

This Christmas



The Christmas Revolution, 1989

by [Theodore Dalrymple](#) (September 2021)

This Christmas, as every Christmas for the last thirty years, I thought of the Ceausescus, Nicolae and Elena, who were in effect murdered on Christmas Day, 1989, after a travesty of a trial.

It cannot be said, of course, that they did nothing to bring about their horrible demise. While their citizenry struggled daily to find enough to eat, thanks to the policies that they imposed, they lived a vulgar parody of the aristocratic life. Nicolae loved to shoot bears and would have himself photographed or painted with a semicircle of bears he had

supposedly shot ranged before him. Probably they had been captured and sedated for him to take pot shots at, so that he neither risked anything nor could he possibly miss. Thus he had himself portrayed as a mediaeval boyar, though the metaphor was a somewhat mixed one as he also often sported a faux-proletarian cloth cap.

Ceausescu ordered the demolition of the oldest part of Bucharest in order to replace it by a pseudo-Babylonian quarter that looked like a D.W. Griffiths film set. He had no hesitation in selling Romanian Jews to Israel and Romanian Saxons to Germany to raise foreign exchange. He tried to imitate North Korea, by which he had been much impressed, thwarted only by the fact that Romanians are Balkans rather than Koreans and therefore temperamentally unsuited to Kim Il-Sungian choreographics. When revolt broke out, he ordered that the protesters should be shot, and many of them were.

There is still some discussion as to whether his overthrow was a revolution or a coup d'état. Actually, the two theories are not completely incompatible: even if the outbreak of protest in Romania was planned by prominent members of the regime at a time when communism was crumbling elsewhere, hoping thereby to preserve the regime's fundamental nature and thus the privileges of its nomenklatura, the coup, if that is what it is, ushered in changes that proved revolutionary in effect and scope. There was no possibility of returning to the ideological state as before.

Having travelled extensively through Romania only three months before Ceausescu's downfall, I was, to my shame, exhilarated by the execution of the dictator and his wife; but a cousin of mine, whose view of the world I did not in general much respect, said to me that she was appalled by the way the couple had been treated and summarily executed, and I saw at once that she was right. It was not so much that the Ceausescus did not deserve what they got as that no human beings should be treated as they were treated.

Watching the video of the trial, so-called, the great dictator emerged with more dignity than his accusers. Huddled together with his wife, he tried to calm her by a pat on her leg, a gesture suggestive of persisting affection and long intimacy, and in the circumstances a moving one. Ruthless and vicious he and his wife may have been, but still they retained some remnant of normal humanity. Once sentence was passed, the unhappy couple asked to be executed together, the denouement of a love story gone to the bad. The request was granted and they were riddled with bullets together, side by side.

Just before he was shot, Ceausescu cried out (his dying words) 'Long live independent socialist Romania!', which suggests rather troublingly that to the last he believed that he was genuinely engaged upon the construction of a happy egalitarian model state. If so, this in turn suggests the depths of self-deception of which human beings are capable. It suggests that he really did not see the contradiction between the radically egalitarian ideology he espoused as a young man when still only a cobbler's apprentice, and the fashion in which he and his wife lived, in grotesque luxury in the most gaudy of *nouveau riche* taste rendered almost comic by the poor workmanship with which it was fashioned. Perhaps, also, he truly believed that he was the much-loved world figure implied by the *Proofs of Love* exhibition in Bucharest, that is to say of the presents sent or given to him, either officially or unofficially, usually of the most appalling kitsch. All power tends to deceive, and absolute power deceives absolutely.

When I look back on my brief time in the last days of Ceausescu's Romania, I find myself prey to conflicting emotions. The fact is that I loved my time there, while at the same time recognising that there was nothing to be said in favour of that regime, which was so obviously a terrible one. But why did I love it?

In the first place I must acknowledge that I loved it on the strict condition that I was a tourist in, and not a permanent

resident of, Ceausescu's Romania. If I had not known that I would be able to leave, my memories, even of the very same events that I experienced as interesting, would have had a very different emotional colouring. (The Securitate detained me briefly at Otopeni Airport on my way out of the country, presumably to let me know that they knew that I had visited dissidents during my stay. I should be interested to know if there were a Securitate file on me still in existence. No doubt it would not be flattering.)

I loved the atmosphere of Bucharest in those days. It was like living in a spy novel. As you walked the nearly deserted streets in the overcast autumnal weather, especially in the twilight or after dark, when the low voltage-electricity allowed only of a yellowing gloom cast by the street lighting, you felt that if anyone was walking at some paces behind you, he must be an agent of the secret service: for who else would be out at night? It wasn't as if there was anywhere to go or anything to do, except spy on others. And one feels important if one is followed: I had never before been important enough to be followed.

