of “regendering” in Jiu Valley. The distribution of roles, agency and power is changing at household and public levels.

While the family was strongly affected by the social-economic crisis brought by deindustrialization it also provided safety, hope, and survival resources. As one dismissed miner told us, “I started to quarrel with my wife because of problems and shortcomings. Fortunately, I have a strong wife. Otherwise she could left me long time ago.”⁹ The love for children played an important role in the struggle for survival. As the same dismissed miner said, “Firstly, I am not affected by my own situation. I am affected by the situation of my children. We are at a step from disaster. I fight for their situation.”¹⁰

Until now we addressed the story of dismissed miners’ socioeconomic exclusion and the changes brought by deindustrialization at class, family and personal levels. For a more complete image it is also important to explore the coping strategies of the unemployed workers and their families, the ways in which their agency was put into practice in spite of a very restricted range of options.

⁸ Vintila Mihailescu, “Introduction” in Magdalena Craciun, Maria Grecu and Razvan Stan, *The World of the Valley: The Unity of Mine, The diversity of Miners*, Bucharest: Paideia, 2002.

⁹ M., dismissed miner

¹⁰ Idem.

II. Responses to Crisis: Survival Strategies of the Dismissed Miners

In front of their crisis, the dismissed miners and their families creatively used their relational resources and cultural skills in order to survive. Their social-economic exclusion was not a total one. Although they were excluded from their former fellow networks they remained integrated in local extended-kin relationships. Although they faced scarce employment opportunities they found survival resources by integrating in informal economy networks.

One main feature of the coping strategies developed at the household level is their cyclic and seasonal character. Winter months are the toughest period. During this season there are very few employment possibilities both on the official and on black labor local market. The unemployment and social aids, as well as the child allowances provide few monetary resources. In these conditions, getting financial aid from members of the extended family who have constant earnings from pensions or salaries is crucial. Another frequent coping strategy developed during winter is to enter informal credit relations with the storekeepers from the neighborhoods. This practice enables them to get food in condition of limited and irregular access to money.

During spring, summer and autumn there are more possibilities to find a temporary job, often without contract. Some jobs, as those in constructions, are cash paid. On contrast the seasonal work on the lands of local peasants is frequently paid in alimentary products. This is rather a pre-industrial activity being sustained by non-monetary exchanges. The access to these temporary jobs is facilitated by blood and spiritual kinship connections (*nasie*).

In some desperate cases the stealing of coal and scrap iron from the areas of the mining enterprises is a survival practice. Those involved re-signified this practice. They consider themselves as simple ‘collectors’ (*culegatori*) who have the right to do this in order to survive and not as thieves. This survival strategy is often a family activity, the role of women and children being to persuade the guardians and the police authorities.

Through the previously exposed strategies, the dismissed miners try to get access to the local available resources using their family networks. Another strategy that seem to be in striking contrast with those previously presented is the transnational migration of

the dismissed miners in order to work abroad. Although there are no statistical data about the evolution and intensity of this phenomenon in Jiu Valley, the transnational migration experience or the project to migrate were stated by almost all the dismissed miners we interviewed.

Starting from January 2001, when the Romanian citizens got the right to move freely in the European space, the practice cyclic migration in order to work abroad became more frequent among Jiu Valley dismissed miners. The destination countries include Italy, Germany, Spain and Hungary. The men are frequently those who migrate in order to sustain their families.

According to our findings, the project to migrate abroad became possible for those who were better anchored in kinship networks. The anchorage in those networks was much more important than the own material resources. The following case, in which a dismissed miner was helped by his godfather to migrate, is suggestive:

I planned to go at work in Germany but I had no money. So I went to my godfather who still works at the mine and I asked him: "Godfather, can you help me with 15 millions lei?" He is *momarlan*¹¹ and he is also brigade team leader. He answered me: "Nobody will give you 15 millions, but I will go to my relatives to take 500000 from each of them." And he went to each of his nine brothers who also work at the mine. Finally he helped me with these 15 millions and I went to work in Germany. Without him I would have lost the labor contract. I worked in Germany for 3 months. I worked on my knees, 18 hours each day. I can do anything if I am paid. I came with 60 millions earned in these 3 months. Here, with 2 millions lei salary a month, I need at many years to earn the same money.¹²

Once returned home, this dismissed miner shared his money with his poor relatives and started to support them to migrate for work abroad.

The support provided through kinship networks extends in destination country. As another dismissed miner who worked in Italy said: "I want to take my brother with me. I already told him: 'One week you will stay beside me. I will teach you, I will initiate you.'" The more experienced relatives facilitate the access to working places and accommodation abroad.

¹¹ Local peasant

¹² M.D., dismissed miner.

Transnational migration is seen, at least at the beginning, as a real possibility of “salvation” from poverty but not as a source of enrichment. The money earned abroad are firstly used to pay the debts and to help the poor kin-members. Those who used to work abroad for several times steadily diversified their investment practices, buying new apartments and new household equipment. However, until present we found no case of “entrepreneurial” activity based on a continuous reinvestment of the capital earned abroad.

