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“Self-control” and “self-knowledge”: fashioning consumer subjectivities in late socialist Romania¹

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English abstract: From the 1980s, research on the history of consumption has flourished. Following Michel Foucault’s studies on governmentality, scholars have established a link between liberal political culture and a turn to the responsible, self-regulating consumer. In this paper, I suggest a more integrated look on consumption politics by including authoritarian states into the picture. Exploring the program on “rational alimentation” in late socialist Romania, I show that the authoritarian government under Nicolae Ceaușescu did not primarily use force to make people eat better. Instead, it aimed at self-control and informed decision-making. Doing so, I argue that the program contributed to a “late modern” form of government that transferred social responsibilities from the state to individual consumers.

In the early 1980s, the Romanian Ministry of Health introduced a new program on “rational alimentation.” The program was an attempt to make people eat more healthily, work out, and refrain from the excessive consumption of greasy food, alcohol, coffee, and tobacco. The authoritarian government under dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu was notorious for its ruthless interventions into people’s intimacy, the near-complete ban on abortions being the most infamous example. The program for rational alimentation, however, did not primarily work with force and restraint, but challenged consumption habits in subtler ways. With self-help guides, weight-and-height charts, and questionnaires, the program encouraged people to analyze their consumption behavior and offered guidelines on how to live a better and healthier life.

Although all of these programs conveyed highly normative visions about health and human bodies, they largely refrained from top-down measures that would have immediately affected people’s lives and consumption habits. Instead, they settled for nonbinding guidelines and advice, aiming to foster people’s competence to make rational decisions

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in matters of consumption. To capture this approach, Michel Foucault coined the term *governmentalization*. Governmentalization referred, in Foucault's terms, to "the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives."² Foucault, and many scholars in his wake, have studied this subtle approach to people's consumption, health, and bodies for the context of Western liberal democracies. As in many other historical fields, the geopolitical focus is not only the result of negligence but is derived from a conceptual bias. As Phillip Sarasin, Thomas Laqueur, and Harry G. Cocks have argued, the quest for autonomous decision-making is based on a specific concept of the individual, namely its ability to control its body and desires. The imperative to restrain the self, in turn, is explained as a reaction to an abundance of goods and civic liberties. These ideas appear intimately related to Western liberal political culture.³ Central and South Eastern European states do not seem to fit into this picture. In the so-called "economies of shortage" of the authoritarian Eastern bloc, there seems to be room neither for voluntary restraint nor for autonomous choice. In a period when "Romanians had to forage for food on a daily basis,"⁴ a program that encouraged moderation and sensitive decision-making appeared cynical to contemporaries and scholars alike and has accordingly not attracted scholarly attention.

There is no doubt that problems with food procurement were part of consumption realities in Romania in the 1980s. However, Liviu Chelcea and Narcis Tulbure have pointed out that these realities did not equal the absence of consumer culture. To the contrary, they have shaped very specific consumer experiences and subjectivities.⁵ Following their lead, I do not intend to deny the repressive elements of Romanian consumption politics but suggest taking them seriously: as a particular

2 Michel Foucault and Colin Gordon, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1980), 39.

3 Thomas Walter Laqueur, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (New York: Zone Books, 2003); Harry G. Cocks, "Modernity and the Self in the History of Sexuality," *The Historical Journal* 49, no. 04 (2006); Philipp Sarasin, *Reizbare Maschinen: Eine Geschichte des Körpers 1765-1914* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2001).

4 Gail Kligman, *The Politics of Duplicity: Controlling Reproduction in Ceaușescu's Romania* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 299, fn 36.

5 Liviu Chelcea, "The Culture of Shortage During State-Socialism: Consumption Practices in a Romanian Village in the 1980s," *Cultural Studies* 16, no. 1 (2002); Narcis Tulbure, "Drink, Leisure, and the Second Economy in Socialist Romania," in *Pleasures in Socialism: Leisure and Luxury in the Eastern Bloc*, ed. David Crowley and Susan E. Reid (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2010).

historical context that shaped the formulation and effect of a consumption program in the early 1980s. How did the program for rational alimentation promote moderation and self-control? What idea of the self, its autonomy, and role in society was conveyed? And what were the boundaries of self-control in authoritarian state socialism?

Besides materials created by the Romanian Health Ministry for the program of rational alimentation, my source base includes several volumes of the women’s journal *Femina* and the most widely distributed guidebooks on nutrition. Although these official releases are no reliable indicators for people’s actual consumption habits, they are worth exploring for the tropes and forms of presentations used to promote the program. Focusing on notions of individual agency and self-control, my aim is to show how and to what extent state socialist countries mobilized these ideas for their social politics. Pointing out parallel tendencies in Eastern and Western Europe, but also discussing the boundaries of the discourse in Romania and other Eastern bloc states, I aim to shed light on what I argue were “late modern” trends in fashioning individual agency and self-control.

