

COMMODIFIED INFORMATION AND THE FREEDOM OF THE PRESS (RALUCA PETRE, *JOURNALISM IN TIMES OF MAJOR CHANGES – CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES*. BUCURESTI: TRITONIC, 2012.)

The freedom of the press is not debated enough in Romanian academic journals. It is the obvious merit of Raluca Petre to put forward in a very insightful analysis some of the structural elements undermining the freedom of the press in our country. The way Raluca Petre is aiming to prove this aspect is by relying to a very powerful and subtle research instruments. Her book, *Journalism in Times of Major Changes – Critical Perspectives* is using the concepts of *habitus* and *field* that Pierre Bourdieu has developed in social sciences. How can we avoid the empty stereotypes like “there was no press before 1989”, “we made real press after the December Revolution” while responding to such a complex question regarding the evolution of the journalistic profession over the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? One possible way is the one taken by Raluca Petre. Avoiding the quantitative research she is relying on in-depth interviews with three categories of journalists corresponding to three stages of Romanian journalism. The first category consists in journalists that stated working in this professional field during Ceausescu’s regime. The second one is represented by the journalists who started to work in this field soon after the December Revolution and the third one is represented by those who join this profession these days.

What were the most important findings that Raluca Petre is analyzing in her work? Before 1989 the journalistic profession was a privileged one. This professional field was dedicated to a minority of people proving either their indisputable obedience to Ceausescu or the fact that they shall write about “innocent” subjects not affecting the political establishment. Raluca Petre succeeds in offering an objective perspective on the way the press institutions were functioning during the communist era. She focuses on the rules governing those institutions. First of all there was the press law. The horrors it created is partially responsible for the repugnance the Romanian journalists feel towards regulating the press. Even at a first glance it was a law that vouch the freedom of the press, it was clearly stipulating that “the freedom of the press cannot be used against the socialist order, against the law order, set by the Constitution and other laws.” (Petre 81) Initially the press was silenced using the censorship mechanisms. There was a censorship bureau whose main task was to exclude problematic texts from the publications. The responsibility for a “deviant” text was thus shared between the author and that bureau. The second step was to use a more perverse instrument: self-censorship. Any responsible journalists should know what could and what could not be published. This way the responsibility for “deviations” from the Party line was placed on the shoulders of the author. A very interesting characteristic of this era was that the academic education was not done in specialized institutions. The “Communist Party Schools” were filling this social need. The journalists were trained at the (in)famous Ștefan Gheorghiu Academy and this way propaganda and journalism were almost

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identical. In her book Raluca Petre is insisting on a very interesting aspect that was mentioned in other contexts: in the Romanian journalistic field there was no elite to take the institutional and symbolic power after the fall of communism. Unlike the case of Poland, for example, in Romania there was no group of journalists trained as journalists to oppose the system. The opposition came from another group: the writers. Several Romanian journalists find refuge in the Romanian press writing about things that were not clearly attacking the establishment. This is why a famous Romanian publication, *Scântea Tineretului*, was concentrating some of the most important Romanian writers at that time. Those were people with solid literary training, not journalists, and, unfortunately, they were not the ones taking the power after the December Revolution.

But what happened after the Revolution? If we follow the Raluca Petre's analysis we find out that there are two stages characterizing the two decades after 1989. The first one is so idealistic that one could be tempted to call it almost idiotic and another one characterized by some sort of hedonistic narcissism.

There are several important elements that Raluca Petre is investigating in order to define those episodes in the evolution of Romanian journalistic profession. After the December Revolution the press was seen as a "promise land". This major political event opened the door for all those that felt oppressed during the communist regime. Their number was not a small one. People from all the professional fields were coming towards journalism. Those were the glorious days of everybody trying to communicate to the masses. Radio-stations were broadcasting from someone's kitchen. People were working twelve hours a day as a result of pure passion. They truly believed they could change the world using the press. This idealistic period was characterized by people with no formal training – there was no journalism department in our country at that time – but a lot of ideals and wishes. At this point the journalistic standards were equated with talent. As a result, there are a lot of people today that truly believe that there is no need for a journalistic department. All you need is a lot of talent and a lot of guts to become a good journalist. You cannot become a journalist. You are simply born to be one. Mother Nature is the only one that could guarantee access and success in this professional field. This very narrow logic of strict biological determinism offered a less honorable place for academic training. Another characteristic for the way the Romanian press institutions worked during this time is that although they wanted to change the world they were not able to change themselves. The political culture of the enthusiastic journalists of the nineties left them totally unprepared for the problems the free-market economy was representing. They probably knew how to express themselves, but surely the most part did not know that this has nothing to do with the free-market economy of the press. Instead they had to understand a very subtle thing for the political culture of that period. That is, the fact that in a free-market society information is a commodity and not an enlightenment instrument for the masses. At this point Raluca Petre's findings offer an astonishing resemblance to the Orwellian *Animal Farm*: the place of the cruel master (the Romanian dictator) was taken by some of the insiders, the pigs (some of the Romanian journalists). The second class of exploiters proved to be just as horrible as the first. In order to understand what an easy target were the journalists of the nineties we have to take into consideration one aspect that Raluca Petre is bringing forward: only 3% of them believed that a raise of salary was a priority at that time. The hyper-regulation of the communist created a very hostile reaction to any kind of regulation. At that particular time they did not understand that you need those things in order to protect your professional integrity, the hard gained freedom of expression, civil rights, etc. They did not understand the nature of the new type of threat. This is why no press law was adopted, no powerful professional associations and unions were formed in order to protect the above mentioned elements. Moreover, the informal networks working in

the communist era were still in place and too often the access in the journalistic profession was the result of a personal favor.

At the same time something very interesting happened. The oppression of the communist party was a “protecting one”: the job and the salary were stable. Journalists did not have to worry about their income. After the December Revolution this safety net disappeared. The vast majority of journalists continued to write and to work in this field and a very small minority began to do something else. They began to make money! There were a few people that understood the fact that in the capitalist society information is a very profitable commodity and lots of money can be made by selling it. They finally understood that the media has a nothing to tell – contrary to the idealistic beliefs of the journalists – but a lot to sell.

How can we characterize the last generation Romanian journalists? First of all nobody wants to change the world. The idealism of the nineties was replaced by some sort of narcissism that was brilliantly captured by Erik Gandini’s movie *Videocracy-basta apparire*. Nowadays Romanian students want to be journalists so they can see themselves on TV! The interviews that Raluca Petre founded her research proved that they believe in regulation, but they think somebody else has to do it. They do not see themselves as agents of the change!

There is a red wire guiding Raluca Petre’s book: where are the professional standards of journalism placed, inside or outside the journalistic field? In other words who is evaluating the quality of journalistic performance? The majority of the professions have the advantage of the peer-evaluation. That is, doctors are evaluated by doctors, professors by professors, etc. These days a new element is taken into consideration: the public. But in no profession the outside opinions are that important as in the case of journalism. In the communist the standards were political. The Party rulers decided who got promoted. Nowadays the press owner decides that. Over the past decades the professional standards are placed outside the journalistic field.

I do not intent to deprive you of the pleasure of reading and analyzing on your own Raluca Petre’s book. The in-depth analysis of the way the journalistic profession evolved can be the starting point of other fruitful investigations. It will be by no means very interesting to continue Raluca Petre’s work and to make an analysis of the political economy of the press. This way we can also see the way the (sacred) property of the Romanian press evolved during the last two decades.