

# Handwriting on the Wall

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## Abstract

The revolutions of 1989 represent one of the largest, least organized yet most successful non-violent movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They marked the end of communist authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe and added to what scholars have called “the third wave of democracy”. However, twelve years after these revolutions, the early intellectual effervescence they spurred seems to have vanished.

This paper is a reflection on the scholarship of the 1989 revolutions and suggests an alternative to the traditional foci on communist elites (by sovietologists and Cold War theorists) or dissident elites (by scholars examining the breakdown of the communist regimes). Namely, this paper seeks to explore the significance of the 1989 revolution from the perspective of (We) “the people” - to paraphrase Timothy Garton Ash’s title. Although “the people” or “popular will” during the 1989 revolutions had played a central role in the legitimacy claims and post-revolutionary politics, attempts to gather systematic data on the non-elite participants such as the research of Opp and Gern in East Germany have no equivalent in other East European cases.

Focusing on Romania’s case, the paper includes content analysis of the 1989 revolutionary graffiti from Bucharest. The image of the revolution as reflected by the graffiti is contrasted with the scholarly interpretations of the 1989 revolutions in general and with debates (and controversies) over the Romanian revolution in particular. The content analysis does not confirm the assertion that issues such as “democracy” or “market economy” were central to the collective mobilization. Among all of the themes identified in the graffiti the anti-Ceausescu ones greatly predominate, followed with much lower frequency by praise for the heroes of the revolution, freedom and anti-communism. That democracy and market-economy<sup>1</sup> were not central issues during the mass protest, as the graffiti suggest, shows that negotiations between dissident and former communist elites rather than “popular will” are responsible for the democratic and market-oriented outcome of the 1989 revolution in Romania and refutes previous theses on the former communist elites “hijacking” the popular liberal revolution.

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<sup>1</sup> For references to the demands for democracy and market economy see: Eisenstadt 1992: 93, Ackerman 1992

## *Handwriting on the Wall*

How important were the revolutions of 1989? The suspiciously yellow pages by now, of Timothy Garton Ash's "We the People – the Revolutions of 1989" seem to suggest that enough time had passed to make this a good time to raise this question again.

There was unanimity in recognizing their great importance of ending the totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe and of adding to the "third wave of democratization"<sup>2</sup>. They were also singled out as one of the largest, least organized and successful succession of non-violent movements of the 20th century. They marked the end of the Cold War and its subsequent power reconfiguration and gave a precious boost to grand theorists who saw in them the victory of liberalism rendered in metaphors such as "the end of history"<sup>3</sup>, "the end of utopia"<sup>4</sup> or more modestly, "the Leninist extinction"<sup>5</sup>. Others, on the contrary, saw in them the continuation of 1968, namely, another signal that liberalism is in crisis<sup>6</sup>. Overall, there was a sense of historical grandeur derived from their global political impact and from the emphasis on their similarities with the great revolutions such as the French, Russian or Chinese revolution<sup>7</sup>.

However, by now, there is another way of assessing the importance of these revolutions: a look at the scholarly work<sup>8</sup> that sprung up around them. By this criteria, their early scholarly enthusiasm around the revolutions seems to be short-lived and limited in disciplinary scope. Of the twelve years that passed since the revolutions the first half (1989-1996) seems to be the most fertile interval, followed by sharp decline in academic work. Disciplinarily, history and political science clearly dominate, followed at a far distance by journalistic accounts, sociological discussions and autobiographies.

As early as 1995 scholars publicized their discontent with the attention given to the 1989 revolutions. Jeffrey Isaac for example, was making the following observations:

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<sup>2</sup> Huntington, 1991, Markoff, 1996

<sup>3</sup> Fukuyama, 1989

<sup>4</sup> Tismaneanu,

<sup>5</sup> Jovitt, 1992.