Modern consumer culture between abundance and restraint

For all modern societies, the concepts of moderation and restraint were productive tools of organizing social order. While the idea of moderation is not modern itself, the presumption that each person is an individual who can control his own body and its affects is intimately connected to the transformations of modern life. The need for moderation and self-control was a reaction to industrial transformations and far-reaching changes within the production, supply, and consumption of goods. The quest to control the human body was a way of adapting human behaviour and subjectivities to the demands of modern life.⁶ In Romania as everywhere else, the modernizing impetus developed gradually in the course of nation-building and reached its peak in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In 1881, the independent principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia had been united with with parts of Dobruja, all of which had nominally belonged to the Ottoman Empire, to form the Kingdom of Romania. After the First World War, the territory was enlarged to “Greater Romania,” with the former Austro-Hungarian territories of Transylvania, Banat, and Bucovina, as well as Bessarabia, which had belonged to the Russian Empire. The new territories were a source of pride, but they also brought many significant problems with

6 Sarasin, *Reizbare Maschinen*.

them. The various regions were shaped by distinct political legacies and were ethnically diverse. In the interwar period, minorities such as Hungarians, Jews, Roma, and Germans made up 28 to 30 percent of the total population. What is more, 77 percent of the population was rural in 1918, and there was hardly any industry that the country could have built on.⁷

Health and consumption politics were a way of modernizing the country and at the same time homogenizing the dispersed communities, which centered around the concepts of village and denomination more than around the concept of the nation. Political authorities designed institutions and social programs to improve food supply and to educate the population about consumption and bodily care. Old-fashioned diets, excessive drinking habits, and superstitious approaches to health and illness were to be replaced by scientific and modern ideas on how to take care of the body.⁸ Again, the modernizing impetus was not specific to Romania, but an integral part of state-building in the early twentieth century. For the early Soviet Union, Tricia Starks has shown that political authorities used hygienic programs as a way of regimenting the human body and conditioning its functions to conform to industrial work life.⁹ The urge to homogenize and improve the national population had a strong exclusionary potential, too. Especially in countries with strong fascist movements, health and consumption politics turned into a racialized discourse about the quality of a particular nation and degenerative potential of certain individuals or ethnic groups. This discourse took its most extreme form in National Socialist Germany. Adolf Hitler, Heinrich Himmler, and other Nazi leaders were outspoken against excessive consumption of any kind and with the 1933 *Law for the Prevention of Genetically Diseased Offspring* banned, among others, alcoholics from procreating.¹⁰ Although, a fascist government under Ion Antonescu took power in 1940 in Romania and was part of the Axis until 1944, there are no reports of similar practices.

7 On the debates about ethnic minorities see Marius Turda, "The Nation as Object: Race, Blood, and Biopolitics in Interwar Romania," *Slavic Review. American Quarterly of Soviet and East European Studies* 66, no. 3 (2007), 432; on Romania's biopolitics in the interwar period, see: Maria Bucur-Deckard, *Eugenics and Modernization in Interwar Romania* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002), 8.

8 *Ibid.*, chapter 4.

9 Tricia Starks, *The Body Soviet: Propaganda, Hygiene, and the Revolutionary State* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 165-66.

10 Robert N. Proctor, *The Nazi War on Cancer* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 141-153. On the concept of moderation in modern history, see: Martin Lengwiler, ed., *Das präventive Selbst: Eine Kulturgeschichte moderner Gesundheitspolitik* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2010).

After the Second World War, the idea of restraint lost prominence. Mary Neuburger notes in the late 1940s how Stalin as well as the first communist leader of Bulgaria, Georgi Dimitrov, smoked in public and were both known to be heavy drinkers. If excess was not actively encouraged in the first post war decade, there were no open calls for moderation either. Enjoying good food and drink were considered a reward for the hard work of building socialism.¹¹ In Romania, which was still a predominantly rural country, health and consumption politics became a tool to enforce the new state agenda once again. In February 1948, the Romanian Workers’ Party assumed power.¹² As in other countries of East Central and South Eastern Europe, party officials consolidated their position with sweeping socioeconomic reforms, which included the nationalization of land property and the central organization of food and health provision.¹³

Rational alimentation, rational life

The program for rational alimentation was thus not the first attempt to steer people’s consumption behaviour in Romania. However, in the later decades of the twentieth century, the politics of health and consumption changed in nature. Since 1965, the state was governed by General Secretary Nicolae Ceaușescu. If in the postwar decades party authorities enforced their policy goals with large-scale structural programs and open violence, the means of governing became more intricate now. Gail Kligman has argued that the new government shifted its means from terror campaigns to social policy programs. More than on open violence, Ceaușescu relied on health, education, and welfare arrangements to organize and control social order.¹⁴ The new policy line does not mean

11 Mary Neuburger, *Balkan Smoke: Tobacco and the Making of Modern Bulgaria* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 170–71. In his memoirs, the Yugoslav politician and later dissident Milovan Đilas describes Stalin’s inclination to excess: Milovan Đilas, *Gespräche mit Stalin*, (Frankfurt/Main: S. Fischer, 1962), for example 192–93.

