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**Faculty of Sociology and Social Work**

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**Morality of Abundance:  
Food Consumption in Post-socialist Romania**

**Summary**

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The idea of researching consumption, more precisely food consumption has arisen from two distinct and complementary sources, which stand as incentives for any scientific inquiry or systematic research for understanding a phenomenon, an event, a process. Daily impressions in various places of consumption and response of individuals represent one of the sources. They have suggested that people tend to give increased importance to consumption, a privileged place in everyday life, both in practice and in discussion. I have often been struck by how much and with what profound degree of involvement most people talk about certain goods and their intentions. All these induced the belief that individuals are concerned about consumption, which therefore qualifies it as an important topic of research.

Sporadic impressions began to organize and become more structured and more frequent once I have asked the first questions stemming from personal curiosity directed toward understanding consumption in my immediate context (family, everyday knowledge and practices). All have shown a sense of urgency, insecurity and ambivalence and especially the frustrations that the society of "anything is possible" in the context of the huge variety and quantity of products generates when denies the very possibility it promotes. At the same time, I noticed the joy and sense of fulfillment and satisfaction with a good purchase, perceived as a successful action. Abundance generates ambivalence that translates into both frustrations and disappointments and comfort and fulfillment. This situation induces questions of selection in the field of consumer behavior. Need for confirmation, evaluation, choice between alternatives becomes a general state, a daily concern. How one selects among choices, on what basis and with what social implications, what status is assigned to consumption, how it is perceived and experienced are the questions that launched this research.

The second source of my desire to understand consumption beyond everyday curiosity and initial systematic observations rests on of how consumption research is structured. The literature suggests that the field is articulated on contraries, some of them are of more general import in social sciences (agent-structure relationship, practice, representation, etc.), others unique to reflection on consumption. Research defines consumption alternatively as instrumental or symbolic, having communication and expressive functions, or conversely as relying purely on

utility, as a sign of civilization in terms of quantity and variety consumed on the one hand, or as a sign of losing culture on the other. Relationship of individuals to objects or goods is regarded as an extension of the means of communicating with others, or conversely as fetishism of objects and the main source of weakening social ties due to more intense relations with things. However, literature avoids considering morality as a central theme of research and rather engages in moral evaluation of practices, representations, and institutions of consumption.

The thesis starts from the general context of changes in Romania after the fall of the socialist regime to establish new frameworks in which practices and representations of consumption occur. Two types of changes structure consumption practices in post-socialist Romania. On the one hand, there are some structural changes whose ostentatious presence one can hardly avoid. Each constituent of the food chain and the system of goods and services has changed. Production of goods and food has been privatized in significant proportion. Further, one can observe the emergence of new forms of retail and dissolution of others.

Nevertheless, the most striking change is the variety of products and consumer reaction to this variety of products that appeared after the fall of the socialist regime. In the 80s consumer goods were rarities. Compared to that period, in the past two decades, the rule has been the enormous variety and quantity of goods and services. The shortage has been converted into relative abundance and the culture of shortages in what might be called the culture of abundance (outlined in Chapter 5). This transformation has direct implications for consumer behavior in several respects. First, in the socialism the problem centered on consumption goods in the midst of shortage in an economic system structured by supply (Chelcea and Late 2004, Mazur - Stommen 2003, Verdery 1994) currently consumption focuses on limited financial resources, unequal access to goods and the variety of goods that requires selection, the exercise of choice. Secondly, certain qualities of consumers, such as tenacity and integration into an information network of, as necessary attributes of any consumer in socialism, gives place to such specific qualities as the ability to select from a wide range of goods (Humphrey 1995) or development of skills in comparing goods (Warde 1997) in the frame of systemic transformation.

This framework is one of abundance: of goods, information about goods, modes of provision. Defined as surplus, excess, something that transcends immediate biological and material needs, it appears as some sort of comfort, and as a safety threshold, which means no anxiety about food or

about its quality. However, the positive side of abundance has its reverse. Abundance means flooding goods, selection principles, reasons, and much concern about well-made and careful selection. Because it is ambivalent, consumption amidst plenty or abundance is the ideal place to study the morality of consumption.

