GENDER INTERTWINED: NEOLIBERAL SUBJECTIVITIES AND LIVELIHOOD STRATEGIES ALONG ROMANIA’S WESTERN BORDER, 1999 - 2005

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Abstract: This paper argues that theorisation of the post-communist period through the lens of transformation rather than transition allows for a more integrated understanding of the role of gender in shaping economic spaces. Gendered identities intersect with neoliberal processes at multiple scales. The selected narratives of three women entrepreneurs from Romania’s western border serve as examples to illustrate the personal complexity of how neoliberal subjectivities intersect emerging political and economic spaces.

Key words: neoliberalism, transition, transformation, subjectivity, entrepreneurship, livelihood strategies, gender, Romania

1. INTRODUCTION

The year 2009 marks the twenty-year anniversary of the first revolutions overturning communism in central and eastern Europe. Since then, numerous scholars have studied the paths of political, economic, social and cultural transitions in the region. Many of these studies (Grindea, 1997) focus on a type of transition characterised as a linear path to modernity and measured by similarity to the West without considering other possible evolutions (Horschelmann, 2002). Generally, the concept of transition emphasises the formal economy particularly from the perspective of neoliberalism. Theorising the post-communist period through the lens of transformation rather than transition lends itself to analyses of the role of gender as it crosses between formal and informal spheres and even non-economic spaces (Gibson-Graham, 2006). As female gender roles tend to extend beyond the formal economy in various forms of diverse economies and informal economies, these often function to create resilience, and sometimes as acts of resistance to marginalising aspects of neoliberal globalisation (Oberhauser,
2005). Connecting gender and marketisation in Romania (Voiculescu, 2004) and in China, (Yang, 1999), material and symbolic implications of the new political economy result in increased commodification of the female body. How can feminist geography contribute towards an understanding of gender and the body in changing political and economic spaces? Based on an ethnographic study of micro-entrepreneurs along the western border of Romania (Lelea, 2009), this paper examines the ways that gender is a factor intertwined in everyday life experiences of transformation, and particularly engagement of neoliberal subjectivities as a part of the cultivation of livelihood strategies. In this paper, three narratives from this research are chosen to illustrate the complex processes of change from one political economy to another from a more personal perspective.

2. CULTIVATING NEOLIBERAL SUBJECTIVITIES

The neoliberal system includes, namely privatisation (enclosure of the commons, accumulation by dispossession) which was a part of the ‘roll-back’ of the state so that the ‘invisible hand’ of the market may prevail and a ‘roll-out’ of the state through the neoliberal emphasis on self-regulatory citizenship which internalises the disciplinary features of governance (Harvey, 2005; Peck & Tickell, 2002, Dunn 2004). Developing a neoliberal subjectivity is a product of the internalization of individualisation and responsibilisation (Rose, 1996). This is a way of linking the broader processes of change with individual experience and perception and identifying how the hegemony of a particular mode of production becomes internalised.

Nikolas Rose (1996) describes neoliberalism as a form of governmentality with an emphasis on autonomous individuals who are responsible for themselves regardless of the context of their given societal structures and interconnections.

“Neoliberalism is thus more than a phenomenon at the level of political philosophy. It constitutes a mentality of government, a conception of how authorities should use their powers in order to improve national well-being, the ends they should seek, the evils they should avoid, the means they should use, and, crucially, the nature of the persons upon whom they must act” (Rose, 1996, p. 153).