The coping strategies we presented are mainly household and kinship based and tend to compensate the absence of the official social-economic integration mechanisms. However, beside these “horizontal” relations between kin members and friends we found some cases on “vertical” interactions with local, national and even European authorities in order to get better paid working places both in Jiu Valley and abroad, as well as other financial and material aids. This negotiation with authorities is held by groups of dismissed miners or by their local instituted associations and varies from petitions to protest actions (hunger strikes). Whether at the beginning the dismissed miners addressed their demands to the local and national authorities, they steadily oriented toward European authorities. For instance, in a recent petition addressed to the Council of Europe, European Court of Human Rights, a group of dismissed miners invoked the poverty of their families, the absence of working places, the burden of the taxes and the corruption and indifference of the local authorities. They legitimized their petition through the reference to the principles of Human Rights. Although we do not know how efficient such forms of negotiation with authorities could be, we consider them as part of a broader adaptation and learning process. Through their exploration we can see how the relations with the authorities is changing and how the dismissed miners define and redefine themselves in this relations.

III. Conclusions

This research explored the social changes brought in Jiu Valley mining region by the post-communist deindustrialization process, and the ways in which the dismissed miners and their families experienced, adapted and responded to these changes.

While during communism the Romanian miners were considered elite of the working class and had a central role in the legitimization strategy of the party state, being supported by economic and symbolic mechanisms, during post-communism they became one of the less respected categories being accused of setting back the reform of provoking political instability through their protest actions.

Designed as a kind of shock therapy, in the larger context of transition to a market economy, the sudden and massive dismissals that took place in Jiu Valley were not accompanied by appropriate protection measures and led to unintended social-economic consequences at least in this region. The social-professional reintegration was strongly impeded by the mono-industrial character of the region and by the nontransferable character of their mining skills.

Those who became dismissed (*disponibilizati*) lost not only their working places but also their professional identity woven around the mine and their social status. To become dismissed meant to become a non-miner, to be excluded from the former working groups (*brigazi*) that were a main source of support and sociality both inside and outside the mine. Besides, becoming non-miners those dismissed lost their sense of masculinity that was previously sustained by the dangerous and difficult character of their work as well as by the ideological discourses.

Furthermore, while the miner's family was previously defined by a strong patriarchal character and clear segregation of roles, the dismissals led to "regendering" process in which the family roles were overlapped and even reversed. We found cases when the woman became the main economic sustainer of her family while the household tasks were steadily taken by her dismissed husband.

While the deindustrialization process put a strong pressure on the family relations, the family - in its nuclear, extended and spiritual forms - had a fundamental role in supporting the coping strategies. Actually a main transformation in the lives of both the active and dismissed miners from Jiu Valley is the passing from a professional solidarity woven around the mine to a more "traditional" type of solidarity, mainly kinship based.

Confronted with the local deindustrialized context, the dismissed miners and their families creatively combine strategies that are both local and transnational in their nature and that have both "regressive" and "progressive" dynamics. Many of their coping

strategies take place in the local community and are based on familiar practices that are reactivated in the new deindustrialized context. For instance, they develop “preindustrial” labor activities, like working on the land of local peasants for agricultural products, or informal neighborhood exchanges, like buying goods on informal credit.

At the opposite end, the cyclic transnational migration for wage work abroad seems rather a “modern” strategy, a social innovation. However, the family – one of the most “traditional” institutions - plays a crucial role in supporting this strategy. Besides, the social and economic motivations of this migration strategy are closely tied. The money earned abroad are used to help the poor members of the nuclear and extended family and to assure a better social status through “investment” in better housing conditions or in furniture and electronic equipment. Until present, we did not find cases in which the capital earned abroad was continuously reinvested through “entrepreneurial” and “market oriented” activities.

The exploration of these coping strategies proves once again the fallacies of neoliberal transition models that assume a linear and teleological transition from communism to market economy and democracy, and a determinist approach in which the micro realities are a direct result of the macro policies and structures. Both improvisations and restorations from the past are present in the ambivalent strategies of the dismissed miners and their families. In front of their crisis they reactivated older cultural practices and relational resources in order to survive and creatively adapted them to the new context.

The discourses of the dismissed miners are also ambivalent. Many of them crave for the communist past when they had working places and a good life level. Besides, old paternalistic attitudes are still present in their discourses when they expect central authorities to solve their demands or exclusively accuse them for their shortcomings. However, according to their discourses they increasingly become aware of the international economic and political authorities that stay behind the State and about the role they play in the new global arena. They steadily learn the new “rules of the game” not necessary to comply them but to survive and to use them in the benefit of their own and of their families.