12 For the history of Romanian Stalinism, I rely on Dennis Deletant, *Ceausescu and the Securitate: Coercion and Dissent in Romania, 1965-1989* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1995), chapters 1 and 2.

13 On the policy of collectivization, see Gail Kligman and Katherine Verdery, *Peasants under Siege: The Collectivization of Romanian Agriculture, 1949-1962* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

14 Kligman, *The Politics of Duplicity*. See for the decrees on abortion and divorce: “Decret pentru reglementarea intreruperii cursului sarcinii: 770/1966,” in *Buletinul Oficial al Republicii Socialiste România* nr. 60, October 1, 1966; “Decret pentru

that the means of governing were devoid of violence, however; to the contrary, many policies were inherently repressive. An example was the new decree on abortions from 1966. The new decree 770 criminalized abortion with only very few exceptions. In order to detect violations of this decree, gynaecological examinations became mandatory.¹⁵ Governing in the “late socialist period” did thus not become any more gentle. Rather, the means of organizing the social changed their form.

The program for rational alimentation provides a further example of the changing nature of governing in Romanian state socialism. The notion of “rational alimentation” (*alimentația rațională*) emerged in the mid-1950s in medical writings.¹⁶ In the 1960s, authors used it in popular guidebooks addressed to rural women. In these publications, “rational alimentation” was a means to update old-fashioned ideas about food and consumption, to acquaint households with knowledge about bodily functions, energy transformation and caloric value, and to overcome metabolic diseases still widespread in the country.¹⁷ In the mid-1960s, the concept was extended to more areas of life. Denoting a “simple formula of hygienic rules,”¹⁸ rational consumption practices included a balanced diet, sufficient movement, a proper balance between work and rest, and a generally healthy lifestyle. In the late socialist period, the Romanian government took the discourse on rational consumption to a new level. In 1981, the Health Ministry set up a commission with the goal of elaborating a national agenda for better nutrition. The commission, directed by the dietitian Iulian Mincu, consisted of the Health Minister, representatives of the Institute for Hygiene and Public Health, the Academy of Sciences, the Women’s Council, and the media. The resulting “Program for the Rational Alimentation of the Population” (*program de alimentație rațională a populației*) strove to advance research on the production and processing of food. With brochures, newspaper articles, and instructional lectures in schools, the committee aimed to guide people in their consumption

modificarea unor dispoziții legale privitoare la divorț: 779/1966,” in *Buletinul Oficial al Republicii Socialiste România* nr. 64, October 8, 1966.

15 See for the text of the decree: “Decret pentru reglementarea intreruperii cursului sarcinii: 770/1966”, in *Buletinul Oficial al Republicii Socialiste România* 60, October 1, 1966. For an analysis of the politics of demography, see Kligman, *The Politics of Duplicity*.

16 For an early example: Iancu Gonțea, “Importanța alimentației raționale pentru dezvoltarea și sănătatea populației”, *Viața Medicală* 2, no. 3 (1955).

17 As an example of a guidebook for “women in cities and villages”: *Consiliul Național al Femeilor din RPR, Alimentația rațională în familie, factor important în apărarea sănătății. Lecție ce se va ține în fața femeilor de la orașe și sate* (Bucharest: 1963). The guidebook was also published in a Hungarian and a German version.

18 “Prevenirea hepatitei epidemice”, *Femeia* 18, no. 5 (1965).

choices, to popularize knowledge about food preparation and dietary standards, and to provide norms for average calorie needs and body measurements. From July 1982, a pervasive press campaign promoted the new program.¹⁹

The timing of the program could not have been worse. In the 1980s, the Romanian government introduced strict austerity measures to reduce its international debts, with the goal of becoming economically independent. Considering that in the early 1980s electricity and basic foodstuffs were rationed, the program for rational alimentation appeared ineffective at best, strategic at worst.²⁰ Food scarcity was a reality in Romania during the 1980s, and the program encouraged norms of consumption which the country’s economy was unable to meet. However, the Romanian program was not simply a propagandistic tool created by a dictator who was known for his idealistic visions of the country’s potential but has to be considered in its global context. Not only in Romania public health institutions scrutinized consumption habits, tightened the regulations on food quality, and expressed concern about dangerous habits of consumption.

The renewed attention to consumption habits was intimately related to recent socioeconomic changes. In both Eastern and Western Europe, the transformation from industrial to service economies translated into a reduction of physical labour. In many states, the work week was shortened from six to five days in the late 1960s. These changes sparked a critical discourse on leisure and consumption in general. National health programs, popular guidebooks, as well as expert journals on health and nutrition scrutinized consumption as a means of discussing and adapting people’s behaviour. People were encouraged to find “cultured” and “rational” ways of using the available time. With activities like hiking, working out, and engaging in cultural activities, people were to avert the stress and lack of movement induced by automatized labour.²¹

19 For the commission and its members: “Stenograma ședinței de constituire a Comisiei pentru elaborarea Programului de alimentație rațională a populației”, October 29, 1981, nr. inv. 98/1981; for its official agenda: “Proiect - Program Național de alimentație rațională a populației”, December 1981, in: “Raport privind programul național de alimentație rațională a populației”, January 1982, nr. inv. 258/1981. Both in: Arhivele Naționale ale României (hereafter ANR), fond Comitetului Central al Partidului Comunist Român (hereafter CC al PCR), Secția Economică (1978-1989), inventar 3294.