Analysis of subjectivities is a way of linking the broader processes of change with individual experience. Entrepreneurship offers a window for understanding these processes of change because these are people who are active in engaging the ideals of the new system. Micro-entrepreneurs, particularly women micro-entrepreneurs, occupy the paradoxical space of representing an ideal for both of these transition/ transformation theorisations. Gender is intertwined in all of these spaces through negotiations for power, inclusions and exclusions, etc.
3. ILLUSTRATING PROCESS THROUGH PERSONAL NARRATIVE

Ethnographic research I conducted in 1999 and 2003 - 2005 focused on contextualising everyday livelihood strategies in this border region using feminist methodologies (Moss, 2002). Women and men were interviewed with a range of age groups, and occupations including entrepreneurs, factory workers, migrant workers, farmers and day labourers. In total, I conducted in-depth interviews and focus groups with 140 ethnically Romanian and Hungarian people living in towns and villages along Romania’s western border. The following three vignettes have been chosen to illustrate the complexity of neoliberal subjectivity with entrepreneurial ‘success’ and ‘failure’ and the role of gender. Although none can be fully representative, there are some common elements that link these examples with broader themes.

**Entrepreneur 1: Nicoletta**

*A story of an entrepreneur who moved from a larger city to an isolated village along the border in the early nineties and tried to start a business but to no avail.*

“To start in the beginning, [this village] used to be very beautiful. Come on, said a friend, “Buy a house...” And so it was. After the Revolution... if a gypsy, put a table on the street – and put out some bottles of juice, cola, and I don’t know what – they could immediately earn some good money. And so I thought... We can sell the apartment [in the city], buy this house, and then with the money that is left over... open a grocery store. When we first came here... we rented space on main street and opened a small grocery store. We planned out how it would all be, how we would buy our merchandise – how much, what and how. But the prices - the inflation started to grow. Whether it went well or not, we had to remain in this village because we had already sold our apartment [in the city], and bought this house [in the country]. With the money that remained, we wanted to do something productive - something from which we could earn a living. When we left, we both had jobs... And here, we are too old for anyone to want to hire us and too young to receive a pension. And so it has been very difficult. We have not been able to get any unemployment - nothing. What kind of unemployment would they give you if you quit your job?... When we came here, everything proceeded slowly and then everything went backwards... After the Revolution, everything depended on personal networks because of corruption... We had said from the beginning that we didn’t want to buy alcoholic beverages, and I said, come-on let’s do something - and sell the merchandise that we bought - pasta, biscuits, rice. But it was so bitter! You couldn't have a decent business with something like this. It was hard. We couldn't buy meat because we didn’t have a freezer.... People would come to buy a hundred grams of something or other and we wouldn’t have what we needed... We didn’t have a car and so we needed to rent one which was expensive... and it was a terrible car... First, a tire would have a problem, then, something with the brakes...
And then, we needed to put money into this car for repairs. And the car was necessary so that we could buy the bread... Because we were from a village and bread was only distributed to villages at night and we could barely get it because there were a lot of people... If you didn’t want to be left behind with no bread, then you needed to give, give, give... My husband and my son, would wait over there all night until morning... Our earnings were so small that we couldn’t even keep up with the repairs for the car, and we didn’t have any more money to give as a gift [bribe] to the bakery. And - I don’t know how to say it - we didn’t have anything left, and we were left so bitterly with a debt of over 2000 German Deutsch Marks... If my mother had not been in [a Western European country] to help us with money, we probably would have needed to sell this house so that we wouldn’t wind up in jail. This is our short tale...

If we could have had a chance... we could have had some work and even created jobs for other people... and then we would have lived a decent life. Ah, but, what happened? ...To tell you the truth, slowly it became worse and worse... I am [in my early fifties] and you can’t get a pension until you are over sixty [so without a pension, without employment, and without unemployment]... It is hard for us to face our children - every time there is a holiday, like a birthday, we cannot give anything to our grandchildren. We cannot even buy them a toy... I mean the Romanian State sells electricity at a higher price than in [the Western European country her daughter lives in]... and how can we pay the same rates as in the West when our salaries have remained the same... It is a nightmare, a nightmare... Everything is in such ruins... And in the end, I don’t know what we are going to do. We need to do something. And we have tried. But this didn’t work out... Our business lasted for about a year... After’93 we closed the store, and in ‘97, we tried again. We didn’t want to need money from our children. They have their own families and all of the money is budgeted – for rent, insurance... everything that they need... We had dreamed that if we thought it through very carefully, we could start a business and it would go decently well... The idea was my husband’s and my younger son’s... We had a beautiful apartment, with flowers... However, in [the city] there was a lot of crime and bad things... so from this point of view, it was a benefit for our children that we came here even with all of the difficulties which happened afterwards... We had such hope and such confidence. At least this is how it was in the beginning...”

