

AMBIGUOUS TRANSITIONS: GENDER, THE STATE, AND EVERYDAY LIFE IN SOCIALIST AND POSTSOCIALIST ROMANIA – A REVIEW

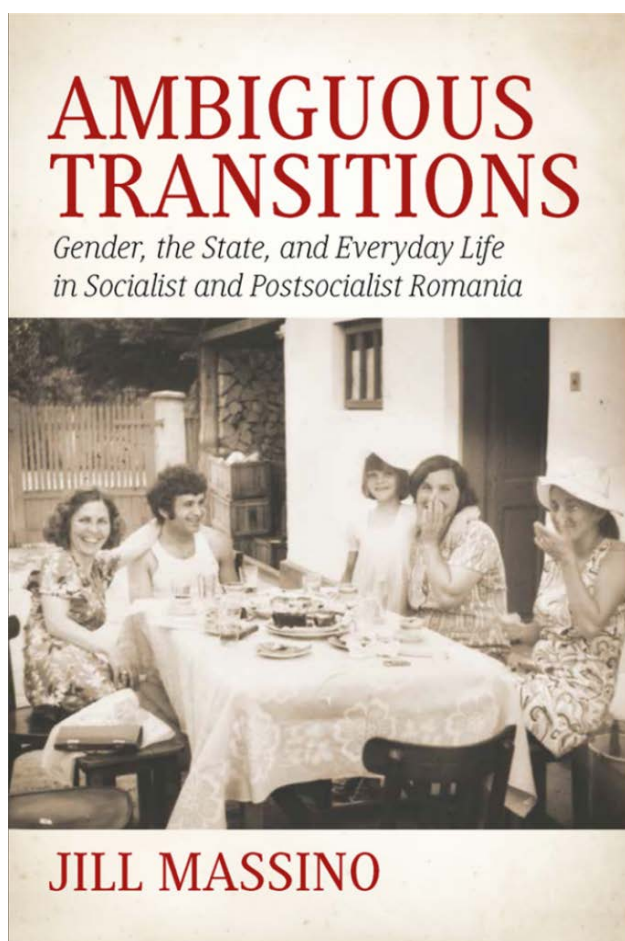
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Ambiguous Transitions: Gender, the State, and Everyday Life in Socialist and Postsocialist Romania/ Jill MASSINO, Berghahn Books, New York, 2019, 453 p.

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Jill Massino is associate professor of history at the University of North Carolina Charlotte and a well-established author in researching gender and its representations in state policies and everyday life in socialist Romania. In 2009, together with Shana Penn, she coedited *Gender Politics and Everyday Life in State Socialist Eastern and Central Europe* (Palgrave, 2009).

The present book, *Ambiguous Transitions: Gender, the State, and Everyday Life in Socialist and Postsocialist Romania* (2019), embarks on a provocative journey of “analysing the complexities of the socialist project and women’s lived experiences of it” (p. 3). Thus, using the lenses of everyday life and the voices of common individuals, the author provides an insightful view regarding the private versus public realm of life throughout the socialist period in Romania, showing that “there is no simple, coherent narrative of life under socialism, but rather multiple and, at times, contradictory ones” (p. 2). Taking

this into account, one may understand the use of the phrase “ambiguous transitions” in the title of the book.

The way the book is structured is rather remarkable, offering within its seven chapters and a thorough introductory section a wholesome tour into aspects such as: childhood, schooling years, marriage and family, leisure time and consumption habits. Moreover, one has to point out the ingenious manner in which the author has named her chapters, making reference to widely acclaimed songs, as it is the case with *The Times, They Are A-Changin’*: Gender, Citizenship, and the Transition to Socialism, hinting to Bob Dylan’s popular song, or *Love and Marriage: Gender and the Transformation of Marital Roles and Relations*, pointing to another renowned song belonging to Frank Sinatra. The same can be said about the other chapters which allude to melodies of other popular artists such as Led Zeppelin, Neil Young, or Sly & The Family Stone.

In the introduction, as well as in an interview offered to LaPunkt.ro, the author points out that one of the main objectives of the book is to analyse how the concept of gender was used to influence the policymaking process during the period under scrutiny and how it highlighted ordinary people’s ideas about womanhood and manhood, as well as the roles, relationships, and identities associated with these notions. At the same time, in the introductory part are offered details about the organisation of the book and the choice of historical sources used. Eloquent in this sense is the use of oral history methodology, the author describing how such an approach may offer people a way of “articulating their identities and reclaiming parts of the past” (p. 15).

The first chapter brings to the fore the situation of women in Romania starting from the second half of the 19th century, providing significant information about legislation, workplace environment, gender aspects, among other valuable data which give context to the book. From this perspective, the first part is essential in understanding the following chapters. In the second chapter, the emphasis is placed upon the recollections people have about their childhood and youth, showing a glimpse of the relations between parents and children, schooling years and cultural activities, daily struggles, mandatory chores, and leisure time. Chapter three offers an analysis of how the socialist regime aimed at promoting women in the public sphere and labour market, while, at the same time, pointing out the discrepancies between the official discourse and actual practice. In chapter four, the author gives perspective concerning marital roles and relations during the socialist period, arguing that “spousal roles were not only shaped by tradition and upbringing but by the challenges and uncertainties of everyday life” (p. 196). This part of the book brings into discussion several sensitive topics which, during the time under scrutiny were part of the family life and raised additional challenges: alcohol consumption, spousal abuse, infidelity and so on. Chapter five revolves around the (in)famous decree 770 which aimed at controlling women’s private lives and at limiting their choice regarding their bodies, by criminalising abortion on demand, with few exceptions. At the same time, the dramatic consequences that followed are also brought to the fore. In chapter six, the author portrays the way Romanians related to consumption throughout the socialist period, viewed both as a strategy and a daily practice, while chapter seven analyses the transition from socialism to democracy “highlighting the complex effects of political and economic pluralism on Romanians’ lives” (p. 24).

Instead of a conclusion, I make use of the author’s words to describe her work, claiming that “is premised of the belief that examining the oppressive alongside the joyous, the ordinary alongside the extraordinary – and all that falls between these extremes – yields not only a fuller, more nuanced portrait of state socialism and everyday life, but is a historical necessity” (p. 3).