What I mean by morality? Morality means a sense of duty to consume in one way or another, to choose something to the detriment of other available alternatives. This morality finds its expression in an ethical food choice. Pleasure, indulgence, moderation, rationality are equally legitimate in this regard, as elements, constituent parts of ethics. For example, in this perspective hedonism qualifies as a form of duty to seek pleasure. Every principle is valid for lending substance to certain moralities. The principles embody such qualities if they are categories, which do not require legitimation (Gullestad 1995, Zentai 2003), but are themselves self-evident categories for legitimating action or representation.

Scholarly literature contains different expressions of and perspectives on morality. Morality appears as an ideology or as social criticism, but always carries an external point of view of social action it assesses. Wilk (Wilk 2001) gives the most striking expression of this approach. He argues that as long as there is consumption that is "destructive" in social, environmental, or personal terms, moral discourse against the "excesses of consumer society" can only make its voice heard. His diagnosis is that this type of destructive consumption exists, even in excess. However, criticism of consumerism (Bauman 2005; Miller 2005; Simányi 2005 Slater 2005) presents some dangers, sometimes elusive, which require any moralizing discourse an acute awareness of the position from which it is made. This position is one that will differentiate between good, acceptable, constructive consumption on the one hand and bad, deplorable and destructive on the other. In this paper, I do not assume such a position. Instead of moralizing, I would tend to identify and detect morality present in consumption practices and representations. The thesis discusses ethical evaluation and selection of food.

The central thesis of the paper holds that discursive construction of food has undergone a change, meaning that principle of health has become dominant in the selection or recommendation of food. The negative recommendation of unhealthy food, healthy eating meaning prohibition of harmful foods, gives place to recommendation of healthy eating as rational and moral management of emotions and impulses (disciplining appetite and the propensity for excess).

Along with the reorganization of food discourse, the meaning of health has also undergone changes. If it was perceived and represented as the absence of disease, now it is widened and have been specified with attributes including dynamism, vigor, beauty, and even pleasure.

Three arguments support this thesis in the general context of the proliferation of discourse about food and eating in 2000-2008. 1. The analysis shows that classification of texts in the “healthy life” column is growing, leaving behind earlier classifications in columns such as economy or social issues. 2. Based on style and voice (Fairclough 1995), we identified three distinct genres of texts: informative, confession, and expert. Expert genre relies on a relationship between actors in the text implicitly built on the one hand and audience, on the other hand. This relationship is based on expert scientific authority whose voice is given in the text. Confessional genre is based on a relationship of sharing an experience, authority is given by the presence of an authentic experience that can be general. Informative genre is based on general interest. We can say that different have different sources of authority: expert's epistemic authority, experiential authority of confessor or storyteller, and utility authority formulated by news journalist. We see an increase in the relative weight of expert genre at the expense of the other two. 3. Following the assumptions and implications of legitimizing discourse and categories, I noticed that they refer to the dynamism, vigor, and beauty as ultimate values, which do not require any further justification. All these legitimizing categories appear in connection with the healthy eating plan of life. Consumption practices among young people, according to a statistical analysis on food preferences between 2001 and 2008 confirm the result of discourse analysis as young people tend preference for healthy food.

Discourse analysis in the last chapter shows that from 2000 there has been a reconfiguration of food representation. The initial complexity of food discourse, elaborated on the relationship between individuals, economy and society was gradually replaced with an image of a relationship between the individual and himself. Rational discourse on healthy food is promoted by a focus on micro-properties of food, precisely calculated dosage, and minute scientific description of its effects. In other words, if food or objects appear initially as an expression of the rules of conduct related to institutions such as the food industry, economy, and society, the primary duty was to comply with the other by avoiding the prohibitions, the dangers. Now, discourse on food has become more a reflection on individuals' own self and the primary duty

has become under an ethic of personal responsibility for their own health. Moderation, balance, and rational calculation of food intake, etc. are signs of this increased responsibility and discipline halting eventual excess.

