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Dress for Success? Entrepreneurial Careers in the Romanian Garment Industry

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Since the early 1990s, economic transformations of the former socialist countries have rapidly become an important field of research. Many neo-institutionalist economists paid special attention to macroeconomic reforms, especially privatization, and tried to analyze the impact of government's choices on firms' results (Vincensini, 2003). Or, as massive social changes occurred, other economists switched the focus on entrepreneurship and scrutinized more carefully the creation of new firms (McMillan and Woodruff, 2002). Because the emergence of new markets was not fully predicted either by local or Western analysts, economists concluded only recently that "entrepreneurs have a central role in transition economies".

Yet, some social scientists have always thought that entrepreneurs are the key to understanding the East European transformations (Staniszki, 1991; Rona-Tas, 1997; Szelényi, 1998; Hanley, 2000). The main purpose of these social scientists was to identify and to characterize the actors who were actually shaping the post-socialist capitalism(s), both in the State-owned enterprises and in the private sector. They tested several hypotheses concerning the origin of the new capitalists and made efforts in gathering empirical evidence and in systemizing their theoretical framework.

For the case of Romania, the theory of political power resource conversion was particularly dominant as an explanatory framework (Szelényi, 1998; Stoica 2004). According to this theory, former members of the Romanian Communist Party were supposedly benefiting the most from their previous connections in setting up and operating big companies. Consequently, "the ghost of the defunct party organization" (Rona-Tas, 1994) seemed to have strongly influenced the most important economic outcomes in Romania.

Despite this interesting assumption, the notion of "political capital conversion" remained a black box for these sociologists. The basic point that I would like to make in this

paper is that in order to provide a comprehensive explanation of the post-socialist entrepreneurial activities, social scientists must try to open this black box and if so, they should make two major methodological adjustments.

First, national statistical surveys which are predominant should systematically be completed by extensive qualitative data (i.e. face-to-face interviews). After 1989, Eastern European capitalists were simply described by very general statistical information (age, gender, residence, number of years of education, occupation before 1990, declared political commitment before 1990, etc.). But in-depth information about their work experience, career's choices or their personal network has been missing. Second, the existing literature tends to oppose the Hungarian or the Polish manager to the Romanian or the Russian businessman, rather than focus on sectoral differences. Running a bank or an oil company is not exactly the same as running a car plant or a textile enterprise. Therefore, one might expect to find significant differences in the ways of converting "political capital" (or other types of social resources) depending on the sector of economic activity. Most social scientists agree with this point, but keep examining only general differences between industry, services sector and agriculture or between full time and part time entrepreneurship (Rona Tas, 1994; Rona Tas, 1997; Szelényi, Eyal and Townsley, 1998; Laki, 2003; Stoica, 2004).

Considering the limits of the existing literature, my paper aims to advance our understanding of the post-socialist capitalists by presenting here some partial findings from my PhD research on Romanian entrepreneurial careers from the garment industry.

The case of the garment industry is particularly interesting for several reasons. Under the centralized economy, this field of activity had a peripheral position as compared with the heavy industry (machine manufacturing, mining, etc.). Technological investments were limited and highly qualified personnel was less numerous than in the heavy industry. After 1990, the garment industry in Romania experienced a rapid privatization and by the mid 1990s, it became a leading industry, with exports growing considerably. In 2004, this sector contributed

more than 5% to GDP, 10% to GNP and over 35% to Romanian exports.

The success of the Romanian garment manufacturing considerably contrasts with the negative picture of Romania's economy depicted until recently by many observers (Fish 1998; Szelényi, Eyal and Townsley, 1998; Ahrend and Martins, 2003; Stoica, 2004). If the Romanian privatization programs have been slowly implemented after 1989, the case of garment industry proves that different privatization strategies are possible in the same national framework. Furthermore, taking into account the general supposition of "political capital conversion", one may expect that the former members of the Romanian Communist Party would be overwhelmingly represented in this flourishing sector. But, as I reported elsewhere (Surubaru, 2004), the majority of garment entrepreneurs from Brasov district had no real political commitments (or responsibilities) before 1989. These unexpected findings about the origin of many Romanian garment's entrepreneurs from the city of Brasov encouraged me to extend my study to the national scale.

Consequently, during my PhD research I constructed a representative sample of the biggest Romanian garment companies in order to carry out interviews with managers. Since 2004, I conducted 23 in-depth face-to-face interviews and I participated at several events which involved garment entrepreneurs (business group meetings, professional fairs, etc.). To complete this information, I reviewed professional press (from 1998 until 2006) and I discussed with economic journalists specialized in the garment industry related issues.

