



**Paul Nixon.** *Sociality, Music, Dance: Human Figurations in a Transylvanian Valley.* Goteborg: Goteborg Universitet, 1998. xxvii + 636 pp. Å£30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-91-85974-49-8.

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## **When Dancing Worlds Collide: The Ideology of Reality and the Reality of Ideology in Pre and Post Ceausescu Romania**

When Dancing Worlds Collide: The Ideology of Reality and the Reality of Ideology in Pre and Post Ceausescu Romania

This is both an interesting and challenging book, focusing on the relationship between persons and the state in authoritarian/totalitarian society and the role therein of music, dance and other forms of expressive behavior. Its classic liberal/libertarian philosophical orientation may be irritating to those readers of a Marxist, Neo-Marxist or authoritarian Socialist persuasion. It is, despite some faults, an exciting and compelling contribution to common interests of anthropology, sociology and ethnomusicology/ethnochoreology which lie at the intersection of an anthropology of aesthetic phenomena and political economy. It will also be of interest to scholars of ethnicity and national minorities and some sections will strongly resonate for scholars of the Roma (this book uses the older term "Gypsy"), especially in representations of the marginalization of Roma musicians, who are hired to provide all the music for Romanian weddings, but are nonetheless treated with great resentment.

Professor Nixon sets out to document human interrelationships, interethnic relationships and the relation of the state to the people in the actually existing Socialism of Communist Romania. His work begins in a very short, politically truncated, session of fieldwork in 1979, followed up by research in the Post-Ceausescu era. His areal focus is on the commune of Hodac in the Ghirghiu

valley, a region of considerable co-habitation among Romanians, Hungarians and Roma. An important element in his analysis of what he calls human figurations is the historic role of various external authorities in everyday lives.

Divided into five large sections, Nixon covers a great deal of terrain, from site description and the history of the Hodac Communa to organizational charts of state folklore and the local politics of emotional expression. In doing so, he touches on areas both political and personal, including his own difficulties with certain other Western social scientists and ethnomusicologists who wished to see Romanians only through the rose colored glasses offered them by the Romanian government. In this sense, and in his references to the morally compromised position of some folklore researchers, Nixon's book makes a valuable contribution to what we might call the ethnography of the social sciences in authoritarian societies. This often necessary co-optation is, in my opinion, widely known and yet under-acknowledged in its effect on our work and our ability to do work in these types of societies.

In many ways, the rural Romania which Nixon describes was and is a battleground of contending realities. On the one hand, are the inhabitants of village and small town life. They are everyday folk of different ethnicities, with human relationship needs, with subsistence needs to fill, with life crises to mediate and occasional fun to be

had. On the other hand is the state with its commitment to a Marxian inspired nationalist vision of how things should be and a desire to mold people's emotions and expressions of affect to that vision. This is apparent through the course of Nixon's book as the state attempts to impose its various ideas of a didactic national folklore on the actual folk themselves. (This is, of course, not unique to Romania). Nixon both documents and demonstrates the collision of these two non-celestial bodies, especially in a memorable description, in chapter four, of a performance at a state appropriated and re-contextualized traditional fair. On this occasion, villagers' actual performance of dance and music was interrupted so that they could be forced to attend the performance of an urban professional folklore ensemble, which was there to show the villagers how folklore should be performed (though villagers seemed most impressed, in a negative way, by the conjunction of stage costumes and fashionable city footwear).

This attempted manipulation of affective behavior and expression also emerges in a more historical role as Nixon discusses the emasculation of the traditional calus, transforming calus from its obvious ritual fertility and healing context to a spectacular, but decontextualized and ritually impotent, performance for the stage.

In Part One, "Mapping the Terrain," Nixon contextualizes his research and sets the stage. In this section, he focuses on describing the facts on the ground and his orientation towards what he calls figurations (what I think are best described as constellations of changing relationships), strongly influenced by Norbert Elias' concept of civilizing processes. In this section, ideas about state folklorism and the role of authoritarian states in daily lives is presented. Nixon presents a good description of the Romanian national folklore industry and how expressive behaviors must, in the words of central planners, be "turned to good account." In this respect, the goal of the State Folklore Institute became one of ideologically transforming folk performance in the mold that the state thought best. At the same time, political manipulation came to dominate even the most basic research, whose planned goals led to very odd results indeed.

