Making one's home:

An ethnography of the material transformations in Romanian blocks of flats

- Notes towards the presentation at ASA 2015 -

Introduction

This paper will explore the post-socialist material transformations in Romanian urban space and energy consumption inside and outside the home. My aim is to reveal multiple, fragmented, contradictory practices and processes of meaning formation around the material culture of the home. In my fieldwork, currently taking place, I am examining the effect of EU wall insulation policies on blocks of flats in the neighbourhood of Mărăţei in Piatra Neamţ, a medieval town of about 90,000 inhabitants. Ceausescu had the ambition of developing Romania's industry multilaterally by building a large numbers of factories as well as housing blocks for workers in towns throughout the country. These housing blocks were erected in quick succession, with very little attention to energy efficiency.

I. The heated debate

A paramount consequence of the post-socialist transformation of Eastern and Central Europe and the Former Soviet Union is the emergence of energy poverty, a condition where households are living in inadequately heated homes (Buzar, 2007). Since 1990, the post-socialist states of Eastern Europe have been undertaking extensive regulatory reforms of their economic and legal systems, in line with the neoliberal prescriptions warranted by supra-national frameworks (Bradshaw & Stenning, 2000). One of the principal components of the restructuring process has been the reform of

energy operations, to allow energy prices to be raised up to economically profitable levels. However, the lack of an adequate social safety net to compensate for energy price increases has forced many households to cut back on their energy purchases, often below biologically unacceptable limits. As a result, 'for many poor people in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, fully heated homes have become a luxury rather than a necessity' (World Bank 2003: 1).

My findings so far have revealed a number of social and material issues concerning the effect of wall insulation policies on the blocks of flats. These include the degradation of buildings due to lack of air permeability of the Polystyrene used in the insulation, but also fire danger because of the high flammability of this material and the occurrence of several health problems as the result of mould in apartments. A central issue I would like to raise is how energy saving policies such as wall insulation, that transgress the boundaries between the inside and the outside of the home, have resulted in a production of new forms of status distinction and social fragmentation in the local community. During the 'transition' following the collapse of socialism in 1989, economic practices have uncertain and unpredictable. It is in this context, that we need to position energy consumption. Therefore, contextualizing energy consumption in post-socialist transition means mediating between experiences in individual households and larger economic and industrial practices. On the one hand, one needs to consider the specificities of Romanian households, which include the social experience of a culture of shortages during socialism and a subsequent post-socialist symbolic value of goods and services. These amount to different practices in the acquisition of material artifacts, within micro-worlds that are very much shaped by the socialist past.

II. The urban puzzle

The landscapes of post-socialist Romania are important and multi-layered symbols of change and continuity. They are changed from within, from inside the blocks of flats, through insulation processes which will be discussed in my presentation. This way, a very specific type of aesthetics emerges, a mix of 'old' and 'new' spread across varied registers. Landscape, in this sense, can be viewed as social process, reflecting and constituting depictions of rapid change in the apparent stability of place (Berdahl, 2000, p. 6). In my research, I follow the thin line between change and continuity in the material environment in order to critically understand not only the quality of the built environment or urban space (in terms of architecture and urbanism), but also the new inequalities and segregations produced through these new forms and formations in a social, economic, symbolic and cultural sense.

III. An ecology of materials

When we discuss energy, we cannot and should not limit ourselves to heating, electricity or gas, but deploy a conceptualization of energy in the wider frame of the household: humans consume, but also emanate energy – the thermodynamic properties of their homes and bodies, and the material properties of the objects they engage with are of utmost importance. I build my theoretical framework on Ingold's discussion of 'an ecology of materials' (2012), which offers some interesting insight in that respect. His aim is to merge biotic and abiotic forms of existence. He suggests a truce between material anthropology and ecological anthropology. These two fields have a profound concern with material conditions of social and cultural life, as the former looks at how humans relate to objects, while the latter is concerned with man's relationship with biotic and abiotic environments. For material anthropology, "persons and things are bound in relational networks" (Ingold 2012, 428); for ecological anthropology,

human beings and other organisms are bound in webs of life (Ingold 2012, 428). Needless to say, an ethnography of energy consumption requires an integration of these two areas.

The focus on material flows instead of made objects is enabling me to bridge discussions in material culture studies and ecological anthropology, which are both concerned with material conditions of social and cultural life, but have developed disparate theoretical languages. As Shove phrased it: having put 'materials' back in material culture, how is value assigned to materials/ products? She encourages a merging of the interest in things with a deeper affinity with materials. She argues that the empirical task of analysing the lives of materially composite but socially and culturally integrated objects is consistent with the theoretical project of addressing fundamental questions about the circulation of symbolic meaning, the reproduction of social order and the dynamics of appropriation and consumption. The properties of man-made materials reflect and embody characteristics both of the culture in which they were made and the imagined future in which they might be used (Shove, 2007, p. 97).

The stories of materials are indeed in concordance with a fundamental part of the second law of thermodynamics: that material cannot be destroyed, but rather it can only transform. Nothing gets wasted. "Material might become something else through various treatment technologies; it might morph to conjoin with other materials; or it might stay in the same material state, but what it does not do is disappear" (Gregson, Watkins, & Calestani, 2010, p. 1067). To illustrate, materials such as asbestos, which has been used due to its strong insulating properties, do not go away once declared hazardous. Rather, their stories have futures. That they have futures is not just a matter of discordances in governance and regulation and the consequent capacity for banned materials to be displaced elsewhere or even of the difficulty of storing old hazardous and/or banned materials (Gille, 2007). It is about material possibilities as well as limits.

Instead of a conclusion

Whether the emphasis is on the past or the future, there is a tendency to treat materials as relatively bound 'technologies' or technological fields, each with their own narratives of invention, diffusion and application. In my diachronic study of wall insulation in Romania, I am investigating not what materials are (such as cement, wood, plastic, asbestos or the ecologically unfriendly and fire hazardous Polystyrene), but what they do.

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