The next sections present the first results of my research. In spite of the great diversity of entrepreneurs' situations, three types of entrepreneurial careers are recurrent. If the three of them contradict to some extent my initial thesis about the lack of the former political commitments and responsibilities of garment entrepreneurs, they also shows how particular markets' configurations enable entrepreneurship to turn this political capital into valuable resources when they know how to mobilize it and combine it with other types of social capital.

The notion of "entrepreneurial careers" describes here the interaction between specific institutional arrangements and selected social actors. The entrepreneurial activity is not only the result of successive individual choices, but also the outcome of collective processes where different social worlds get punctually together and create temporarily a

potential space of economic profit (Zalio, 2005). Individuals who are situated at this crossroad are then capable to identify this space of profit by mobilizing the heterogeneous resources that their particular location provides.

Romanian Garment Industry Before and After 1989

Before 1989, Romania's foreign trade was clearly dominated by commercial exchanges with other socialist countries. But by the mid 1960s, the Romanian Communist Party did not fully agree with COMECON's¹ decisions and decided to establish new relationships with Western companies as well.

If a Western European company wanted to subcontract in Romania, they had first to contact the Romanian government. After negotiating the terms of the contract with the highest Romanian officials specialized in foreign trade, they were directed towards a State economic board (*centrala*) which coordinated at national level the production of each type of good. For instance, there was a *centrala* for cotton products, a *centrala* for synthetic fibres, a *centrala* for garment items, etc. The board members decided together with the Romanian foreign trade professionals which factory would produce for Western markets and the foreign customer had no choice but to accept this decision if they wanted to proceed with the subcontract in Romania.

Some units of production, especially the biggest, were privileged in this process because the *centrala* repeatedly made the same choices and sent them the most important foreign customers. As a result, these enterprises managed to establish long-term relationships with Western European companies and became specialized in manufacturing high and medium quality brands. During the 1980s, the biggest enterprises generally had one or two regular foreign customers and several occasional ones.

In 1990, the new government abandoned the economic centralization function and got rid of the *centrale*. From that moment, enterprises were free to establish trade relationships with whoever they wished to. But facing this opportunity, the biggest Romanian garment enterprises reacted in different ways. Some of them succeeded in maintaining the old subcontracting relationships established before 1989 and, hence, during the 1990s, continued to produce as before. Other enterprises had real difficulties in approaching former customers and for this rea-

son, they were rapidly confronted with two alternatives: either they accepted to replace the *centrala* by other go-between organizations, or they refused this and tried to find new customers by themselves. Because the domestic garment production was huge as compared to the domestic consumption, enterprises were forced to search for the Western European customers by any means, including intermediation, participation to expensive international fashion exhibitions, managers' personal trips aboard, etc.

Following these situations, entrepreneurial careers varied. Available loyal customers mostly led former communist *cadres* to consolidate their positions inside companies and prevented from massive organizational changes. Even if the former top management was evicted after the breakdown of the communist regime, the middle management remained in place and pursued the same strategy as before 1989: stabilizing relationships with one or two foreign customers. For this case, the political capital conversion thesis is valid, but one must acknowledge that this politically-derived resource is closely related with the organizational knowledge that middle management acquired during the 1980s. This knowledge is a local one and highly depends on the conditions of production which characterize each particular factory. Therefore, it cannot easily be transferred or converted elsewhere.

In the second case, the Romanian companies did not succeed in negotiating directly with their former customers. New emerging entrepreneurs benefited from this failure and set-up structures that resembled the former *centrala*'s activities. Mainly ex-members of foreign trade ministry or State-owned foreign trade enterprises, these entrepreneurs became during the early 1990s the most important experts in intermediary services for clothing manufacturing. By mobilizing general organizational knowledge about Romanian production factories and personal connections with indigenous and foreign managers, these new entrepreneurs were particularly innovative. They diversified their field of activity and established several companies, including modern garment factories.

For the companies which could not maintain trade relationships with old customers, the emergence of these competitors was a serious problem. Instead of being direct subcontractors for Western companies, many former socialist factories were forced to become indirect subcontractors, working exclusively for those new entrepreneurs. However, some former socialist factories without loyal customers followed a different strategy and did not accept

indirect subcontracting. Despite economic crises, these companies managed to survive and most of them finally found new foreign customers. In this case, entrepreneurial careers are more heterogeneous and it seems more difficult to generalize. Nevertheless, the communist middle management generally replaced top management and struggled to improve products' quality. In some cases, post-communist managers actively looked for a foreign partner and when they succeeded, the new investment saved the company. In other cases, Western European companies, which did not subcontract in Romania before 1989, approached the biggest garment manufacturers and established new trade relationships. Because subcontracting in Romania became very attractive by the mid 1990s, this category of entrepreneurs needed no longer to worry about finding new customers.

