

Untangling the tourism game: politics, development, and elites in Sighisoara, Romania
Claudia N. Câmpeanu, The University of Texas at Austin
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Note: dear readers, this is a simplified and truncated version of a longer paper that I am working on; contact me at campeanu@mail.utexas.edu if interested in a longer version or just a conversation.

In 1999 the historical center of Sighisoara, Romania, joined seven of the surrounding villages on UNESCO's World Heritage list as a well-preserved example of the Saxon culture in Southeast Transylvania. The surrounding area, a large triangle referred to as "the Saxon triangle" was colonized by German settlers starting with the twelfth century and has had its history and identity closely connected to this population. Following WWII, many of the Germans in the area have emigrated to Germany, in several waves, leaving behind an impressive and rapidly degrading built heritage.

Three social spheres intersect in their interest in this space of 'heritage': the nongovernmental sector (often connected to historical preservation), the local administration, and the local, mostly tourist oriented, businesses.

The interest in heritage preservation in the area is rooted in imagining the space as primarily connected to its German past. Rather than participating in the Romanian-Hungarian oppositional historical claims on the space, this orientation focuses on the German heritage, insisting on a historical European connection (the "medieval Transylvania") as well as a current one (via the continued involvement of the Saxon diaspora living now in Germany). These complex interests have brought in an odd set of actors, interests, and projects. The main actors in this area are: the German diaspora, institutions related to the German government, German NGOs, local NGOs, large international organizations, institutes connected to the Romanian government. The involvement of these organizations is organized around a moral stewardship over the space as well as a rhetoric of 'rescuing' and 'preserving.'

The businesses in the historical citadel are overwhelmingly tourist oriented. They are run by an elite that is a mix of Romanians (which tend to constitute the majority of the local economic elite, connected to the pre-1989 elite), Germans, and a few foreign passive investors. Their business orientation is short and medium term and revenue-driven, capitalizing on the interest in the German heritage while taking it for granted. The German heritage is treated like a resource to be "exploited" (*exploata* in Romanian), maximizing profits through renting rooms and selling food while not being willing to invest in extra services, attractions or general preservation of the site.

For the local administration, the citadel is both an asset and a burden. The Local Council literally owns many of the houses in the citadel as well as the fortified walls and other public edifices. While there is much to gain financially from this (through renting out the spaces, participating in joint ventures, collecting taxes), due to the national and international pressure for historical preservation, the citadel becomes a liability. Tourism is seen as a possible solution, taking the citadel for granted as a point of attraction to be exploited. Mass tourism without much investment is thus encouraged, aligning the administration's developmental policies with the practices of the local tourist businesses. Not surprisingly, those owning and running the businesses are also formally involved in the local administration as well as cultivating personal relationships with local administration workers.

I am broadly locating this paper within the study of ‘globalization,’ and in following Anna Tsing (Tsing 2005), I am paying attention to global connections. Instead of looking at globalization as an uniform and coherent process (not that anybody really would), I am interested in what she calls “heterogeneous and awkward encounters,” where different “regimes of understanding” (Downey and Fisher 2006) as well as different and differently scaled mechanisms of power are able to articulate, often through invoking some kind of universal. In describing these “sticky engagements” the trope of pressure and resistance seems rather unproductive. Instead, I chose to look at the force, the impulse that is gathered from the encounter, which seems to have a generative quality and translates in the proliferation of new arrangements of power, building on and articulating well with existing ones.

In this paper, I am looking at one kind of these sticky engagements, attending to a zone of similar engagements between foreign donors and funders interested in heritage preservation and local NGO recipients. These engagements revolve around invoking universalizing concepts like ‘development,’ ‘heritage preservation’ (or the belief that what constitutes heritage is worth preserving), and ‘civil society’ as a social and political sphere. Invoking these concepts is, of course, stepping on a highly politicized terrain. This is not what I will be covering in this paper. Instead, I will show how these engagements are deeply implicated in articulating the three seemingly separate spheres that I mentioned, sustaining, in new ways, existing local elites and arrangements of power. The three points that I will be trying to make about the articulation between these three spheres are:

1. that it is dependent on informal practices and knowledges that show continuities with previous, pre-1989 ones;
2. it is rather overdetermined, in that it is connected to multiple and continued engagements between the foreign funders and the local NGOs, in overlapping ways;
3. it is centripetal, drawing in and connecting actors implicated in such foreign-local engagements;

In illustrating these points, I will refer to three local NGOs, as well as one particular model of practice that makes this articulation materially possible and visible.

In very simple terms, a non-governmental organization owns a for-profit entity for the purpose of self-financing, by producing revenue usually through a tourist oriented activity. Due to the seasonal nature of tourism in Sighisoara, these companies are rarely profitable and able to pour any money into the NGO activities. Instead, part of the NGO outside funding which is mostly connected to tangible or intangible heritage preservation, is often channeled into sustaining the for-profit company, especially its larger investment costs. The political clout that comes from access to these funds as well as from operating the businesses connects their managers/directors to a city wide network of power that includes politicians and business owners, many of them both owning businesses and serving as councilmen (literally men) on the Local Council.