<sup>6</sup> Arrighi, Giovanni, Hopkins, Terence K., and Wallerstein, Immanuel, 1991

<sup>7</sup> Eisentadt, 1992, Garton-Ash, 1990, Goldstone, 1993, Goodwin 2001, Foran (forthcoming), Isaac, 1996,

<sup>8</sup> The discussion is limited to scholarship available in English

“One would have expected that such dramatic and consequential events would have been grist for the mill of American political theorists. The power of ideas in a world of cynicism and manipulation. The relevance of an avowedly humanistic vocabulary in a postmodern age. The nature of democratic movements, the strategies they employ, the choices they face, the kinds of politics theory aspire to construct. [...] The "meanings" of the revolutions of 1989. The possibilities are virtually endless. And yet, surprisingly, American political theory responded to these events with a deafening silence.” (Issac, 1995)

Jeffrey Isaac was referring to American political theory; however his concern is equally applicable to all other underrepresented fields of social science. The response to this was an even more “deafening silence”.

Most of the literature on the 1989 revolutions focuses on one or more of the following aspects: the history of the communist elites, the communist political and social environment; conventional historical accounts of the uprisings; dissident elites, causes, political, economic implications<sup>9</sup> and meaning<sup>10</sup> of the revolutions.

Although there is agreement on the spontaneous nature of the demonstrations, ordinary participants in these revolutions, “we the people” (utterly accessible to the social scientist) are almost invisible. Some of the notable exceptions are the survey based research of Karl Dieter Opp and Christiane Gern’s (1993, 1998) attempting to “explain the revolutions from below”<sup>11</sup> by looking at protest and mobilization in East Germany, and Anthony Oberschall’s (1996) overview of the protest by looking at mobilization resources and framing of the protest in East Germany, Hungary and Poland.

The English language scholarly publications concerning the case of the Romanian revolution flourished during the same interval 1990-1996 and presents the reader with the same predominance of conventional historical/political science foci – communist elite and dissident profiles, succession of the revolutionary events, considerations about the future and, plus a new category: the debates about the revolutionary nature of the 1989 events in Romania<sup>12</sup>.

A somewhat different and more recent approach is Richard Andrew Hall’s (1999) investigations of the plot theories around the Romanian revolution. Through a

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<sup>9</sup> For all of the above see: Antohi and Tismaneanu (Eds.), 2000, Berend, 1996, Brown 1991, Bunce, 1999, Garton Ash, 1990 a,b, Prins (ed). 1990, Banac (ed). 1992, Linden, 1993, Longworth, 1997, Stokes, 1993, Tismaneanu, 1992, 1999 (Ed)

<sup>10</sup> On the meaning of the 1989 revolutions see: Ackerman, 1992, Arrighi et. Al, 1992, Chirot, 1991, Eisenstadt, 1992, Isaac, 1996, Tismaneanu 1999.

<sup>11</sup> Opp’s, 1998 article title

<sup>12</sup> see Almond, 1988, 1992, Brown, J. F. 1991, Calinescu and Tismaneanu, 1992, Eyal 1990, Martyn 1992, Nelson 1992, Ramesh, 1991, Roper, 1994, Siani-Davies, 1996, Stokes, 1993, Tismaneanu, 1993, Verdery and Kligman, 1992

historical systematic examination of the plot scenarios published in the media, their authorship and the context in which they mushroomed, Hall reaches the conclusion that they were perpetrated by individuals affiliated with the Romania secret police – “the Securitate” – with the goal of exonerating this institution of its role in the killings during the revolution. Later on, Hall argues, the political opposition picked up the conspiracy repertoire and made use of it with the intent of discrediting the former communist apparatchiks in power.

As can be gleaned from Hall’s research, the Romanian literature on the revolution largely revolves around various conspiracy theories. Army Generals, former Securitate members, scholars, political opposition members<sup>13</sup> – all write about plots originating with Moscow, Hungary, or the United States. In contrast to that, academic historical accounts by Romanian scholars are in great shortage<sup>14</sup>, with even fewer addressing the conspiracy repertoire<sup>15</sup>.

On issues of protest, mobilization, and non-elite participants the Romanian literature on the 1989 revolution is fortunate to include three notable exceptions: Irina Nicolau’s (1990) collection of graffiti, memoirs, and interviews in Bucharest, and Milin (1990, 1997), Anghel (1990) and Mioc’s (1999) collections of interviews and impressions from Timisoara.

