**Jill Massino, *Ambiguous Transitions: Gender, the State, and Everyday Life in Socialist and Postsocialist Romania*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2019, 453 p.**

Reviewing *Ambiguous Transitions* as a male scholar feels something like ‘mansplaining’. Men have systematically and comprehensively written women’s lives and voices out of histories of Romania since the modern history of the country began. In this book, Jill Massino gives us not only unique insights into women’s experiences of state socialism and post-socialism, but she gives it to us in their own words. Structured around one hundred interviews conducted with women in Braşov and Bucharest between 2003 and 2012, the book explores how women negotiated state socialism and its collapse, from the 1950s until the early twenty-first century. Writing as a man, I now have the privilege of evaluating Massino’s work and pronouncing judgement on the value of these women’s accounts. Although male voices are muted in this book, men’s demands and the country’s patriarchal social and political system structured the world these women lived in. As Massino takes pains to point out, this is far from being a situation that is unique to Romania, and her frequent comparisons to the state of women’s rights elsewhere in Europe reminds us that hegemonic masculinity is a widespread problem, even if it manifested in unique ways in socialist Romania. Particularly poignant is her discussion of the limited materity leave women were allowed during the 1980s. Massino’s informants detail the manifold difficulties that only having 112 days of maternity leave posed for them as mothers and the creative ways they found to surmount this problem. Despite being woefully inadequate, this was far more than any of the book’s North American readers are currently entitled to by law.

Male dominance is represented in the book through the legal system, healthcare, films, self-help manuals, fathers, husbands, and employers. But the most frequent voice dictating to women how they should live comes through in the monthly women’s magazine *Femeia* (*Woman*). As Massino acknowledges, *Femeia* is a problematic source because it was a mouthpiece for Communist Party propaganda, and was recognized as such at the time. *Femeia* gave advice on numerous aspects of women’s lives, but it is not clear how seriously – if at all – readers took its advice about how to deal with children, husbands, sex, domestic violence, and workplace discrimination. Nonetheless, Massino argues that “because women read these magazines, albeit selectively, they should not be written off as empty rhetoric, but instead be considered complex and polyvalent sources that offer important insight into state constructions of gender and women’s roles in socialist society.” (20) Helpfully, Massino consistently presents articles from *Femeia* as evidence of what the Communist Party wanted women to do, rather than as evidence of what they actually did. Throughout she contrasts *Femeia*’s advice with testimonies from her oral history interviews, in which women outline the strategies that they actually employed to survive and thrive under socialism.

Although all of Massino’s interviewees were living in Braşov and Bucharest at the time of the interviews, they came from diverse backgrounds and many were born in rural areas or had lived elsewhere in the country. The relative homogeneity of the group in terms of age and geography at the time of the interviews does raise questions about how representative the sample is, but as with all oral history, the point is that we are hearing individual perspectives rather than generalizable examples. Massino always provides useful information about informants’ backgrounds when she discusses their testimonies, and it is important for the reader to keep in mind that these women are speaking for themselves, not for “women” in general. One thing that becomes clear when listening to these accounts is that there was no single “female” experience of state socialism. Rather, financial status, geography, age, education, ethnicity, and religion all influenced their subjectivities and experiences. Massino is also clear that we are not accessing the past “*wie es eigentlich gewesen*”, but rather how it was remembered in the twenty-first century. She is attentive to the role of memory in shaping her informants’ accounts and the final chapter on “the transformation from socialism to pluralism” is useful for putting memories of socialism into perspective.

Unlike in many studies of state socialism, Massino’s writing is crystal clear and easy to read. Her prose is uncomplicated by unnecessary jargon, her surveys of longer historical periods are smooth, and students will find this text easy to engage with. I have used it for teaching graduate level classes, and student essays demonstrated that they understood *Ambiguous Transitions* much better than they did other, more demanding texts. In many ways this is a testimony to the intrinsic appeal that first-person testimony offers the reader, and the clarity with which Massino brings her sources to the fore allows for fruitful classroom discussions about methodology and interpretation of sources alongside debates over what actually happened. The wealth of sources, alongside the variety of topics the book discusses, make this a valuable text for both researchers and students alike.

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