

## Katherine Verdery

# Transylvania in Berlin



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“More than you ever wanted to know about a Transylvanian village,” is how I describe the manuscript I wrote during my year at the Wissenschaftskolleg, *Unmaking Socialist Property: The Political Economy of Land Restitution in Transylvania, 1990–2000*. I say “wrote”, though what I produced was a first draft of about 600 pages, still much in need of pruning. The book’s subject is decollectivization, the process whereby land in collective and state farms was given over to private ownership after the Romanian “revolution” of 1989. How was private property in land created from socialist property, and to what extent were new owners able to make use of their new resource? Where do we see the effects of socialism in this process – that is, how does a postsocialist land reform differ from reforms in other places, such as Mexico or Ghana? The location from which I address these kinds of questions is the community of Aurel Vlaicu, in south-central Transylvania, and my data come primarily from anthropological field research.

In contrast to political scientists and economists who would argue that simply creating owners with property rights will help to produce market economies, I try to show that no matter what and how institutions were designed at the top, the way decollectivization was

implemented in local settings often obstructed realizing the goals of national-level policy-makers. In Part I, I describe the structural features of Romanian society that gave unusual power to the mayors of communes (each containing several villages), enabling them to delay the completion of the reform so they could use other people's land to collect clients and allies. Thus, creating new owners involved tremendous social conflict, abuse of office, uncertainty, and continual postponements.

In Part II, I discuss the difficulties of their becoming *effective* owners, given price trends and government policy toward agriculture. By the end of the decade, many small cultivators had been forced to turn their land over to larger entities, only some of which were able to make productive use of it. As the price of land dropped so low that one could buy a hectare by selling two large pigs or a good cow and the cost of *working* a hectare became as high as the cost of *buying* it, its happy recipients of 1990 found themselves in 2000 holding a resource that had become ever less valuable. Transylvanian smallholders experienced, in the space of a decade, the devaluation of agriculture that has occurred over a much longer time span in other areas of the world. But this devaluation extended beyond the merely economic, for these smallholders also valued effective working of their land as an element of social status and personal identity. In this expanded sense, land has lost value for them twice: once when it was seized from them by socialism, and again when it was seized by the "free market".

Regardless of whether or not this book will make the world a better place, the manuscript would most certainly still be languishing in fieldnotes without the luxury of a year at the Wissenschaftskolleg. I began the research for the project in 1993 and had been unable to complete it for lack of a long stretch of leisure in which to analyze my material. Benefiting from the wonderful services of the Kolleg's librarians, I could supplement my notes with virtually anything I asked for. A beautiful apartment, quiet office, and truly dreadful weather gave me no excuse whatsoever to put off writing. Without some friends, however, that effort would have been fruitless. Aside from the opportunity to share living space with my partner (we usually commute), I enjoyed several rewarding social relationships. Notable among them were my walks and talks with my neighbor, Deborah Klimburg-Salter; the warmth and good humor of my office neighbor, Francis Snyder; inclusion in some terrific dinner parties of Wiko's South Asian contingent and its marvelous chef, Sanjay Subrahmanyam; the unflinching helpfulness and good cheer of so many

people, especially Barbara Sanders, Christine von Arnim, and Katharina Biegger; and my connections with the Romanian Cultural Center and its director, Ruxandra Demetrescu.

The company of other Fellows, particularly those in the FIASCO group (Financial Instability and State Crisis), which met every Wednesday for lunch, helped to prevent my disappearing entirely into my one village. In the autumn I was privileged to have regular “Romanian lunches” with the three other Fellows who spoke that language (Professors Ligeti, Yavetz, and Niculescu), each with anecdotes from different places and time periods of their association with that country. Among the Wiko seminars I enjoyed the most were those by what I thought of as the “bug people” and the “bat people”, who presented information I would otherwise never have learned about the animal world. I think my favorite moment of the whole year, however, was when Professor Dieter Henrich observed, in response to a question, that he thought Hegel was very hardworking but not particularly bright. Finally, I derived unexpected benefit from a group of agricultural economists at the Humboldt University working on postsocialist transformation of agriculture, who included me in two conferences that I found very useful.

Being in Berlin rather than somewhere else had a number of other advantages, not the least of them being the city’s buoyant spirit as it recovers its former status in a united Germany. From the forest of cranes in the central and eastern part, it is obvious that textbooks written 50 years hence on the city’s economic and financial development will give pride of place to capital accumulated in the construction industry. Years of studying socialism made me especially interested in how the architectural disjunctures between east and west are being brought into alignment (not always successfully, as in Potsdamer Platz), as well as in the social consequences of what some easterners still think of as the *Anschluss* of 1990. It was also fascinating to participate indirectly in the effects of Berlin’s losing the federal subsidies that enabled it to maintain so rich a cultural environment.

A good vantage point for perceiving this was the principal form of recreation my partner and I engaged in: attending many marvelous productions at the Staatsoper and Komische Oper, several of them enhanced by complaint in one form or another about the plan to reduce the programming and push three opera houses into two. We have never before been able to see so much good opera as we could here, where the ticket prices still reflect the subsidies aimed partly at making West Berlin a cultural paradise and partly at

making culture accessible to all East Berliners. Being the beneficiary of this conjuncture was a tremendous boon. Especially memorable performances: *Così fan tutte*, *Macbeth*, *The Magic Flute*, *Salome*, and *The Barber of Seville*, at the Staatsoper; *Saul*, *Boris Godunow*, and *Don Carlos*, at the Komische Oper. Music in other forms further enriched our time in Berlin, chief among them some wonderful concerts by the Berlin Philharmonic, as well as piano recitals by Mikhail Pletnev and Krystian Zimerman. Adding to these some visits to Berlin museums (the bust of Nefertiti left us breathless) made our experience here an unforgettable cultural feast.

For want of a car and sunny weekends, we did less exploring in the environs of Berlin than we would have liked, particularly egregious omissions being Dresden and Potsdam (easy enough to reach by train, if the weather suits one's schedule). In November, however, I read Christoph Wolff's superb biography of J.S. Bach, the consequence being a small pilgrimage in the footsteps of that great master – to his birthplace, towns where he had worked, and the Thomaskirche in Leipzig. The inevitable Bach T-shirt, replete with Brandenburg Concerto, seemed a fitting souvenir.

Disappointments? No sun. Not managing to learn German by osmosis. Not finishing my book altogether. Not going up in the balloon. Not making it to Prague, despite many plans. None of these, of course, the fault of the Kolleg, whose wonderful staff would surely have solved even those problems if they could. In short, not much to diminish a superb year, which I feel greatly privileged to have been offered.