20 On economic politics in Romania in the 1980s: *ibid.* Critical remarks about the program on rational alimentation can be found in: Serban Angheliescu, Ana Vinea and Muzeul Țăranului Român, LXXX: marturii orale: anii '80 si bucureștenii (Bucharest: Paideia, 2003), 167; Kligman, *The Politics of Duplicity*.

21 On work and leisure politics in socialist Bulgaria: Neuburger, *Balkan Smoke*, 174, 185. For the introduction of the five-day working week in Czechoslovakia and its

To update consumption habits to the new demands of socioeconomic life, the World Health Organization as well as public committees in the USA, France, the Soviet Union, and Bulgaria had worked out programs which defined dietary standards and caloric needs according to age group, gender, and professional effort. In its work, the Romanian committee explicitly picked up on the results of these programs.²²

Furthermore, the Romanian program drew on powerful contemporary sentiments. First, it did not overthrow old norms of consumption. Although the commission for rational alimentation designed the program according to the standards of other “developed countries,”²³ it deliberately built on traditional habits of food preparation and consumption. To a large extent, the program for national alimentation entered in the form of practical knowledge which was highly adaptable to people’s everyday lives. Secondly, the program mobilized contemporary fears of modernization and change. In their brochures, authors created a dark-age scenario of the modern world, with new forms of consumption causing “diseases of civilization”²⁴ to abound, like obesity, mental illnesses, and substance addiction. The program for national alimentation balanced the threat of unfettered modernization by promoting a more reasonable, more “natural” way of life.

It was therefore no coincidence that the trope of intoxication gained considerable attention in the 1980s. The idea that the body was polluted by unnatural, adulterated, or rotten elements was not new but had strongly featured in biopolitical debates of the early twentieth century all over Europe. Often, these debates had a strong racial connotation, with “foreign” races argued to pollute the allegedly clean, homogenous national body. Romania was no exception here.²⁵ In the context of the late socialist campaign of rational alimentation, the fear of intoxication was channelled to substances that were ascribed to an excessive,

neighboring states, see: Lenka Kalinová, *Konec nadějí a nová očekávání: K dějinám české společnosti v letech 1969-1993* (Prague: Academia, 2012), 208.

22 As testified in the background material of the program, see: “Proiect - Program Național de alimentație rațională a populației,” December 1981, in: “Raport privind programul național de alimentație rațională a populației,” January 1982, nr. inv. 258/1981. ANR, CC al PCR, Secția Economică (1978-1989), inventar 3294. For the formulation of public and national consumption programs in the 1970s and 1980s: Jakob Tanner, “Lebensmittel und neuzeitliche Technologien des Selbst: Die Inkorporation von Nahrung als Gesundheitsprävention,” in Lengwiler, *Das präventive Selbst*, 31-54.

23 “Proiect – Program” (see footnote 12).

24 Nicolae Feraru, *Ministerul Sănătății, and Institutul de Igienă și Sănătate Publică, Pleoarie pentru o alimentație rațională* (Bucharest: Editura Medicală, 1980), 9.

25 Proctor, *The Nazi War on Cancer*, 11; on the Romanian debates, see Turda, “The Nation as Object: Race, Blood, and Biopolitics in Interwar Romania”.

modern way of life. Brochures and newspaper articles depicted alcohol as well as tobacco, coffee, and medical drugs as unnecessary, seemingly unnatural substances that polluted the human body.²⁶ In this endeavour alcohol figured as the paragon of irrational consumption. Publications emphasized the negative impacts of alcohol consumption for important body organs, describing alcohol as a “counter-aliment”²⁷ or “the enemy of a rational life.”²⁸ To a certain extent, the program also started to demonize coffee, depicting it as a serious drug that everybody should avoid as much as possible.²⁹ Given its reduced availability in late socialist Romania, the campaign against coffee appears strategic. But again, the trope of intoxication was a powerful moment, and the incentive to restrain oneself in consuming “stimulants of the type coffee”³⁰ was not solely an attempt to justify food shortages.

A further substance that came under scrutiny was tobacco. In the 1950s, scientists in Great Britain and the United States had published what were later described as the “key texts” for establishing a systematic relation between smoking and lung cancer. Doctors in Romania and other states made use of these texts to underscore the dangers of smoking. From the mid to late 1970s, many countries introduced policy campaigns against smoking. Notably, none of them seriously threatened the production and sales of tobacco. Instead, they determined the rules by which people could consume. In Romania, too, new decrees raised the age limit for buying tobacco, restricted its advertisement, and banned smoking from public places like train stations, health institutions, and public transportation. Governments thus settled for a minimum protection of people’s health and otherwise contented themselves with discouraging their citizens from pursuing their habits.³¹ Especially in women’s journals, anti-smoking texts

26 See for example: “Fumatul și sănătatea,” *Femeia* 40, no. 9 (1987); “Atenție la consumul de medicamente,” *Femeia* 40, no. 7 (1987).

