
OCCUPYING A POST-COMMUNIST COUNTRY

THE CASE OF ROMANIA[†]

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Abstract

In this paper I am trying to explore the possible relationship between the worldwide grass-roots Occupy movement and the 2012 Piața Universității marathon manifestation in Romania. My approach is a comparative one – I firstly try to sketch a conceptual framework designed to produce a clear image regarding the global Occupy movement, and secondly to see if the Romanian phenomenon is related to the wider Occupy movement. Finally, I will try to formulate some conclusions regarding the implications for political theory of both types of social movements, the most important one regarding the relation between a non-hierarchical, leaderless movement and contemporary evolutions in political ideologies.

Keywords: social movements, occupy, political ideology

1. Introduction

In this article I will attempt to approach a very topical matter, regarding the global Occupy movement and its implications with respect to the Piața Universității demonstrations. The main reasons behind this attempt are the following: first, because this type of studies are very uncommon in the present-day Romanian academic context, second, because of the extent of this type of phenomenon and third because I find that the study of the Occupy phenomenon can determine several important conclusions with respect to political theory, especially to the social movements, both in general and in our country especially.

The present approach is of a comparative nature, thereby hoping to point out the particularities of the Romanian movement within the global context of this type of phenomenon. The purpose of this undertaking is twofold: on one hand, I seek to give an account of the extent to which the demonstrations at the end of 2011 can be integrated in the general logical frame of the global Occupy

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type movements and, on the other hand, to attempt an early assessment of the implications of these movements for the study of the political ideologies. As such, I will try to provide an answer for the following questions: are the OWS movements of an ideological, post-ideological or non-ideological nature? How is the Piața Universității phenomenon to be understood within the global context of this type of movements?

2. Context and problematization

2.1. Social movements and political ideology during the economic crisis period

The last years, dominated by the economical and financial crisis, produced, as it was to be expected, a series of socio-political effects. The common denominator of most subsequent political positions is dissatisfaction. On one hand, in the industrially developed countries, there is dissatisfaction within the middle class that feels threatened by the effects of the austerity measures which were adopted by the governments in order to cope with the crisis, and, on the other hand, in the developing countries (such as the Arab world for example), there is a general dissatisfaction, involving not only the insufficiently developed middle classes, but also the general part of the population, displeased with the social and economical effects generated by the harsh policies adopted by the governments pressured by international actors such as WB or the IMF and also with the chronic incapacity of their regimes in controlling the difficult economical conditions generated by the drastic drop in the global commerce (with serious internal social and economical consequences, resulting in the unemployment increase, the crash of the, already frail, internal markets, etc.).

Probably the most salient and analyzed contemporary ideological phenomenon is represented by the emergence of the right wing extremism, on the backdrop of the post Cold War nationalist resurgence [1]. In the present context, the right wing extremism reconfigured, as xenophobia overcame the limited frame of the mere national boundaries and, ironically, acquired a global perspective. For example, the rural area Frenchman or Englishman feel no longer threatened by the traditional minorities, but by the foreigners that amassed in their proximity under the effects of the permeabilization of the boundaries, phenomenon bringing together Europeans and Maghrebians or Nigerian Africans, Chinese, Turks, etc. Beyond the particular histories that enabled these contemporary realities, ideologically speaking, this reaction suggesting a new dimension of right wing extremism is very interesting – anti-Globalism and, anti-corporate capitalism backed by a relatively simplistic autarchic economical perspective, typical to the XVIIIth and XIXth centuries mercantilism [2]. A similar situation is to be found on the other extreme of the ideological spectrum: Left radicalism acquired new impetus in this period, reclaiming even an academic legitimacy that had seemed lost after the collapse of the socialist block at the beginning of the 90's. It abandoned the authoritarian

etatism in favour of certain democratic roots originating with the Euro-communism of the 80's, integrated however with a critical discourse inspired by the French philosophical Left of the second half of the XXth century, backed by Foucault's and Neo-Gramscian influences [3, 4]. Here as well we can find the same anti-globalist and anti-capitalist position, structured however – as expected – around the critique of global exploitation, of anti-democratism effected by the increase in the global relevance of non-State actors (i.e. trans-national corporations and international monetary institutions) in their relation to the State (especially to the developing states), correlatively of the ideological formula associated with this type of hegemony – neo-liberalism.