Part Two, "Perspectives on Politics and Passion," focuses on the history of the Romanian people. It discusses the multi-ethnic nature of, especially, Transylvania and describes the role of Romanianization in attempting to create an homogenous national culture. A valid criticism of Marx's overemphasis on production then leads to the next section: how does the subordination of one group

by another affect both?

In Part Three, "Complex Sensitivities," we dive deeply into the villages of Comuna Hodac. Nixon describes the status rankings present (Intellectuals, the Well Off, Peasants and Settled Roma) and discusses relations between and among these groups. On a more structural level, he discusses relationships between villages in the commune. A critical dimension is, of course, the ownership of land and the extreme measures undertaken to cut the traditional ties of peasants to their land. This naturally spawned resistance, but a very carefully held one, as the state was always prepared to enforce its vision of "Past Bad, Present Good, Future Perfect." Considerable resistance to state control, in terms of "fiddling" and otherwise finding and exploiting cracks in the socialist system of production, are not exclusive to Romania.

Part Four, "Listening to Assonance and Dissonance," focuses on dance and music making and is, in my opinion, the most substantial and substantive part of the book. Anthropologists like myself whose research focus is on dance and dance events in various Eastern European countries will find this a particularly compelling chapter. The organization of folk music and dance in Romania and its performance is thickly described and a number of descriptions of dances and transcriptions of music are included in the text. Village dance and music occasions, both quotidian and "folklorized", appear in this chapter and Nixon discusses the attempts made by the state to control this arena of emotional expression. Especially interesting are his comments on the manipulation of judging in Romanian national festivals, where ideology and Ceausescu worship were much more important than actual performance. Resistance to the state's manipulation of expressive behavior on the local level is evidenced on an occasion when Nixon almost literally runs into a Gypsy fiddler, dressed in his Sunday best, who denies that he is going to a dance. Of course, he is, as Nixon follows him to the recreated village dance, well out of earshot of officialdom. This chapter also documents the persistent low status of the Gypsy musicians who actually provide the music, but who are generally treated with contempt. The only non-Gypsy musicians are the poorly rehearsed, but ideologically valorized and thus award winning, Hodac Flute Band (who seem to be equally motivated by a local Party "intelectuali" and by alcohol). Equally of interest to those studying emotion and its expression are Nixon's description and analysis, at the end of this chapter, of the organization of mourning customs.

The concluding section, Part Five, "Synthesis-Ideals-Challenge," is a summation of what has gone before with some additional material bringing the reader into the post-Ceausescu era. It begins with Nixon's frustration at suggestions that he look favorably, and ahistorically, on the mess that actually existing Marxism had made of Romania. In his view, the salvationist ideology of Marxism is ultimately a delusion, one which has affected far too many who cannot see the actual forest for the ideological trees. The Romanian interpretation of Marxism's effect on dance and music and social relations between people was a palpable burden, pressed down upon the people. He does name names of certain scholars who seemed to him to be incapable of discarding Marxist utopian precepts for the empiricism of actually lived lives. In this chapter, Nixon outlines some of the disruptions caused by the end of the Socialist era in Romania, from attacks on perceived internal enemies, to the relegalization of some religions and the subsequent reclaiming of religious lands and structures. Finally, Nixon brings us to the changing scene in music and dance from the traditionalization of introduced Greek and Russian folk dances to the demise of some forms of (formerly) state sponsored performance genres and he concludes the book with some thoughts on the role of music and dance in making sense of life under pressure.

In sum then, this is a massive, and well illustrated

(with maps, diagrams, transcriptions and photographs) work of social anthropology/ethnomusicology, almost literally encyclopedic in its scope (a country profile of basic information is found at the beginning of the text). Each of the first four chapters can easily be read as a separate ethnography, while the final one is, at the very least, an excellent essay. I found it a challenging and exciting piece of work, though hampered a bit by a certain idiosyncratic writing style. My only caveats are 1): for dance scholars, Labanotated dance scores would have been useful (though the author notes that video tape are available for viewing). Perhaps a more generous publisher would have included a DVD, a practice which is becoming more common in ethnomusicological/ethnochoreological publications? And 2): I think that Nixon would have found Jacques Maquet's formulation of art by destination, transformation and metamorphosis to have been useful in his analysis of the various appearances, transformations and recontextualizations of the many expressive behavior that he describes. From his bibliography, it is not apparent that he is familiar with Maquet's work. In conclusion, this is a fascinating book, highly personal in nature and tone, which represents an important contribution to our understanding of many aspects of the continuation and transformation of expressive behaviors in authoritarian states. I have the feeling that I will return to this book again and again.

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