27 Mircea Diaconescu, *Alimentația rațională*. With a foreword by Iulian Mincu (Bucharest: Editura Medicală, 1979), 63.

28 Aurelian Ciurdea, “Adevărul despre alcool,” *Femeia* 34, no. 5 (1981).

29 On this critical attitude towards coffee consumption see for example the questionnaire “Cunoașterea gradului de echilibru interior” in Adrian Neculau, Septimiu Chelcea, Pavel Mureșan et al., *Comportament și civilizație: Mică enciclopedie pentru tineret* (Bucharest: Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1987).

30 Neculau, Chelcea, Mureșan et al., *Comportament și civilizație*.

31 For smoking politics in Europe: Rosemary Elliot, “Inhaling Democracy: Cigarette Advertising and Health Education in Post-war West Germany, 1950s-1975,” *Social History of Medicine* 28, no. 3 (2015); in Austria, a new law restricted advertising for alcohol and cigarettes in 1974: Irmgard Eisenbach-Stangl, *Eine Gesellschaftsgeschichte des Alkohols: Produktion, Konsum und soziale Kontrolle alkoholischer Rausch- und Genussmittel in Österreich 1918-1984* (Frankfurt/Main,

incorporated an affective dimension, too. Many tests pointed out the consequences for women's looks. According to a 1981 brochure, it was accordingly "important to mention the not unimportant fact that smoking also affects the physical, the aesthetic. Women who practice this habit age prematurely, [...] their fingers and nails turn yellow, their teeth turn black..."³² The use of beauty standards was an element as intricate as common also in brochures on *rational consumption*. Advocating regular workout and a diet poor in fat and sugar, articles in the women's journal *Femeia* picked up on the goals of the state program and declared them individual desires of every woman.³³

"Judge for yourself and decide"

The global quest for better consumption led to a number of new regulations. In the 1970s and 1980s, many states introduced new standards for food quality and restricted the access to certain substances with age limits or medical prescriptions. In Romania, the program for "rational alimentation" similarly envisaged to improve the quality of consumption habits by increasing the standards of food production and preparation. Public food places were to play a crucial role in this endeavour. By offering meals that followed the standards of the program, canteens in schools and enterprises as well as kiosks with warm meal services were supposed to improve people's consumption habits in a very immediate way.³⁴ Given the austerity politics of Romania in the 1980s, a successful top-down strategy would have however required a reformulation of economic plans and an increase in public spending on food infrastructure. Evidently, the government was unwilling to do so. As a less demanding and in the long run cheaper strategy, the commission for rational alimentation turned to other channels to disseminate the program's goals. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Romanians were confronted with an ever-increasing number of

New York: Campus Verlag, 1991), 203. For Bulgaria: Neuburger, *Balkan Smoke*, chapter 7; for Romania: Ioan Bordeleanu, *Fumatul*, (Bucharest: Editura Științifică, 1966).

32 Diaconescu, *Tabagismul*; for a similar depiction: "Fumatul și sănătatea," *Femeia* 40, no. 9 (1987).

33 On advice how to workout, see for example: "Sfaturi practice," *Femeia* 28, no. 1 (1975). Advice for women not to eat too much fat or too much was ubiquitous, see for example the model menu for a week which was heavily gendered in many aspects. The mother was for example completely denied any desserts and was not allowed to spread butter on her bread, see *Femeia* 34, no. 1 (1981).

34 As envisaged in the official text of the program: "Proiect – Program" (see footnote 12).

guidebooks on alimentation. From late 1981, the column “The art of living rationally” (*Arta de a trăi rațional*) was a regular part of the women’s journal *Femeia*, and articles on proper consumption became a common element in other newspapers, too. Readers were to learn about the dangers connected to old-fashioned habits of food preparation, unhealthy consumption, and lack of movement.³⁵

Providing people with scientifically sound knowledge about food consumption, the media campaign was no end in itself, but served to transfer the responsibility for consumption habits to individual households. In particular, guidebooks and articles mobilized the traditional role of women as mothers and housekeepers. The focus on women was explicitly formulated in the background material of the program on rational alimentation.³⁶ Many articles stressed the responsibility of women in battling dangerous consumption habits. A commonly mentioned example was the persistent tradition of feeding alcohol to infants. Although both mothers and fathers were reported to tolerate their children’s alcohol consumption, doctors and guidebook authors made sure who was in charge of the children’s education: “the family, in particular mothers, have the obligation to make sure that youths and also children are protected from the damage done by alcohol, from the diseases caused by its consumption.”³⁷ To be sure, women did not passively oblige to rigid state-imposed norms, but were themselves interested in improving their family’s consumption habits. Administering the household budget and responsible for the moral and physical integrity of the family, women bore the brunt of alcoholism and health problems. By addressing women in their traditional roles, the program for rational alimentation exploited this responsibility and at the same time reinforced prevailing gender hierarchies. Susan Gal and Gail Kligman have described this as a “parasitism” of the socialist state on the