Entrepreneur 2: Danuța

This woman, along with her husband is the owner of a small bar and a store in a booming border town.

1 female, ethnically Romanian, early fifties, former entrepreneur, Western borderlands, Romania, interviewed August, 1999.
“This is the fourth business that we have started... In 1990, I moved into a house with my husband where we began our life as a couple and we had children. We completely renovated that house and stayed there for another couple of years. Then we sold that house and bought a smaller apartment so that we could also run a restaurant in [the nearby city]. We were busy with that for about two years, but the rent was far too high to keep up. Then we thought that we might be able to find a house in a more peripheral location where we could have both the business and our home to avoid paying rent... And then we came here and found this house with adjoining storefront. We renovated it... At first there was a grocery store, but it didn’t go as it should, so we closed it because it was running a loss. The food would expire so quickly, and so on... That was brief, and then, we tried to think of something that would be new - for which there was a need, so we started this store... It is going really well and there is a lot of work. So much so, that in the summer we can hardly find time to eat... sometimes the children will make us sandwiches or something like that... There isn’t any time because we don’t have any employees except for one boy who helps with loading. We work only for ourselves because there is no opportunity to have faith in other people... regardless of how much money you might give them, they will be on the lookout to steal from you behind your back. We have reached the conclusion that it is better for us to do everything ourselves... We hope to create something that we can leave for our children. But for now, there is a lot of work to do and to be done earnestly. If you cannot put your spirit into what you do, you will never succeed; and you will not have accomplished anything... Our biggest obstacles - I can’t really say that I had many obstacles – never, because we, as husband and wife, get along very well, and we have worked together at his work and in the home – and starting a business – and everything, everything, everything, with my husband. He did the construction by himself and only when he needed to do some more difficult labour did he hire some men to come and help, and then I made food for them... and we have helped each other. But aside from that, we have done everything ourselves. Honestly, I should tell you, that I have come to the conclusion that you cannot depend on anyone, because it will destroy your money and materials and it is very hard... Our son helps us in the store and... it is good for him to learn to have a good work ethic... Our first business was started in the late nineties... in another town... We were business partners with another couple. The two of us worked on the planning, and it was going well. But they were some people - with debts and they ultimately had their apartment taken by the bank. When they saw that the business was exploding, and that there was lots of business... then they stuck their noses into everything - except that the woman didn’t even know how to do math with a calculator! I mean, nothing. She was stupid... and there we were, working like two idiots - the same way that we are here - where everything that we did, we did together, but there it wasn’t worth it. After a whole month, we had to end it. I did not want to go there anymore, because I had left my children and my home and
everything only to wake up after awhile to the fact that I had nothing to show for it... Yes, you know, after four months of work, we realised that we were left with no money. After we left, they ran the business for another three months and then had to declare bankruptcy. They didn’t know how to do the accounting and people stole from them and they were unaware; people who do not like to work. That is how they were accustomed - to have everything handed to them and to live lavishly - going to restaurants... It ended up that finances went through the roof and this lady even had to sell everything from her home including the animals from their pens, and the car - everything. It was really serious. My brother said that they were foolish not to hang onto us as if we were holy because it was how it was - we were getting by and had our part of the profits and they had some of the profits. But they wanted it all. Why split the money when you can have it all? And in the end, they have been left with nothing... Yes, you know, we became aware that after working for four months, that we had nothing to show for it. And we had worked hard – from morning until night... we painted, vacuumed, and everything, during difficult weather where the wind was blowing like it is now, and I was there - with my eyebrows, eyelashes and hair all full of paint. And her, she had some of those really long nails – like she did all the time... and she was smoking cigarette after cigarette, just so that she wouldn’t have to do any actual work, and even her husband didn’t even know how to hammer a nail, nothing, nothing, nothing... I didn’t have another job because I had a house with little kids, a garden and livestock and everything to take care of and I couldn’t leave my house to go and work for somebody else... After that, I told my husband, do what you will, but I will not work with others anymore because these people stabbed us in the back... I had some experience in business. During the communist period and afterwards, I worked ten years in a processed foods factory, and after that I spent four years in commerce and there I was among the best in my section... Well, I got by just about anywhere. Wherever I was and for however much time, I could get by, and this is because I was the type of person who if they threw me out the door, I would return through the window. I don’t ever give up... I like to work for myself because you have the satisfaction that everything that you do - whether you make a mistake or if it moves forward, that it is for yourself... You know if everyone would be even half like me - then everything would be ordered differently. But not everyone cares. They think, “today I have some money, I eat, drink, and get by, or even get drunk and sleep. Nobody thinks about security for tomorrow, for their future or their children’s future. In this country - I don’t know - the youth don’t want to work anymore - they just dream... as if everything falls from the sky without work. They don’t think that without work, it is not possible to get anywhere. This is the hard reality; the truth... People need to get used to the expectations of the new time.”