From the perspective of theses explaining changes in consumption, the present thesis confirms and denies in part all present. Following Warde, I have identified four such theses. The first is centered on the notion of gastro-anomie, a term denoting a shift from food consumption based on clear rules and codes (gastronomy) to a context where all rules are suspended (Fischler cited Warde 1997) and the individual is one that makes its own rules. This thesis is based on the response of individuals to a situation characterized by social detachment and deregulation, where food selection and consumption is increasingly a matter of individual choice. Lack of shared norms and increased individual responsibility in the selection of goods leads to anxiety (Warde 1997), or the celebration of individual voluntarism (Featherstone, Mike Hepworth, and Turner 1997). Our results show that there is a strong tendency to promote healthy eating as an overarching norm. From this point of view, the absence or suspension of norms cannot be confirmed. Conversely, health as a principle of selection is a robust and dominant one. It is true that the assessing food as healthy food is ambiguous, but our findings do not confirm the diagnosis of gastro-anomie. It confirms the individual nature of food consumption in the generic form of consumer representation devoid of any social attribute.

The second thesis advances the image of niche consumption, and neo-tribalism. It argues for a more lax situation of gastro-anomie where there are rules observed by small groups of consumers. Variety of products produces various groups of consumers with different identities and moralities. The lack of any specification of consumer representation in the Romanian media and choosing healthy food trend described in the eating behavior of young people do not deny or confirm this thesis. Choosing healthy foods can be part of neo-tribe consumption, but to confirm or refute their existence we have no relevant data. Slow food and organic food are two movements suggesting niche consumption, which are probably partly based on the same principles of health described in this paper.

The third is the thesis of massification starting from the idea of McDonaldization of society, a metaphor to describe products based on the same type of phenomenon, i.e. rationalization. Standardized production produces similarity based on efficiency, calculation, predictability, and



control. In this respect the variety of goods itself is questioned. In view of our results, we can only say that there is a tendency towards a rational, even technical discourse on food and eating behavior tends to conform to, if not entirely, at least partly to this discourse. If discourse is generated by food industry or not remains to be verified. It is plausible to argue that food industry has a stake in the rationalization of production and sale, but consumer reaction cannot be automatically assumed.

The fourth argument speaks about of maintaining the importance of distinctions between social class and consumption patterns of different classes. It is the perspective of Elias (Elias 1987) and Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1984), on which others (Mennell 1995) argue that contemporary society is still significantly differentiated structurally, and this differentiation has its effects on consumption. We are not able to address Bourdieu's theory in its complexity. The analyzed data suggest that there is a common fundamental representation of consumption and differences play out in other areas of consumption, such as the possession of material goods. Regional differences, socioeconomic status among the youth generation are unlikely to differentiate groups in terms of food consumption. The differences are noticeable regarding durable goods. They are articulate, as expected, according to socioeconomic status in the sense that a higher status increases your chances of owning a good with greater pecuniary value.

The indeterminate nature of our results – on theses about changing food consumption in recent decades – is due to several factors. First, food consumption is more complex than our account. Secondly, our data that address only a fraction of the complexity. Lastly, we suggest that all four trends exist simultaneously. Niche consumption, rationalization of food production, differences based on socioeconomic status, the trend towards healthy food consumption as the foundation of motivation are present to some extent in Romania. The relative significance of each is a subject that cannot be decided in this work, but maybe it is worth addressing in the future.

## Data

The data used in this paper come from several sources. They are different, indicate an attempt to access, and capitalize on existing data whenever possible with all the advantages and risks. For representation of the food in the Romanian public space, we covered four national daily newspapers, *Adevărul*, *Jurnalul Național*, *Cotidianul*, and *Libertatea*. The period considered is

between 2000 and 2008. We analyzed the data with the method of discourse analysis and we sought to uncover how discourse constructs consumers. Specifically I followed what is defined as *voice* and *style* in critical discourse analysis. For food consumption practices we used data of two sociological surveys coordinated by ANSIT (National Agency for Supporting Youth Initiatives) and Max Weber Foundation. Both included questions about food preferences. The surveys are representative at national level or at the level of the Transylvanian Hungarian youth. To analyze the relationship between subjective poverty, income we used the BOP survey commissioned by Open Society Foundation. Results of descriptive statistical analysis were confronted, specified, and refined by data collected from many informal conversations and observations.