35 Examples for the column can be found in most *Femeia* editions of the early 1980s. A number of slim brochures addressed aspects of the program, for example: Constantin Dumitrescu, *Alimentația rațională a școlarului* (Bucharest: Sport-Turism, 1979); Mircea Diaconescu, *Alimentația rațională* (Bucharest, Editura Medicală, 1979); Nicolae Feraru, *Pledoarie pentru o alimentație rațională* (Bucharest, Editura Medicală, 1980); Viorica Dobre, *Principiile alimentației raționale* (Iași: Institutul de Medicina și Farmacie, 1982).

36 “Proiect – Program” (see footnote 12).

37 This and all following translations from Romanian are mine (E.W.). Aurelian Ciurdea, “Adevărul despre alcool”, *Femeia* 34, no. 5 (1981). See furthermore: Gabriela Ionescu, “Abuzul de alcool, atentat la sănătate”, *Femeia* 28, no. 6 (1975).

family, meaning that the state relied on gender dependencies to fulfill its social goals.³⁸

Members of the commission for rational nutrition were aware that exploiting people's own interests in good food and health bore an enormous potential. As a commission member formulated in the debates around the program, its success relied to a good extent on people's acceptance "that rational alimentation is in the interest of their own health."³⁹ When preparing the program, the commission member Constantin Arseni, a neurosurgeon, accordingly emphasized that "the population, in particular the middle tier [*pătura mijlocie*] and those in the countryside should obtain some explanations so that they don't reach other conclusions."⁴⁰ Accordingly, the media campaign around the program for rational alimentation was cautious to present the program not as a state-imposed consumption plan to justify food shortages, but as guidelines leading to self-fulfillment. In a guidebook on rational alimentation, the author argued along these lines:

Does this life put any restrictions on us? Does this rational, preventive attitude deprive anyone of [his/her] joy of living a fulfilled life, does it frustrate [him/her] in [his/her] joy and pleasures? Not at all, no. To the contrary, an ordered life, with a well balanced program of work, with respect to the hours of rest, with a rational alimentation does not do anything but create the conditions so that we can fully seize the pleasures of life.⁴¹

Towards the end of his deliberations, the author specified: "It has been proven that people who lead a rigorous, ordered life... benefit from a robust, active old age, without suffering, with perfect health, which they can then bring into service for the family and society."⁴² With a similar focus on people's productivity, the commission for rational alimentation pronounced that "[i]t is the interest of everyone to know what, how, how much, and when [he/she] needs to consume in order to be healthy, vigorous, creative, fit for work, and to avoid premature aging".⁴³

38 Susan Gal and Gail Kligman, *The Politics of Gender After Socialism: A Comparative-Historical Essay, with the assistance of American Council of Learned Societies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 70.

39 "Stenograma ședinței de constituire a Comisiei pentru elaborarea Programului de alimentație rațională a populației", October 29, 1981, nr. inv. 98/1981. ANR, CC al PCR, Secția Economică (1978-1989), inventar 3294.

40 Ibid.

41 Note on language: the above pronouns are ungendered in Romanian. Quote from Mircea Diaconescu, *Alimentația rațională* (Bucharest, Editura Medicală, 1979), 44.

42 Ibid., 177-78.

43 CC al PCR, "Sinteza. Programul de alimentație științifică a populației", June 12, 1982, in "Programul de alimentație științifică a populației discutat în ședința de lucru din 13

With Michel Foucault, we can describe this attempt of transferring governmental goals into individual desires as “microphysics of power,” meaning “the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives”.⁴⁴ The Romanian discourse on rational consumption was certainly not void of normative guidelines, but more than telling people what and how to eat, newspaper articles and guidebooks encouraged autonomous reflection and decision-making. Doing so, they enforced the “subjectivization” of their readers, an understanding of the autonomous self who was not only capable of, but also responsible for making informed decisions.⁴⁵ By the mid-1970s, the genre of self-help guides and personality tests experienced a global boom.⁴⁶ Also in the Romanian campaign on rational alimentation, questionnaires became a common instrument to help people “get to know themselves” (*auto-cunoaștere*). As a 1987 guidebook specified in 1987, *auto-cunoaștere* was neither supposed to encourage the “passionate obsession with the self (narcissism) nor the inverse tendency (continuous self-flagellation),”⁴⁷ but rather presented “a disinterested sympathy towards the own self.”⁴⁸ At a meeting of the commission for rational alimentation, Nicolae Ceaușescu got to the heart of these measures by suggesting that

[w]e also need to make recommendations for physical education..., to point out the optimum weight according to age and sex, so that people can control themselves. Nothing works better than self-control and because of that, people need to understand what is rational.⁴⁹

In women’s journals, readers were asked to answer questions to find out “whether you and your family live healthily.”⁵⁰ In monthly columns on rational alimentation, questionnaires enquired for example “what does it mean to live a rational life?” or “how do you spend your leisure time?”

iunie 1982”, nr. inv. 121/1982. ANR, CC al PCR, Secția Economică (1978-1989), inventar 3294.