From these works, I chose to analyze the collection of graffiti contained in the collection coordinated by Irina Nicolau for several reasons:

- First of all, they constitute an excellent record<sup>16</sup> of the publicly expressed concerns of the demonstrators in Bucharest
- Second, it is a complete data set (according to the editors, it contains all of the graffiti that were written on the walls of the center of Bucharest where the demonstrations took place); it is simultaneous rather than retrospective (the collection took place during the revolution) and the collection process was unobtrusive.

In my content analysis I tried to overview the revolutionary repertoire as reflected by the graffiti and to identify the themes that occurred more frequently. Accordingly, all of the 141 graffiti entries were coded, resulting in a list of ten themes, enumerated below from the highest to the lowest frequency, totaling to 169 appearances:

- Ceausescu
- Heroes of the revolution

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<sup>13</sup> see Hall, 1999 for extensive references to the conspiracy theme in media, Sava and Monac, 1999, Gabany 1999, Domenico, 1999, Codrescu

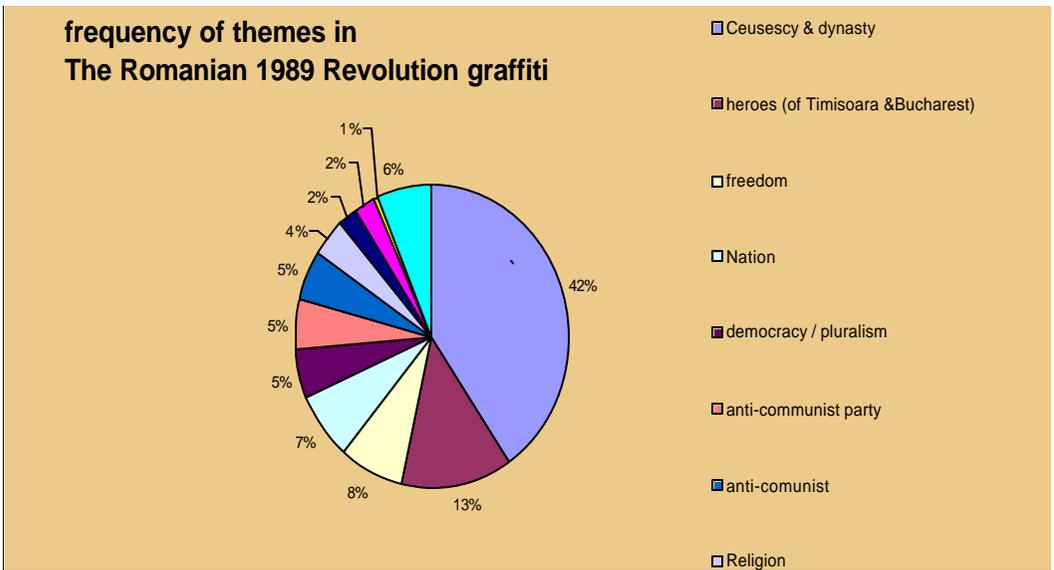
<sup>14</sup> Stefanescu, 1995, Pasti, 1997

<sup>15</sup> Voicu, 2000

<sup>16</sup> the only one, to my knowledge

- Freedom
- Nation
- Democracy
- Communism
- Communist Party
- Religious symbols
- References to fascism
- Peaceful protest

The unit of analysis is the theme – and it does not coincide with the graffiti since one graffiti can contain references to several themes; consequently, the frequency distributions refer to the number of occurrences of a certain themes among the graffiti.



Among all themes identified in the graffiti, the anti-Ceausescu one stood out as the most prominent, with 69 occurrences (42%). Within the anti-Ceausescu category, the most common graffiti was ‘Down with Ceausescu’ (14 occurrences). I also identified a dynastic component among the anti-Ceausescu graffiti but this component is of lesser strength when compared with the graffiti that single out only Ceausescu (10 vs. 59).