To illustrate the differences between these post-socialist entrepreneurial careers, I chose three representative examples. These empirical data give a comprehensive look of how economic actors mobilize heterogeneous resources and confirm that "the political capital conversion" is only a part of the story.

Old Customers-Suppliers Relationships and Local Organizational Knowledge

Confectia Company² located in a small Romanian town, enjoyed a rather special situation since its beginnings. In 1971, the communist government established excellent subcontracting relationships with a French company. But, instead of redistributing the orders to the existing units of production, the government built two modern factories in order to become the exclusive subcontractors of the French company. Production was therefore organized in accordance with Western quality standards and foreign technicians frequently visited the factory.

Even if the French contracts were signed by the highest Romanian officials, *Confectia*'s management benefited from a relative autonomy in organizing production. Thus, national economic authorities, including the *centrala*, intervened less than usually.

"Sometimes the centrala criticized our production methods and asked us to rationalize differently the raw materials: use less tissue, don't throw rebus away, etc. But I always explained them that here we have to work as our French customer wants...finally, they had to agree with me and stopped

asking for changes.” (interview 12, female, former Chief in Production, now Production Manager, 2005).

Yet, in the 1980s, *Confectia* was forced to diversify its products and began to export to USSR, too. Top management started to be more closely involved in *centrala*’s activities and learned how the international socialist market was functioning. Meanwhile, the production for the French customer continued as before and the Chiefs in Production acquired more organizational responsibilities. By the mid 1980s, these persons travelled to France and received training for the new technologies that the French company had brought from Western Europe to Romania.

The breakdown of the centralized economy did not affect the relationship with the Western customer. Orders slightly increased and former *cadres*, including top management, maintained their positions. The Soviet customers disappeared and were replaced by occasional Italian ones. Consequently, the number of employees decreased after 1989 from 3 000 to 2 077, out of which 1 500 are involved in the production of the French brand.

The first serious changes happened only in 1995. The old general manager, who explicitly retarded the privatization process, retired and a former member of middle management took his place. Ionescu, the new manager, a fifty two year old male, had a strong support from other former members of the middle management, mostly engineers. They decided together to privatize the company by using the Management/Employee Buyout strategy (MEBO) and one year later, the process was completed. After that, shareholders were extremely diffused and corporate control was never transparent. The entrepreneurial coalition of former engineers possessed only 8% of the shares, but they began to act as if they were the real owners of *Confectia*.

The consequences of this switch of power were important. First, the company was no longer State’s property and new managers were free to develop more dynamic strategies. Then, the renewal of top management was likely to bring more organizational changes in order to reinforce *Confectia*’s privileged relationships with Western customers. But as an employee put it, the effects of this new configuration of power were mitigated.

“After privatization, some people in the company managed to buy some shares, but of course, they already had a good position: they were engineers. Nowadays, they are the real owners

of the company and decide about our future. Unfortunately, I think they are not really interested in improving Confectia’s economic situation. Instead of modernizing the company or raising wages, they invest the profit in all kind of businesses (medical engineering, retail and so on). As a workers and a shareholder of Confectia, I have no say, I accept everything because I don’t have any other choice, the rate of unemployment is quite high in our region and for an older woman like me, there are no jobs!” (interview 13, female, former worker, now team leader, 2005).

As a matter of fact, in 1997, Ionescu tried to diversify *Confectia*’s activities and invested the company’s profit in building a syringe factory in another Romanian town. As the business failed rapidly, the factory’s construction was not finished and *Confectia*’s investment was never recovered.

Afterwards, Ionescu explained to the shareholders that “doing business in a big town is not the same as doing it in a small town” (interview 10, Ionescu, 2005). He convinced his partners to invest in a small general store, situated next to *Confectia*’s workshops. He said that “*Confectia*’s workers will be perfect customers for the new store” and he personally promised to encourage employees to buy those goods. But workers did not respond to Ionescu’s expectations and one year later, retail business got bankrupt.

The repeated failures of Ionescu’s entrepreneurial initiatives outside *Confectia* show that converting local organizational knowledge is not always easy. If Ionescu managed to take the power inside the company, he was not so successful in doing business in other fields of activity. His professional experience and personal connections turned out to be irrelevant in medical engineering or retail operations.