44 Foucault/Gordon, *Power/Knowledge*, 39.

45 Sarasin, *Reizbare Maschinen*, 23-25.

46 Eberhard Wolff, “Moderne Diätetik als präventive Selbsttechnologie: Zum Verhältnis heteronomer und autonomer Selbstdisziplinierung zwischen Lebensreformbewegung und heutigem Gesundheitsboom,” in Lengwiler, *Das präventive Selbst*, 169-204.

47 Neculau, Chelcea, Muresan et al., *Comportament și civilizație*, 164.

48 *Ibid.*, 165.

49 “Stenograma ședinței de constituire a Comisiei pentru elaborarea Programului de alimentație rațională a populației”, October 29, 1981, nr. inv. 98/1981. ANR, CC al PCR, Secția Economică (1978-1989), inventar 3294.

50 “Arta de a trăi rațional”, *Femeia* 34, no. 5 (1981).

offering multiple choice sets for readers to pick an answer.⁵¹ Other guidebooks dug deeper, urging readers to “get to know the level of your inner balance,” among others. The questions were not restricted to consumption habits, but also made readers analyze their decision-making processes, their professional life (“How do you feel about your superiors?”), their conflict resolution skills, and their family life (“Do you usually look forward to going home?,” “Do you sometimes feel lonely within your family?”).⁵² Open in their formulations, these questions acknowledged negative feelings towards stress at work and in the family as a valid option.

The interest in self-exploration seems hard reconcile with life in a dictatorship, especially when considering the demographic policy in late socialist Romania. In 1966, not only abortions were banned. A new decree practically prohibited divorces, too. In the course of the 1970s, the number of divorce requests as well as their acceptance rate increased progressively. But even with a gradual liberalization of divorce procedures, the process remained tedious, and official media channels did their utmost to discourage people from this possibility.⁵³ What was the motivation then of surveys that asked their readers to reflect on their family life? What use was it to a Romanian woman to acknowledge her unhappy marriage if the national policy line actively discouraged separations? For some personality tests, there is proof that they are taken over from a very different socio-political context. The authors of the above questions cited for example the US-American doctor Donald M. Vickery as their source of inspiration. Vickery became a best-selling author for his repeatedly re-edited self help guide on how to “Take Care of Yourself: A Consumer’s Guide to Medical Care.”⁵⁴

However, formulations like the above were no isolated phenomenon in the Romanian guidebooks of the 1980s. More interesting than the ostensible mismatch of psychological tests and ideological requirements is the curious ease with which guidebooks and articles in late socialist Romania integrated formulations and examples which centred on the notion of autonomous individuals, individual responsibility, and free choice. The coverage on smoking is another example for the turn to the self-regulating consumer. In the 1950s and 1960s, Romanian brochures

51 “Arta de a trăi rațional”, *Femeia* 34, no. 7 (1981).

52 All examples from “Anexe”, in Neculau, Chelcea, Muresan et al., *Comportament și civilizație*.

53 Kligman, *The Politics of Duplicity*, 50-52.

54 Donald M. Vickery and James F. Fries, *Take Care of Yourself: A Consumer's Guide to Medical Care* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co, 1976); for the reference to Vickery see: P. Muresan, “Cunoașterea stării de sănătate”, in Neculau, Chelcea, Muresan et al., *Comportament și civilizație*.

emphasized the biological harm potential of tobacco.⁵⁵ Also in later decades, popular texts on smoking never ceased to mention the biological impact of smoking. By the late 1970s however, they devoted more space to the question of individual choice and responsibility. In a 1977 guidebook, the doctor Gheorghe Alexandrescu explained that “[e]very individual is born with a biological capital [*capital biologic*]. Some spend this capital stingily [...] of course every individual can spend this capital as [he/she] wishes, [he/she] is free to choose the poison which will end [his/her] life.”⁵⁶ The decision was presented as strictly voluntary: “Judge for yourself and decide. But we ask you insistently, do not decide until you have not taken into account your true interests.”⁵⁷

Again, we might dismiss these formulations as blatantly inappropriate in the context of a state socialist economy. Doing so, we would however ignore how neatly the phrase “biological capital” fits into Alexandrescu’s argumentation about health as an individual choice and interest. Far from an unfortunate slip, the term “biological capital” encapsulates the general thrust of the program for rational alimentation. Assigning capital value to individual health, it expressed the idea that people could choose how to “invest” and enhance their health value by rational choices about consumption. The program for rational alimentation was a means to transfer social responsibilities, and thus costs, from the state to the institution of the family and its individual members.