### Structure of the thesis

The thesis is divided into two parts. The first part is theoretical and reviews the status of morality as a research topic, theories of consumption, and the methods used in consumption research. It comprises three chapters. The first two give an overview of a relatively wide range of studies to find and describe the reasons why researchers' interest diverted from consumption in favor of an underlying moral discourse. The most important dimension of academic reflection, that structure disinterest in consumer research is that it sees goods and objects as an index for different types of societies. This was articulated as a dichotomy between 'modern' and 'traditional' cultures, which were assigned moral values especially around the concept of authenticity. In chapter three I try to show that the image of consumers implied by existing theories are articulated largely on these considerations, both in expressive and symbolic and in the political economy approach.

The fourth chapter describes research methods used in consumption starting from existing research and the methods they use. The key concept of the system, or more recently, food chain was preceded by motivation research and research of acculturation, resistance, and hybridization in the context of cultural contact. Each of these concerns has given rise to particular methodological approaches. Motivation research used psychological methods, the study of cultural contact used especially ethnographic methods. The methodological constant throughout this time has remained document analysis and observation. The purpose of this chapter is to review the main methods used in research. They are motivation research, ethnography and document analysis.

The second part presents observations on the data we have collected and we have analyzed. The first chapter outlines the Romanian post-socialist transformations of society emphasizing those areas that are significant for consumption. The main argument of the first chapter is that socialist Romania, characterized by practices and representations of scarcity, with a generic term culture of shortages turned into a society where the main feature suggests the existence of the culture of abundance, defined as practices and representations arising in response to the abundance of goods. Switching from one type of consumer is gradual and partial. Some practices and representations are new while others are transformation of old ones or they are reproduced as they were before.

The following three sub-chapters contain three studies that describe results of three surveys. The first study attempts to establish a relationship between income, subjective poverty and consumption. Analyzing survey data, I noticed a reluctance of individuals to declare themselves as poor or rich regardless of income, education, place of origin, or the difference between the declared income and income considered decent. In this study, I suggest that introducing consumer attitudes expressed in informal discussions, clarify the reluctance in the sense that consumption is perceived as acceptable satisfaction of social roles, in our case the role of parent and declaring yourself poor means you declare failure in this role. The second study is a statistical analysis of food consumption among young people. The main argument is that young people, regardless of ethnicity, choose to consume more and more basing their preference on the principle of health. Another observation of the study is that food consumption has peculiarities, meaning that it is different from other types of consumption, namely consumption of durable goods. In this second type of consumption, we observe some differences by ethnicity and social status of the person. There are two implications. Social differences are played out in the field of goods with higher pecuniary value. The second is that consumption of food is not in this respect a factor of social differentiation. The third study notes the role of consumption in a currently widespread social practice in Romania, namely migration. The purpose of this study is to note that consumption is an activity based on ethical considerations in many types of social activities such as in this case, migration. Also shows that consumption can be seen as an idiom to negotiate a new social reality. The last chapter presents the main thesis described above, starting from the analysis of media representations of consumption.

This chapter attempts to reinterpret theoretical views on consumption through the results discussed in part two conclusions. It is also the place where I try to sketch a more general interpretation of the implications of the results suggesting that public discourse about food is a forum for socialization in a new configuration of society. Is the promotion of individual, a new topic in post-socialism a sign of individualization? The answer can only be equivocal. Other situations and practices support a higher sociality in consumption, but the representation described in the final chapter promotes individuals and not groups or social networks.

This paper is hybrid both in its aspirations and approaches used. It wants to understand food consumption in Romanian society today, providing a picture of the categories and valuation principles. Such ambition cannot be but exposed to criticism. The nature of our topic denies comprehensive approach. Food consumption includes a number of institutions (market, industry, and advertising), practices (shopping, commensality), and gender relations on the provisioning and preparing meals. Given this kind of complexity, any approach is doomed to criticism. On the other hand, expressive and symbolic perspectives of political economy are exclusive. One approach will necessarily put the other in background, so the approach can only be partial. However, I believe that lack of reflection in the field of consumption in Romania explains, if not justifies somewhat the visible hybrid, fragmented character of this study.

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