2.2. Short history of the Occupy type movements

The idea of *occupation* probably originates with the student revolts of May 1968 in France, when Sorbonne was occupied by protesters, and the Occupation Committee sent a memorable telegram to the USSR, in which they dissociated from the French Communist Party and repudiated the Soviet communism. By paraphrasing Voltaire, the students wrote: "Tremble in your shoes, you bureaucrats! The international power of the working-men's councils will very soon destroy you. Humanity will not be happy until the last bureaucrat shall not be hanged with the intestines of the last capitalist! Long live the struggle of the Kronstadt seamen and of the Machnovists against Trotski and Lenin! Long live the 1956 Budapest insurrection! Down with the State!" [5] The engenderers of the American version of this phenomenon are a group of Left radical activists (some of them with old unpaid bills, since 1999 Seattle) that took on the name *New York City General Assembly* (NYCGA) [<http://www.nycga.net/>, accessed on 09.04.2012], by this underlining the anarchist's model of direct democracy. NYCGA presents itself as "an open and horizontally organized participative process, by which people's capacity to associate within public space as autonomous collective forces within and against the crises of our times" [<http://www.nycga.net/about/>, accessed on 09.04.2012]. Their program is based on the eight solidarity principles of the Occupy Wall Street Movement:

1. The involvement in a direct, transparent and participative democracy;
2. The exertion of collective and personal responsibility;
3. The acknowledgement of the individuals' inherent privilege and of their influence on all interactions;
4. Reciprocal empowerment against any form of oppression;
5. The redefinition of work valorisation;
6. The sanctity of the individual private sphere;
7. The belief that education is a human right;
8. The attempt to use and support open source applications.

Once started, the protest of the 17th of September 2011 focused on the Internet, as a consequence of its promotion by Anonymus. Thereby, OWS became both a physical and a virtual protest movement.

The idea gained impetus quite rapidly, on the backdrop of the global dissatisfaction with the neo-liberal policies and became global: approximately 1500 cities all around the world registered similar manifestations. In March 2012, an alliance between the Occupy movement, Anonymus and other groups claim the spoils in the annulment of the G8 meeting that was supposed to take place in Chicago, determining president Obama in relocating it to Camp David. The financial crisis emerging at the end of the 2000's also effected in Europe strong reactions against neo-liberal governments and policies, the most famous of such manifestations probably being the ones in Greece and Spain, which presented several traits similar to the American Occupy movement. The *Indignados* (*Indignant*) movement in Spain, as it was the case in Barcelona for example, presented a variety of neo-anarchist traits. Here, immediately after the start of the movement (2011) and the occupations of the public squares, people congregated in neighbourhood gatherings (that sometimes became 'gatherings of gatherings') in which the future of the movement and the ways instrumental to the contestation of the budget cuts and privatization neo-liberal policies were discussed. There also emerged ingenious summoning modalities, as was the case in the Sant Andreu neighbourhood (predominantly working-class), where the participants wore yellow T-Shirts, thereby announcing the event [Hillary Wainwright, 'Indignados Movement takes Root in Barcelona', October. 2011, at the address <http://www.tni.org/article/indignados-movement-takes-root-barcelona>, accessed on 09.04.2012]. On July, the 27th 2011, a group of *indignados* left Madrid with the destination Brussels, where they arrived on October, 8th, 2011, before the European Summit that took place October 17th and 18th. Along the march, the participants collected the requests by the people they met, thereby drawing up a document of over 100 pages, written in English, French and Spanish, entitled *Book of the People/Cahier de Doleances/Libro de los Pueblos* [http://issuu.com/agorabrussels/docs/libro_de_pueblos_final/9, accessed on 09.04.2012] that was given to the European authorities in Brussels.