In 2002, Ionescu started again a new business together with the former Local Police Chief, whose wife was actually the accountant of *Confectia*. But this time, Ionescu and his associates finally mobilized their specific organizations skills and opened a garment factory.

However, this project corresponded to a severe deterioration of French orders. During the 1990s, an American multinational bought the French company and started to reorganize the entire garment supply chain. New Eastern European subcontractors were found and *Confectia* progressively lost orders. Anticipating a deep crisis, Ionescu

understood that big garment factories are no longer profitable.

“Confectia is a mammoth. Nowadays, the Western customers need rapidity and high quality goods. We can’t do this here, technology is obsolete and people are not motivated. That’s why we invested in a new company and we hired only the best 200 workers from Confectia. The old French customer was delighted to work with the son of Confectia.” (interview 10, Ionescu, 2005).

The loyalty of Western companies is thus relative. But old customer-supplier relationships enable entrepreneurial activities and new managers legitimately convert organizational experience into valuable capital. Because the frontier between executive and control functions was particularly blurred inside MEBO privatized companies, original entrepreneurial careers emerged and managers without majority of shares often became the new capitalists.

General Organizational Knowledge and Particular Windows of Opportunity

Next Clothing Company is located in Bucharest and belongs to a holding of companies owned by Popescu, a thirty eight year old male. *Next Clothing* was established in 1999 and employs around 750 workers. Specialized in medium and high quality ready-to-wear products, the company has had several Western customers since its beginnings.

The development of this company is closely related to the personal trajectory of Popescu, both owner and manager. Being rather an exception in the Romanian garment manufacturing, this type of entrepreneurial career, however, raises fundamental questions about the social conditions of emerging new businesses and surviving old ones.

Originally from Bucharest, Popescu graduated in Foreign Trade from Bucharest University of Economic Sciences in 1989. His first job was in a State-owned import-export enterprise. At that time, Popescu was in charge with administrative functions and followed a small part of French garment orders. When the State-owned enterprise was transformed in 1990 into a shareholding company, Popescu lost his job. Soon after, he got a job in a big Romanian garment factory, but he quickly abandoned it for starting his own business.

If working for the import-export enterprise was an excellent opportunity to acquire practical knowledge about foreign trade under a centralized economy, Popescu’s first job was also a unique chance to make acquaintance with the Western companies already interested in subcontracting in Romania. At the beginning of the 1990s, most of the managers had no access to this type of information and their knowledge was limited to the customers sent by the central economic authorities. As a result, many former employees of the State-owned companies specialized in foreign trade became successful entrepreneurs.

Popescu’s second work experience was also important because it gave him a chance to meet Lupescu, an elderly man who just lost a position among the company’s top management. Former member of the Communist Party, Lupescu was not fired by the new manager but demoted to a lower responsibility position. Meeting Lupescu was crucial for Popescu’s entrepreneurial career because the Lupescu was a great specialist in garment manufacturing and had a comprehensive knowledge about the Romanian enterprises.

First, Popescu established a firm of commission agents and hired Lupescu as a part-time consultant. Combining his personal knowledge about the Western companies and Lupescu’s information about the Romanian production, Popescu convinced foreign customers to subcontract in Romania and persuaded the indigenous managers to accept the terms of the contract that he himself negotiated. In return, he received a commission. The enterprises which lost their customers after 1990 welcomed this initiative and contributed to Popescu’s business welfare.

Progressively, Popescu extended his field of activity and invested in wood processing. He bought a company located in a hilly village and designated his cousin to run the business. Nevertheless, he continued to be mainly interested in the garment manufacturing and in 1999, he decided to open his own factory:

“When a French manager told me that he was selling a part of his factory’s equipments, I thought that this was a great opportunity for me. I was tired of arguing with the Romanian managers about the bad quality of their products. Having my own factory was very important for me because from that moment on, I was able to control all the sequences of production.” (interview 22, Popescu, 2006)

In 2002, benefiting from the reorganization of another French company, Popescu established a small knitting factory with 120 employees and designated Lupescu as the manager. Nowadays, the two factories are located in the same building and share six Western regular customers.