female, ethnically Romanian, mid-thirties, entrepreneur, Western borderlands, Romania, interviewed March, 2005 W24
Entrepreneur 3: Magdalena

The owner of an exotic dancing club in a border town with a truck crossing.

“I left Romania before the Revolution in [December] ’89 - I left in May... This was my second time trying to cross the border because I had unsuccessfully tried crossing into Budapest when I was 19 years old. To get to Hungary, I paid the equivalent amount of money that, at the time, could have purchased one Dacia car... The second time, when I successfully crossed the border and finally made it to [a Western European country], I was with my first husband and I was pregnant. At the time, I didn't know that I was pregnant, but the doctors told me when we were in a refugee camp. My oldest son was born there. My first husband - he abandoned us. I became homeless and had to live on the streets my young son. But the Lord helped me... Eventually, a cousin came with my passport. And later I met my second husband who [had a decent job]... To survive, I was working at a laundry and helping street children. I was working informally at this time. I would also collect things that were thrown away [in this Western European country] to bring here [to Romania] to sell and also to give as donations for an old folks home. I opened this night club at the end of the nineties. I figured it was better for the girls to stay here than on the street. Another benefit for the girls working here instead of on the street is that they get paperwork so that their working time counts towards their retirement pension... I knew what it was like to be on the street and how hard that was. With this dance club, I see myself as providing a safer alternative for the girls who would have otherwise have been on the street. The girls are not from here; they came here from other regions in Romania from the mountains in the north and to the east; regions which were more economically impoverished. Some of the girls send money home to relatives, to parents, to children. In particular, the girl over there wearing the hot pink tube dress, she would not be able to afford the medicines that she needs for her mental illness from a regular job... Truckers are often stopped here for hours at the border and we ready to relieve them of their boredom and their cash. The girls all live together in the same apartment... in the nearest city - not in the nearby town. The local people wouldn’t want to have anything to do with them.”

One of the exotic dancers employed in the club interjected to explain that, ‘I do this in order to secure a better future for myself and for my young son who is being taken care of by my parents in the eastern part of the country. I send them money so that he can have what he needs; food, shoes, books for school etc. In addition to [this exotic dancing], I also have another full-time job at a department store in the city. By working here and there I move between two worlds - two classes, one which is ‘more civilised’ and one which is ‘more free’. You wouldn’t

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3 female, ethnically Hungarian and Romanian, late thirties, entrepreneur, Western borderlands, Romania, interviewed July, 2004. W2
believe that I give advice to other women from the middle and upper classes who come to the shopping mall. I try to raise their awareness to muster the courage to take control of their own lives and not to despair. I encourage them to open their eyes and to not feel trapped in their lives. I tell them to do whatever it takes to move forward and to achieve their dreams. The first step is to believe in yourself.’