The message of direct democracy of the *Indignados* was probably most salient during the November 2011 general elections: in the pre-electoral period there was a strong campaign against the political class and the representative system – people wrote 'urn' on toilets and sewers, the direct deliverance of the voting cards to the banks was suggested, etc., the *Indignados* finally recommending the electors three strategies under the slogan 'They want your vote, we want your opinion': 1. Abstention; 2. Vote annulment; 3. Voting for a third party, in order to undermine the bi-party system. In the end, the absenteeism and the annulled votes amounted to 11 million, more than the winning party received in the elections [6].

2.3. Characteristics of the Occupy type movements

This sort of ideological evolutions that can be held as more or less predictable, in the sense of belonging to the grander scale of the functioning of the modern state in contexts such as those responsible for the global crisis, was

joined by a seemingly new phenomenon, generated in fact by the same dissatisfactions as those mentioned earlier, namely the grass-roots anti-systemic movements such as ‘the Arab spring’, Occupy Wall Street (OWS)/Tea Party Movement or *Indignados*. Undoubtedly, this type of civic activism is not completely specific to this century as it manifested during the previous one as well, but the specific aspects of the contemporary phenomenon reside in its global nature, the lack of hierarchical organization, respectively its intimate link to the informational technology, especially to the virtual world of the socialization networks. Moreover, at least in the case of the industrialized West, another trait must be added, namely the strong support for a participative and consensual democracy, as an alternative to the classical representative model. This aspect is less visible in the case of the Tea Party Movement, belonging to the right-conservative pole of the American ideological spectrum. Despite of their success in gaining seats in the Congress, Tea Party insists on a political model deriving from a communitarian vision which they find fundamental to the American political identity and which seemingly would correspond to the model originally adopted by the early colonists. On the other hand, this movement cannot be characterized solely on account of its grass-roots component – Tea Party in fact represents, as Theda Skocpol puts it, a combination of forces that include, along the grass-roots element, an elitist component operating on the national level and an alternative media component, especially on the Internet [7, 8].

On the other hand, in the case of the Arabian movements, despite their having been directed against authoritarian and dictatorial regimes such as those of Mubarak in Egypt, Ghaddafi in Libya or al-Assad in Syria, their subsequent preference for Western type democratic regimes is still uncertain until future events. Notwithstanding, their link to the similar Western movements is quite obvious, the best example being the conscious adoption by the Occupy movements of several models launched during the Arabian spring [9].

Another aspect relevant to the discussion of this type of phenomenon regards the ideological dimension of these movements. It is noteworthy that, at least seemingly, the entire left-right continuum is, although specifically, covered, fact implying a discussion not so much about the conceptual reconfiguration, but rather about the recalibration of the left-right distinction as to integrate the Occupy phenomenon with its peculiarities. Roughly speaking, we could place the Tea Party movement at the right wing and the OWS or the *Indignados* at the left wing of the ideological spectrum. The common characteristics of these movements reside in their anti-systemic orientation, on their grass-roots assumptions, as opposed to a political establishment which they perceive as corrupt or incompetent, respectively their preference for the alternative informational media, such as the Internet, for the promotion of their ideas. However, the similarities end here. Tea Party, without abandoning its grass-roots origins, became involved in the national politics, finally succeeding in obtaining seats in the U.S. Congress (under the umbrella of the Republican Party). At the same time however due to the particular political discourse it professes, its area

of influence never extended beyond the U.S. borders, thereby remaining a specifically American phenomenon. On the other hand however, the OWS continues to deny the representative democracy, on the basis of a participative-consensualist vision, resembling the organizational practices of the Spanish anarchists from the Spanish Civil War period. At the same time, the Occupy model reached far beyond the U.S. borders, gaining global relevance. This extension (undoubtedly facilitated by the Internet) had, in my opinion, a specific effect with respect to the ideological coherence of the movement. It has no coherent program, other than its own extension and the anti-systemic reactionary position. In other words, we are dealing with a so called ‘modular ideology’, which is very versatile with respect to a wide variety of socio-political and economical contexts, as long as a few fundamental conditions are met. This specific trait of the OWS movements derives from their strictly horizontal organization resulting in the emergence of an all-adaptive ideological formula, which could be easily mistaken for incoherence or populism. As such, my answer to the previous question as to the ‘ideological, post-ideological or non-ideological nature of the OWS movements’ is quite simple – they are modular, in the sense of their belonging to a relatively lax general ideological frame (for example anti-capitalism) populated with messages, programs and ideas stemming from a wide variety of sources, depending on the local colour, the nature of the social, economical, political and cultural context of the country, the participants etc. Noteworthy is the fact that the aforementioned general frame attempts to provide an answer to the five dilemmas identified by Giddens in 1998 – globalization, left/right, individualism, political actors and ecological problems [10].