Concluding remarks

We have seen that the Romanian program for “rational alimentation” did not simply choose to improve people’s consumption habits by top-down means, for example by augmenting the network of public food places or by changing the meal services of these places. Instead, state authorities banked on a campaign that appealed to people’s “self-knowledge” and their ability to control their actions. How did the focus on individual responsibility fit into a country like Romania, which did not only nominally subscribe to socialist ideals, but also to national communitarism? And how did this strategy make sense for a government that was notorious for its ruthless intrusion in intimate

55 Zamfir, Constantin, and Gheorghe Gheorghiu, *Intoxicația prin tutun: Tabagismul* (Bucharest: Editura Militară a Ministerului Forțelor Armate ale RPR, 1960), quotes from page 59.

56 Gheorghe Alexandrescu, *Nu-mi luați ultima plăcere* (Bacău: Direcția Sanitară Bacău, 1977).

57 Dan Abulius and Ministerul Sănătății și Centrul Sanitaro-Antiepidemic al Municipiului Bucharest, *Dragi fumători incepători* (Bucharest: Editura Medicală, 1975), 14.

matters of the body? Considering for example the close regimentation of women's bodies, it is striking that when it came to matters of consumption, the government acknowledged people's autonomy to make informed decisions. The appeal to individual consumer choices created contradictions. In state socialist Romania, people were not only confronted with caloric tables, but also with empty shelves and rationed foodstuffs. If they took the appeal to individual responsibility seriously, they became painfully aware of their limited choice to make informed decisions. Pushing this argumentation further, we might argue that people's agency was the price state socialist governments had to pay for their ambition to install a new mode of governing: that the state of half-liberalization, half-subjectivization proved eventually fatal for socialist states.

However, it would fall short to explain the fall of communist governments with unlikely consumption policies. Appeals to moderation and self-control were certainly more convincing in liberal states for the simple reason that people had more liberty to choose. In Central and Eastern Europe, the boundaries of what was and wasn't allowed to be said and done became at times very visible, and it goes without saying that the difference between liberal and authoritarian states (as well as the difference between functioning and poor food provision) had significant consequences for individual realities. Considering the categories employed in consumption politics however, liberal democracies were rife with contradictions, too. Also in Western states, people experienced clear boundaries. Their health, consumption, and general life course continued to be influenced by structural factors such as class, ethnicity, and gender. The consequences of social inequality could be attenuated, but not removed by institutions of welfare, which made appeals to free choice questionable, too. Far from collapsing, Western states showed that it was possible to accommodate the arguments about individual choice and responsibility together with their inherent contradictions and turn them into a viable rationality of governing.

While the turn to individual citizen choices does not immediately explain why the Eastern bloc collapsed at the turn of the 1990s, it gives us an idea why "everything was forever, until it was no more:"⁵⁸ why, as Alexei Yurchak has argued, the end of state socialism caught many people by surprise and yet quickly became an accepted reality. State socialism had not been an invariable, monolithic regime, which all of a sudden disappeared in its entirety. In many areas of life, gradual

58 Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

transformations of social organization had been underway. In their governing strategies, Western and Eastern states resorted to increasingly similar measures. If in 1981, Nicolae Ceaușescu argued that “[n]othing works better than self-control,”⁵⁹ he contributed to a dominant paradigm of consumption politics. Still in 2015, Olivier De Schutter, until recently a United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to food, argued that “‘autonomous’ motivations (i.e., out of a sense that this is the ‘right thing to do’, and that it corresponds to the kind of person one wants to be) are more robust and have more lasting impacts than choices that are made simply as a response to external constraints.”⁶⁰

It is hard to assess whether these appeals to people’s consciousness have yielded better results than functioning networks of public meal services and health centers would have. Whatever their effect, they have been notoriously difficult to enforce and control. Rather than comprehensively improving public health, the strategies have contributed to a new form of government that aimed to replace external controls with internal regulation. Tapping into notions of human agency, self-reflection, and responsibility, they did not involve disciplinary measures and domination, but governed with the consent of those governed. The Romanian program for rational alimentation should accordingly not be dismissed as a cynical attempt to divert attention from food shortages. More than that, it embodied a new approach to organizing people’s behaviour and allocating social responsibilities. The Romanian and all other programs were strategies of adapting to contemporary challenges such as automatized labor, the resulting sedentary lifestyle and lack of movement, the ubiquity of food, drinks, and legal substances, and the increase in leisure time. Rather than declaring these phenomena and their consequences the result of encompassing socio-economic developments, health programs framed them primarily as challenges on the way to personal fulfilment. The “individualization” of consumption politics saved costs in a two ways: first by shifting the focus from public food programs and health infrastructure to advice and guidebooks—and secondly, in a figurative sense, by shedding responsibility for social problems.

59 “Stenograma ședinței de constituire a Comisiei pentru elaborarea Programului de alimen-tație rațională a populației,” October 29, 1981, nr. inv. 98/1981. ANR, CC al PCR, Secția Economică (1978-1989), inventar 3294.

60 Olivier de Schutter, “Foreword: How to Motivate Healthier Lifestyles?,” in *Regulating Lifestyle Risks: The EU, Alcohol, Tobacco and Unhealthy Diets*, ed. Alberto Alemanno and Amandine Garde (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), xviii.

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