4. DISCUSSION: NARRATIVES OF ENTREPRENEUR EXPERIENCES OF TRANSFORMATION

These three entrepreneurs engage neoliberal subjectivities in different ways. Before the Revolution, although there were plenty of informal exchange networks, one could not be an entrepreneur in the formal economy. Nicoletta and her family, left white collar jobs to become early entrepreneurs. Danuța worked in a factory and, a number of years after the Revolution, was promoted to work in the business section after which she began her first business. Magdalena fled the country just before the Revolution and later engaged in the informal economy including cross-border trade.

These three women took responsibility for their own survival and attempted to create viable businesses. Danuța’s narrative demonstrates the most attachment to the perception of self that regardless of circumstances, an individual who is smart and hard-working will be able to create success. Nicoletta’s narrative is much more tempered. She relates having had confidence and optimism in the beginning of her forays into entrepreneurialism, but later would identify structural challenges including a lack of adequate resources, corruption and inflation that thwarted their attempts. She described wanting to have been able to create employment for others in the community, but was embittered that not only could she not help anyone else, that she could barely survive. Magdalena also demonstrates a neoliberal subjectivity with her entrepreneurialism, but she does not frame it with this type of language when she describes it. Potentially to divert negative public perceptions of her business, she was very committed to a narrative which emphasised the extension of assistance of others; first street children abroad, elderly, and, then ‘her girls’. Her narrative is contextualised in a broader struggle of hardships.

Particularly in the first ten years after the Revolution, inflation was such that the idea of credit was largely taboo. Many of those who did use credit became the subject of tales of what to avoid. Two of these narratives described selling housing assets in order to start their businesses. Particularly because these two examples are of counter-migrants, who migrated from urban to rural areas, the value of their urban properties could be extended in the rural and semi-urban areas for their new housing and start-up capital. For those who did not have such access, migrant networks provided the differential. Both with the counter-migrants and with the
temporary international migrants, they leveraged geographic differentials as part of their livelihood strategies.

The role of the border for all three also demonstrated how they were embedded in the local economies in their communities, including passer’s through. Part of the vitality of the businesses that Danuţa and Magdalena describe are dependent on being situated along important border crossings where many people and goods circulate. A big part of the challenge faced by Nicoletta is that over the years her village became poorer and more isolated. Under such difficult conditions, the moral stipulation that she and her family would not sell alcoholic beverages exacerbated the challenges they faced.

A common theme shared with many of the women entrepreneurs in this study which is also represented in these three narratives is the theme of creating a better future for their children. In this way the identity of motherhood is prominent. In the first narrative, Nicoletta ultimately consoles herself that their hardships with their businesses, were worthwhile because her children were able to avoid crime in the city. Nicoletta also describes the shame of her poverty as heightened by the inability to purchase gifts for her grandchildren. In the second, Danuţa explains that although she has little time for traditional feminine reproduction roles of cooking and household maintenance, that her children benefit, not only from the income generated, but from learning to internalise a strong work ethic. Magdalena sees hope in the future that her daughter will have a broader range of choices available to her.