3. The Piața Universității (The University Plaza) marathon protests

3.1. Short history

In Bucharest there is an occupy-tradition dating back to the days of the ’89 revolution and its immediately subsequent period. The author of this article, for example, was in Piața Universității on December, the 21st 1989 at the time at which the protesters discussed the perspective of occupying Piața Universității (*The University Plaza*) for protesting against the Ceaușescu Regime. The decision was made rather quickly, by consensus, the idea of occupying Piața Universității being adopted due to media related considerations – the protesters thought that there were representatives of the foreign media residing in the Intercontinental Hotel, fact which would have contributed to the international propagation of the news of the revolt and on the other hand would have constituted a deterrent for the regime with respect to the use of the military forces against its own people. From this point on, Piața Universității gained an extraordinary symbolic meaning – with respect to the democratic spirit, to human sacrifice for freedom etc. Its image as a symbolic haven of democracy was strengthened by the events taking place in the spring of the following year,

when the protests associated with the first ‘Piața Universității’ phenomenon occurred. This is the time at which this area located in the centre of the Bucharest gained the name ‘the zero kilometre of democracy’. The occupation of the plaza, its enclosing with improvised fences and barricades anticipated the Occupy movements. Nevertheless, the basic motivation behind the protest had nothing in common with the present day phenomenon, as it constituted an anti-communist protest, promoting the functional representative democratic institutions and basic citizen freedoms – association, expression, etc. From this perspective, the first Piața Universității phenomenon was not post-modern but rather pre-modern in nature: the Romanian people were in search of democracy and not of an alternative democratic model, as in the case of the OWS. In this regard, things remained more or less the same in the last twenty years.

The present day Piața Universității movement broke out at the beginning of this year along with the pro-Raed Arafat and SMURD (The Mobile Emergency Reanimation and Decarceration Service) manifestations originated in Târgu Mureș. Arafat’s resignation from the position as state sub-secretary to the Ministry of Health following a TV altercation with president Băsescu regarding the public health program lead to a wave of public indignation materialized in a series of legal protests initially held in Târgu Mureș, the SMURD’s ‘birthplace’. The street protests became almost instantly an actual uprising (following several mobilization messages promoted through the Internet and as a result of the media coverage) – initially in support of Arafat and, later on, gaining anti-government and anti-presidential tendencies [11]. From that point on, the protests rapidly spread in the entire country, involving tens of cities. The manifestations in Bucharest became central to the phenomenon not on account of the magnitude of the protests but mainly due to the presence of the national TV’s headquarters and also to the violent clashes with the police that occurred on the night of January the 14th and the following day.

Piața Universității was occupied by the protesters on both sides of the boulevard, fact practically leading to the emergence of two different and concomitant manifestations – on the side of the University there were mainly young people – students, professors, activists, NGO etc. – while on the side of the National Theatre the main group was formed by pensioners, unemployed and people dissatisfied with the social effects of the austerity policies of the government. The intensity of the manifestations decreased in time, the number of the protesters amounting to a few tens at the time of the writing of this article.