In spite of Popescu's statements, his business was not completely transformed by the opening of these factories. He continued to act as the intermediary agent and more than 25 Romanian companies are now depending on his orders.³

This type of entrepreneurial career shows how the former organization of the garment industry generates a window of opportunity for selected economic actors. Making profit by restoring past activities, Popescu finally reshaped the Romanian garment manufacturing by complicating the subcontracting process. A new structure of power emerged inside the Romanian sector and direct subcontractors, such as *Next Clothing*, became dominant players (Fligstein, 1996).

Combining Local Organizational Knowledge and Foreign Capital

Moda Company is located in a large town, in the north-west of Romania. The factory exists since 1949 and represents one of the first communist investments in the garment industry. During the 1960s, *Moda* increased its production and specialized in military ready-to-wear clothes. Then, during the 1970s it turned to produce clothes for women, men and children for the Eastern European and Soviet market. In addition, the *centrala* occasionally sent to them some Canadian and American customers.

Unlike the Western companies' socialist subcontractors, this type of enterprise possessed a design workshop. Despite *centrala*'s severe price and raw material control, before 1990 *Moda* was free to create and to sell collections on other socialist markets. Top management was directly engaged in establishing contacts in these countries and participated in the *centrala*'s activities.

After 1990, the company lost all the old customers, except for the Romanian army. Several financial crises shook the company, but the State intervened and the business survived. By the mid 1990s, some Italian and German companies contacted *Moda* and established sporadic subcontracting relationships.

Meanwhile, Petrescu, the former technical director, a fifty year old male, left the company and created a small ready-to-wear workshop of 25 employees. In spite of his good technical skills, he ignored the functioning of foreign trade and in the beginning had to accept only insignificant local orders. However, in 1993 he finally succeeded in signing a contract with an Italian brand and as a result, the workshop developed into a modern factory of 300 employees.

By mid 1990s, this company was a real successful business. But Petrescu had greater ambitions and wanted to return to *Moda*.

"I worked 30 years of my life at Moda. Even though I was happy to be on my own, I missed the atmosphere of a big factory. Working for Moda was an every day challenge and I enjoyed it. But it isn't easy to come back, once you leave, you lose contact with people. They don't trust you anymore... I knew that Moda's executive board didn't want me back so I did all I could to make them aware of my strengths and so... to accept me".

Petrescu did not possess enough capital to buy *Moda*. Therefore, he actively looked for a Western investor and in the end, he convinced a German business woman to help him obtain the majority of *Moda*'s shares. At that time, nobody thought that *Moda* was worthy and for this reason, the capital invested was in fact less important than expected.

Petrescu abandoned his own factory and invested time and money in restructuring *Moda*. He upgraded technologies, modernized the design workshop, fired reluctant middle management, and hired young personnel. His German partner sustained this strategy and for her part, persuaded several Western clothing brands that Petrescu was a serious subcontractor. Moreover, the German investor promoted abroad *Moda*'s unique capacity of providing design assistance, if needed. As a result, three Western companies became regular customers and saved *Moda* from bankruptcy.

Considering this, one may notice that technical skills and local organizational knowledge are valuable resources in setting up new businesses. Nevertheless, in the case of former socialist companies which lost customers after 1989, these resources are insufficient. The intervention of foreign capital is thus decisive and newly established personal connections with Western investors contribute to reinforce the position of particular entrepreneurs.

Conclusion

The first results of my PhD research suggest that past institutional arrangements (i.e. foreign trade before 1989, *centrala*'s intermediation activities, etc.) structure post-communist economic outcomes and enable particular social actors to mobilize specific skills or networks in order to make a profit. The three entrepreneurial careers analyzed here illustrate how after 1989 the former political engagement can be converted into valuable entrepreneurial resources. For the first case, "the political capital conversion" turns out to be a direct result of the consolidation of a local pre-existing alliance (Ionescu and the others engineers). For the second case, the former political engagement seems relevant only indirectly. (In the illustrative case presented, Popescu is only a young graduate in 1989 but he benefits from a former top manager's expertise.) Finally, the last case shows that 'political capital' and local networks are sometimes poor resources for running a big company, and that technical knowledge and external support (from foreign investment) are more important. (Petrescu is a highly skilled technician who succeeds in setting up alone a small company, but needs external support (foreign direct investment) when he wants to return to Moda.)

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Endnotes

¹The Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) was an economic organization composed by several communist states (Bulgaria, Cuba, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Mongolia, Poland, Romania, Vietnam and the Soviet Union) which encouraged exclusive exchanges between its members. Created in 1949, it was disbanded in 1991.

²For the purposes of confidentiality, all enterprises and entrepreneurs' names were changed.

³Interview 23, female, manager of a subcontracting company of Next Clothing.

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