Ceausescu and his rule appeared to be at the center of the protest, with a generous series of epithets, dealing with his social class background - such as ‘cobbler’,

“illiterate” -, or deeds: “the criminal”, “tyrant”, “dictator”, “paranoid”, “assassin of children”, “vampire”, “breeder of slayers”, kin of Hitler, or the simply “pig” (in “Christmas without pork”).)

Normatively speaking, the overwhelming majority of the graffiti propose (ambiguously) to put him down - except for few more concrete demands such as trial proposals “We want him tried”, violent punishment- “We want shoes/trousers from Ceausescu’s skin”, calls for resignation and - more humorously- “Ceausescu for export<sup>17</sup>”.

There are also references to Ceausescu’s dynastic style of leadership – such as “the clan”, “the dynasty” or directly naming his wife Elena who is ridiculed for her great scholarship pretensions in graffiti such as “Down with the illiterate woman” (4); “Down with the ‘savant’ woman”(1).

All other themes come with a much lower frequency – the second most frequent one being “praise for heroes” with 22 occurrences (13%). Here, the more secular term of the “hero” (7 occurrences) is preferred to the more mystical “martyr” (1). A great importance is attributed to the heroes of Timisoara - the original place of the revolt, and the profile of the hero is young, college student (3) – or (affectionately) child.

The 13 calls for freedom are for the most time very simple “Freedom”; while several include the concept of nation -“Free Romania, Hurrah!”, or more intellectual pursuits – “Freedom for culture”, “Down with censorship”.

The graffiti in “The People/The Nation” category mainly identify the protesters with the people –“The people demand resignation” or, commit the revolution to the nation or reassert a positive Romanian-ness: “Romanians are not cowards”, “This is the Romanian”.

The other themes – Democracy, Communism, Communist Party, Religious symbols, References to fascism, Peaceful protest- appear with frequencies lower than 5 percent.

Overall, I found that the graffiti of Bucharest confirm many of the propositions set forth by the scholars of the Romanian revolution. Among these are the “sultanistic” and “dynastic” character of the regime, the unpopularity of the Ceausescu, the prominence of the nationalist sentiments intensely cultivated by Ceausescu’s regime, the profile of the protesters and their non-violent agenda.

There is however, one scenario of the revolution which is not consistent with the data examined here, and that is the “hijacked revolution scenario”<sup>18</sup> – which

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<sup>17</sup> The export proposal represents Ceausescu’s massive exports strategy (as a way to pay off Romania’s foreign debt) turned against him.

<sup>18</sup> See Marino 1990 cited in Rady 1992, Calinescu and Tismaneanu 1992, Stokes 1993, Ramesh 1991, Codrescu 1991

proposes that a spontaneous popular anti-communist uprising that sought radical change was subsequently hijacked by the former apparatchiks that had an agenda of minimal revisions for the existing system.

The thematic distribution patterns in the public expression of grievances contained in the Bucharest graffiti indicates that among the great diversity of grievances formulated, the removal of Ceausescu constituted a much higher priority than the removal of the communist party, or the communist ideology. This does not necessarily mean that the protesters were in favor of only eliminating Ceausescu and preserving the system; it could be simply a framing strategy the protesters perceived as more conducive for success. On the other hand, it may constitute empirical evidence for the thesis formulated by Peter Siani-Davies<sup>19</sup>, who argued in that the initial impetus of the revolution was for rectification as opposed to redistribution of power, thesis echoed by Romanian political scientist Vladimir Pasti, who arguing that in 1989 the expectation was the fall of the Ceausescu clan<sup>20</sup>.

The important point, however, is that the “hijacked revolution” scenario emerged after the protest, and it mainly originates in the power struggles between the former apparatchiks consolidating their power and the opposition faction formed around the Romanian dissidents.

Each group took advantage of the lack of organizations and clear agendas during the protest and extracted legitimacy from it, by defining the “goals” of the revolution in a self-serving way: in terms of “hijacked” or “popular will”.

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<sup>19</sup> Siani-Davies, 1996:455

<sup>20</sup> Pasti, 1997