3.2. Characteristics of the Piața Universității protests

Perhaps the most striking thing when examining the Piața Universității protests is its spontaneous grass-roots origins. This is a major difference from the OWS movements, as the latter always originated with a small group of, usually left wing, activists. From this perspective, the Romanian phenomenon was more similar to the Moldavian or Ukrainian revolutions or to the Arabian Spring. The most interesting thing however is the fact that there were several

previous attempts at copying or creating a OWS movement in Bucharest, by applying the organizational algorithm recommended on the site of the movement [http://www.adevarul.ro/locale/targu-mures/Revolutia_SMURD_incepe_la_Targu-Mures-_Peste_3-000_de_oameni_au_cerut_demisia_lui_Basescu_0_626337901.html, accessed on 09.04.2012]. Nonetheless, the Piața Universității protest on October, 15th did not succeed in rallying more than a handful of protesters, and the occupation of the universities – particularly the Bucharest University – along the lines of the Western university occupation model [<http://www.howtooccupy.org/>, accessed on 09.04.2012] proved also to be a failure.

The similarity to the Arabian Spring seems to be even stronger when considering the programmatic aspect. Though formally unorganized and temporarily also lacking a clearly identifiable core able in providing a minimal programmatic coherence (as was the case with the 1990 manifestation, having the University balcony and the Students League as main driving forces), the 2012 protests promoted its intents and demands synthesized through chants, slogans, placards and Internet posts, mostly by the TV media and, secondly, by the Internet. The main demands regarded the dismissal of the Health Law Project, the resignation of the foreign minister, T. Baconschi (after he had disrespectfully addressed the protesters), the resignation of Prime Minister Boc and its government, the resignation of president Basescu, the organization of anticipated elections. Similarly to the Arabian Spring, this was a very clearly stated political agenda, being directed mainly against the political authorities and their institutional regime, however lacking the anti-globalist, anti-capitalist and consensualist tendency typical to the Occupy movements. In other words, the aforementioned general ideological frame lacked in the Romanian case. Undoubtedly, there was a high amount of frustration and discontent, but their target was completely different from the Western version of the phenomenon. From this perspective, a possible correlation between the democratization level, the type of political culture and the programmatic shape of the protest movement would prove to be an interesting research subject in the future. For example, the rejection of the political class in its entirety, that could seem an element similar to the Western Occupy movements, could be more easily explained not just by reference to the set of austerity policies adopted by the government or by general discontent with global capitalism reflected upon internal politics, but rather by the long deception with the effects of the electoralist democracy during the post-communist era, with a weak state and an inefficient institutional construction that seems more suited for favouring corruption than the interests of the common citizens.

Alongside this unanimously accepted agenda, there were several other demands, especially with the group on the side of the University, originating mainly with a small group of NGO activists, students and young professors. These new messages regarded gender equality, ecological and political responsibility. Such messages, backed by the use of several symbols of the global Occupy movement and its allies (such as the Anonymous mask), the

organization of several internationally coordinated A.C.T.A. protests are clear signs of this group's association with the international movement. Nonetheless, this type of messages belonged to a secondary agenda, specific to this group that, in fact, is the one that remained in the plaza after the disbanding of the main crowd of protesters. At the time of the writing of this article, the protest was reduced to a small number of persons and, more importantly, the Internet campaigns had died out as well.

4. Conclusions

Is Piața Universității an OWS movement? Yes and no, rather related than *per se* belonging to it. The Internet mobilization, the occupation of symbolically relevant spaces, the contestation of neo-liberal policies and the absence of vertical organization obviously constitute common aspects. However, the existence of two different agendas, the main one (in the sense of having been assumed by all those present) being dominated by claims and demands exclusively associated with political representatives erroneously related to a certain type of authoritarian regime, separate the Bucharest movement from the foreign ones, including those in the Arabian countries (directed against explicit authoritarian regimes). Moreover, the absence of the general meetings decision model (participative, direct and sometimes consensualist) which is to be found in all forms of Occupy movements seems to contradict the similar character of the two movements.

The obvious conclusion is that, at best, we could speak of two distinct and superposed phenomena, creating the appearance of a unitary whole especially due to the common political agenda. However, once most demands present in this agenda were met (the Health Law Project was dismissed, the foreign minister resigned, Raed Arafat was reinstated and, last but not least, the Boc government also resigned), the main group disbanded, leaving the hardcore members associated with the global Occupy movement out in the open.

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