Particular to the narrative of Nicoletta, she discusses feeling that she could engage in capitalist exchange after watching Roma street vendors in the early days after the Revolution in ‘89. To note is that the per capita GDP\textsuperscript{4} in 1991 was $1254 and by 1992 had fallen to $892\textsuperscript{5}. So not only were they situated in a more economically impoverished village isolated on the border, but the particular years in which they started were some of the most difficult. The second time they started their business, in 1996, was a year in which a lot of insecurity was introduced through the removal of agricultural subsidies in favour of trade liberalisation. Although there was no social safety net from the state in terms of unemployment or pension, the only community assistance that they could benefit from was from their church and from subsistence activities with their garden and small livestock. They were able to get some help from a mother living abroad and children, but not on a regular basis and not without emotional distress. Nicoletta is not individualising the outcomes of her entrepreneurial attempts. Although they originally had strong confidence (like Danuţa), she recognises that outside structures are part of the

\textsuperscript{4}http://data.un.org

\textsuperscript{5}Although per capita GDP is obviously not spread evenly among people because of the increasing inequalities, it does give an indicator of some of the context.
reason why there is no success in their endeavours; you can work as hard as you want, but sometimes there is too much against you. One external barrier which was brought up by a number of other entrepreneurs in the study was age discrimination. Although the other entrepreneurs described this as part of the reason that they sought to create self-employment, Nicoletta described this as part of why she had little recourse after her businesses failed.

Danuța’s last business was not only situated in a border boom town, but the period from which she opened it in 2003 until the year of the interview had nearly doubled per capita GDP from $2724 to $4584. Similar to Nicoletta, she was able to borrow money from family at one point, but no other family members had businesses. She demonstrated tenacity because despite early hardships, they kept trying. Initially she had a garden and livestock for household resilience, but needed to cut back this type of reproductive labor when the fourth business was thriving. Although there was a gendered division of labor, important aspects of management/decision-making were equally shared. Her identity as a woman is contrasted with the type of woman described in an earlier failed business partnership where the other woman had what could be considered a ‘decorative’ femininity. Likewise, part of the way the ‘failure’ of this other woman’s husband was described was his lack of knowledge of typically masculinised tasks.

In the third narrative, Magdalena was an early migrant escaping before the Revolution. All the ‘girls’ working for her are internal migrants, from east to west and they all commute from the nearby larger city to the border crossing area. While she provides employment for others she also depends on their labour. Being female exacerbated her vulnerability when her first husband left her and their child; and in turn, she then used her female body as part of her survival strategy. While the bodies of other women, ostensibly for exotic dancing, became part of her income from her business, this activity might be described as exploitation, or as she describes it, as helping them avoid the dangers of more informal situations. She organised everything and her husband’s male gender was part of the ‘security’. For each of them, their gender gave them ‘access’ to spaces in the business that the other did not have. Because she is now older than the women employees, her female gender carries more authority and allows her more mobility between male and female spaces. Her subjectivity is action-oriented, pick yourself up and survive, but her narrative is not individualised, rather it is placed in a context of broader vulnerability. However, her employee resists being characterised as a marginalised woman. She does individualise her situation as a choice and uses a language of self empowerment. Magdalena’s story is an outlier in this research project, but it is one in which the materiality of women’s bodies and the implications of gendered power relations, sexuality and economic exchange is most pronounced.
5. CONCLUSION

Gendered identities intersect with both neoliberal subjectivities of the new economy, and neoliberal influences shaping the structure of the emergent capitalist economy, all while negotiating differing structures of the previous regime. In these three narratives, a more personalised approach can be taken to contextualise the complexity of this transformation. This may change according to life-course, class, education, and family background, and with connections and disconnections to place, region and to patterns of globalisation. Women micro-entrepreneurs may be active in creating resilience and strength, and may be vulnerable in the face of rapid geo-economic and geopolitical change. No one story can be definitive and three narratives only begin to illustrate the breadth and diversity transformations. Likewise, one singular trajectory of transition masks multiple non-linear transformations.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to IGU Gender and Geography 2009 conference organisers Sorina Voiculescu and Judit Timar, my dissertation advisor Janet Momsen and, my colleague, Agnieszka Zajackowska, for their support during the process of my research and writing this paper. I am especially indebted to all of the people along the border who gave of their time to speak to me about their experiences and particularly those who extended warm hospitality to me. This research would not have been possible without the U.S. Junior Fulbright Fellowship to Romania.

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