The first NGO, the association “M”, founded as a steward to an important historical building in need of restoration, has received significant funds from a foundation from Germany. The house was transformed into a hotel and restaurant, offices and a conference/exhibition space. The director of the association is connected to the local German political organization as well as to people active in that organization through personal and business-related relationships. The political clout and the participation in a city-wide network of power that I was alluding earlier rest not necessarily on formal, visible, or clearly regulated relationships, but rather on informal practices and connections that surface either through rumors or through their material, concrete

results. To give an example, the restaurant's request for a patio in the main square was turned down in the main city council meeting, due to firecode regulation, but magically approved a couple of weeks later. These informal practices, articulating seemingly separate social fields, are sometimes referred to through tropes like "mafia" and "corruption" (see Katherine Verdery (Verdery 1996) and Nancy Ries (Ries 2002) for a discussion), and point to continuities with and changes from the socialist period (Ledeneva 2006).

My second example is a youth center, where I worked between June 2004 and August 2005. The center was founded under a project of the German government, and has received hundreds of thousands of Euros to restore and modify the buildings in which it was to function, transforming them into a youth hostel, a restaurant, two bars, as well as offices and a larger seminar room. The center organizes an annual ethnic cultures festival with budgets hovering around 50000 euros, attracted from a number of institutional funders. A large percentage of the budget goes to housing and feeding the 700 artists, through deals connecting the center and local tourist businesses through personal relationships, special negotiations, as well as a series of kickbacks. The center's hostel and restaurant would handle a large number of festival participants, with money flowing back into the organization, to be later used for investments or covering operating losses in the low season. And this same model would be repeated through youth education projects (mostly camps) funded by the German or Romanian government or foreign organizations.

The funds as well as the interventions of the foreign funders are meshed in with developmental agendas that make these engagements possible, invoking, on both sides, the need for development. On the side of the funders, the larger agendas get disappointed by the on the ground reality, but the engagements themselves are sustained and satisfied through well-written reports, material accomplishments (the buildings that get renovated, the number of festival attendees, the media coverage), and on-location schmoozing whenever the funders visit. What smooths over the friction of the encounter is, as Arturo Escobar (Escobar 1995) suggested, developmental discourses and practices, which are one of the most efficient ways in which these sometimes incompatible local, regional, and transnational mechanisms of power articulate. The ideological dissatisfaction is connected to an apparent failure to create a separate civil sphere and it surfaces through a discourse of a slow pace of political and economic reform, of anti-modern inertia, which is connected to ideas about a Balkanic "culture" and "history" of corruption and "unprofessional" business and political practices.

Unwillingly, I also bought into such discourses. When, instead of opting for a cheaper, more reliable printer from the capital, we chose a local printer, good friend of the NGO director, I was enraged. As soon as I cooled down enough to be able to reflect on my own reaction, I thought of the Austin, Texas campaign, "Keep Austin weird, support local businesses" or "Choose Austin first." Why would this be any different? Why would the same kind of practice, in this particular geographic and political context, look so suspect? Looking closer, I could see this particular deal as part of a system of mutual support and somewhat delayed reciprocity. The center would always try to give its business to the local printer because the printer would accept installments and delayed payments, and also would be more tolerant with sloppy preparation work as well as last minute changes.

Another seemingly inefficient business practice that I noticed was hiring more people than necessary and keeping them on the payroll even in the lower season, when it was operating in the red. This employment charity was attending, in a way, to the structural transformations in the local economy that have resulted in massive unemployment, while maintaining a rather docile and dependent work force, as well as sustaining the local political and economic elite.

Another NGO, foundation "A," while important in the area, has long been in conflict with to the local administration as well as a good chunk of business elite, mostly due to its opposition to a development project in the area, that of a Dracula theme park. About a year ago, I was surprised to see the unlikely marriage between the foundation and the local administration through a management partnership for a natural protected area. The partnership was a recognition, on the local administration's part, of the political importance of foundation's access to large donors, and on the foundation's part, that the local administration was a power mechanism that the foundation had to eventually articulate its workings with in order to be successful. Militantly staying in opposition for ever was not an option. Once the partnership was established, the foundation found itself policing some of the local administration's relationships to smaller NGOs as well as gaining access to stewardship over several historical buildings in the citadel.

To sum up, in this paper, I looked at these awkward and uneven engagements between foreign and local actors, sustained around ideas of development, heritage preservation, as well as the creation of a civil society. I focused in particular on their generativity, how these engagements are implicated, in productive ways, in the formation and maintenance of local elites, articulating what seem like separate social spheres.

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