Finally, our research was an exploratory one. We revealed aspects of the complex social relations and of the broader puzzle that shape the world of Jiu Valley. We believe that this mining region is a privileged site for the research of the post-communist transformations and of the local consequences of the global changes, and that it worth further investigation. We also believe that the social-anthropological research is particularly fit for this aim because it provides access to peoples' discourses and informal strategies and it offers valuable insights on the interaction between the global and the local social processes.

IV. The Role of the Fieldwork Research in Teaching Anthropology

In the discipline of social anthropology an effective learning can be acquired only by connecting the theoretical and methodological issues received in class with the experience of ethnographic research. In other words, beside an “informative” part, teaching anthropology needs a “formative” fieldwork dimension in which new research skills and ways of seeing social realities are developed.

All the four students that I coordinated in the fieldwork from Jiu Valley where actively involved in all the stages of this research. This teaching strategy motivated them and offered an appropriate learning environment.

We begun with a preparatory stage in which we defined our research objectives in broader lines, and we started to shape the adequate methodological and theoretical tools. During the workshops I led as part of our teaching program, we explored the theoretical contributions and limitations of the post-communist anthropology and its suitability in the context of the Romanian society. We also had an intensive workshop on anthropological research methodology that mainly focused on the techniques of doing life history interviews.

During the fieldwork in Jiu Valley we started with a short period of accommodation with the local realities. We carried out informal conversations with the inhabitants and we started to identify our informants. As result of this exploratory stage we decided to mainly focus on the families of dismissed miners and to explore three

related aspects: a. The coping strategies they developed and the nature of the social relations that sustain them, b. The identity changes and the transformation of gender relations, and c. The discourses about authorities and the changing awareness of the global changes. We divided in smaller teams to thoroughly investigate these themes.

The research methodology training continued during the fieldwork. I advised the students how to take field-notes in a more appropriate manner, how to design the interview guides and how to improve their interviewing techniques. Particular attention was given to the ethnographic interviews. In order to provide a proper feedback, I went at interviews together with my students and I listened samples from their interviews.

Besides the individual feedback, each day we had guided collective discussions related to the fieldwork activity. These discussions proved to be very useful for idea exchange and for eliciting the group's resources. During these discussions, the students introduced their research findings and their plans for further research. They were also advised how to surpass the temporarily difficulties.

During fieldwork, the students had the possibility to test the empirical applicability of several theories of social change and of their related concepts by confronting them with the research findings. Besides they also found the opportunity to critically assess the strength and limits of the social-anthropological research.

However, the fieldwork in Jiu Valley supposed not only a rational understanding but also a strong emotional involvement. We were not only researchers but also humans who learned about the lives other human beings. Thus, the learning process supposed an important dimension of empathic understanding. As a consequence of the strong emotional impact that the situation of the poor dismissed miners had on us, the issue of engagement was intensely discussed in our team. Should we act as distant and "objective" observers or should we become involved and do something for the people we study? We do not have a final answer but we believe that a thoroughly understanding is a first thing we have to accomplish.

At the end of the fieldwork period we had a workshop in which we designed a common plan for the research report. In order to become accustomed with the whole process of knowledge production each student was required to write a material on one of

our initial research themes. They were advised how to transcribe their interviews and how to organize their writings.

The usefulness of these research findings will not stop at this research report. The students involved in this research continued to use these findings in the term papers that were asked to do. Two of them also decided to do their thesis on Jiu Valley. In this way they will continue to integrate the research findings and to better understand the social realities from Jiu Valley.

Bibliography

Ashwin, S. "Redefining the Collective: Russian Mineworkers in Transition", in Burawoi, M. and Verdery, K. (eds.), *Uncertain Transition. Ethnographies of Change in the Postsocialist World*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 1999.

Ballard, C. and Banks, G. "Resource Wars: The Anthropology of Mining" in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 32, 2003.

Kearney, M., "The Local and the Global: The Anthropology of Globalization and Transnationalism" in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24, 1995.

Kalb, D. "Afterword. Globalism and Postsocialist Prospects", in Hann, C. M. (ed.), *Postsocialism. Ideals, Ideologies and Practices in Eurasia*, London: Routledge, 2002.

Kideckel, D. "The Unmaking of the Working Class", in Hann, C. M. *Postsocialism. Ideals, Ideologies and Practices in Eurasia*, London: Routledge, 2002.

Nash, J. "Global Integration and Subsistence Insecurity", in *American Anthropologist*, 96, 1994.

Snel, E. and Richard S. “Poverty, Migration and Coping Strategies: An Introduction” in *Focaal*, 38, 2001.

Stan, R. “Looking for the Real Miners. Professional Culture in Jiu Valley”, in Craciun, M., Grecu, M. and Stan. R. *The World of the Valley: The Unity of Mine, The diversity of Miners*. Bucharest: Paideia, 2002.

Strangleman, T. “Networks, Place and Identities in Post-Industrial Mining Communities”, in *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, vol. 25, 2, 2002.

Verdery, K. *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.