The people I met, both by accident and design, were exceptional. Some of the things they said have remained with me. I remember, for example, a young art student who said that, though she and her boyfriend had lived nowhere else, had little information about the outside world and had known no other regime, she knew that they were not living normally. By this she meant that the regime was a permanent assault on human nature, a Canute-like attempt to alter the order of things which resulted only in deformity, suffering and absurdity. Another said that it would take three generations at least to repair the damage done to the human soul by the regime, however quickly the economy might recover. Yet another said that there was only one solution for Romania, the return of King Michael, who at that time was still alive and who had always been a decent man (unlike his father). Only a

figurehead such as he could prevent or heal the antagonisms that were certain to come to the fore when the regime changed. *That* the regime would change was by then obvious, although in exactly what guise the change would come was uncertain: but Romania could not for long remain isolated from the changes in the rest of Eastern Europe.

When I went to people's homes, I made as sure as I could that there was no one around to see me do so. No doubt my efforts to evade detection were completely amateurish: I had never done anything like this before and it was very exciting. The first thing the person I visited did when I arrived was to stuff a cushion over the telephone as if to suffocate it. It was automatically assumed that there was a microphone in it and the cushion was to prevent us being overheard. I had no idea whether such precautions were necessary, but everyone knew of cases in which the most private conversations had led to dire consequences, possible only if surveillance was omnipresent and minute. In addition, informing was almost a national pastime: people would denounce their neighbours, or even their relatives, for the sake of an ounce of coffee or a square of chocolate. Severe shortages may create discontent, but they are also useful for a government in its efforts to control the population. Freud spoke of the narcissism of small differences; one could also speak of the psychopathy of small privileges.

In the end, of course, all the information gathered by spies and informers didn't save the regime. In those days, it was still possible to have too much as well as too little information because the technology did not exist to separate the wheat from the chaff, the signal from the noise. The purpose of all the information gathering was as much intimidation as it was to gather true information about potential enemies. It was preventive rather than curative, and everyone knows that prevention is better than cure.

My conversations with Romanians were furtive and generally

short. This gave to our encounters a depth which is unusual on first meetings in the west. The people whom I met were anxious to convey as much as possible in as concentrated a form as possible, for they did not know when or whether they would have another opportunity to speak to a sympathetic person from the West. Within a few minutes, I felt we had got to the heart of things. There was no time, and probably no inclination, for small talk. I parted from my interlocutors with a feeling almost of elation, so intense had been our conversation (to which my contribution was limited). My visit was an event in their lives, which again was flattering to my self-importance.

It didn't occur to me that, only thirty years later, we in the west would be living under surveillance a hundred times more efficient and minute than that of Ceausescu's regime in Romania. Of course, it is less centralised and more for commercial than political purposes. We have no Securitate to fear (as yet). But we should not be too complacent.

Every month I receive on my telephone a summary of where I have been in the previous thirty days. I never asked for such a summary, but I receive it all the same. It is like a dossier of the secret police. I don't have anything to fear because my life, without being a completely open book, is very humdrum. But the record is not perfect in its accuracy: it sometimes claims that I have been to places which I have never visited and where my telephone has never been, nor has it ever been out of my possession.

How this misinformation gets into the telephonic record I do not know, but it occurs to me that it could be quite sinister. Supposing that a crime is committed where the telephone says that I have been at the material time: it could turn me into a suspect. If I were to claim that the telephone record was in error, no one would believe me rather than the telephone. I know from experience as an expert witness that an ounce of documentary evidence is worth a ton of personal recollection. Being someone of very limited technical knowledge, I do not

know whether it would be possible to manufacture and falsify a telephone record of location, but I would be surprised if it were not. Here, then, is a potential tool for blackmailers, for the vengeful, for those who want to shift suspicion for their crimes on to others.

The manner in which we are followed for commercial purposes is also alarming, if not actually sinister. One has only to make electronic mention of some kind of product or other to receive, unasked for, advertisements for similar products. Some countries have all but eliminated cash as a means of payment, such that everything anyone buys or pays for is recorded electronically. The possible uses of such information, given modern computing power, are obvious.

Most of us have not thought much yet about the consequences. No matter how many examples there have been of people ruined by a tactless electronic message which can never be erased from the record, prominent and intelligent public figures continue to ruin themselves by sending such messages. Eventually we shall learn, however; and then we shall realise that we are living in a richer, more garish kind of Bucharest *circa* 1989.

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Theodore Dalrymple's latest books are [The Terror of Existence: From Ecclesiastes to Theatre of the Absurd](#) (with Kenneth Francis) and [Grief and Other Stories](#) from New English Review Press.

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