Navigating the Margins between Consent and Dissent

Mechanisms of Creative Control and Rock Music in Late Socialist Romania

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This study seeks to delineate the highly convoluted relationship between (rock) musicians and the state in late socialist Romania (1975–1985). By investigating extensive archival files originating from the Securitate records, Agitprop branches, and the ideological committees of the Romanian Communist Party, we examine how the Romanian regime employed its mechanisms of creative control and how it made sense of Romanian musicians’ attempt to navigate them. First, such intricate mechanisms ranged from rewards and penalties in order to ensure ideological compliance, to repression by means of surveillance, recruitment, and harassment. Second, in our exploration of the margins of consent and dissent, the relationship between musicians and the state fluctuated between one of duplicity (that proved beneficial for both entities) and (symbolic) resistance (through collective and individual forms of dissent). Successful dissent came mostly from abroad, while, domestically, musicians were much more rigidly controlled; without being able to articulate coherent forms of dissent through their music, musicians challenged the Securitate through issues of morality. Music also led to the formation of subcultures—csőves and punks—which practiced anti-proletarian rituals of dissent. Thus, this research throws considerable light on broader sociological debates, such as the role of musicians in totalitarian settings, the hidden mechanisms employed by the state, and the ongoing literature concerning the configuration of subcultural movements in the Eastern bloc.

Keywords: popular music; subcultures; late socialism; archival records analysis; Romania

The present article critically explores the intricate layers between Romanian musicians and the mechanisms of creative control during Nicolae Ceaușescu’s ideological pinnacle, ranging from 1975 to 1985. With Ceaușescu’s visit to East Asia at the beginning of the 1970s inaugurating an unprecedented, radical cultural revolution, Romanian rock artists faced increased levels of restrictions imposed through repressive and ideological state-apparatuses of creative control. Given the proverbial incompatibility between rock music and socialism, and with many Romanian
musicians succumbing to these alien, capitalist sounds, the socialist leadership felt compelled to react. Now, musicians—more than ever—had to navigate between the pragmatic option to operate within (and, in some cases, for) the system (“consent”) and a fluctuating commitment to the ideal of creative autonomy (“dissent”). This article addresses the following research question: *How did the Romanian late socialist regime employ its mechanisms of creative control and how did Romanian musicians navigate these mechanisms?*

The broader relationship between rock music and Romanian socialism is an urgent and foremost interesting scholarly subject. First, Ceaușescu’s own neo-medieval approach to culture, his despotic reign being often labelled the most primitive and brutal application of socialism in the Eastern bloc, calls for a more nuanced academic exploration. In fact, the selected decade elicits an investigation of Romanian socialism’s most harrowing periods, one that anticipated the shortages and civil unrests of the late 1980s, and, subsequently, the 1989 revolution. Owing to its heightened levels of creative control, it also represents an era best suited to examine the inner dynamics between state repression and musical expression. Second, the very nature of the Romanian music industry that allowed—and, at certain times, encouraged—its musicians to tour the West puts forward a highly complex setting that stimulated transnational hegemonic exchanges. Third, compared to similar studies, the present article problematises the dominant premise that rock musicians inherently represent anti-establishment entities; by contrast, we postulate a duplicitous relationship between artists and the state. In fact, a wary perspective on the duplicitous and opportunistic nature of both entities—one, (rock) musicians, in search of financial and professional conveniences, and the other, the state, seeking compelling instruments to propagate the socialist ideology—cannot provide but fruitful outcomes. Fourth, the methodological approach brings forward a novel way of reconstructing history, extending this study into a genuine anthropological inquiry of the past.

This research draws on previously unexplored archival sources (roughly thirteen thousand pages) that contain official discourse, directives, policies, and transcripts with regard to the internal mechanisms of spreading ideology and blocking divergent rhetoric through the secret police agency (the Securitate). Concentrating on an as yet scarcely explored area, this article will throw considerable light on sociological debates concerning (1) the role of (rock) musicians in totalitarian settings, (2) the hidden mechanisms employed by the state, and, ultimately, (3) the emergence of Eastern bloc–based dissident youth movements that coagulated around their shared music preference.

**The Consent of Socialist State Music versus the Dissent of Western Rock Music**

Following the sociological debates described above, the aim of this section is to
investigate the scholarly perspectives opened by the implementation of socialism in post-war Eastern Europe through the prism of popular music. Here, the government did not only provide artists legitimacy but it was also the exclusive producer of events, distributor of records, and facilitator of commercial opportunities and rewards. A recurrent assumption that dominates the existent literature is the idea that given this lack of creative autonomy, artists infused their music with ambiguous meanings or, depending on ideological thaws, with overt messages of dissent. Ultimately, this led to what is being interchangeably referred to as either “anti-state music,” “unofficial music,” or “music as resistance.” More simply put, if mainstream, state-supported popular music played an essential role in ensuring the political legitimation of the government, anti-state (rock) music served the purpose of questioning the actions and even the very existence of the state itself, by means of critical and autonomous artistic expression.

However, the premise that popular music can be instrumental in socio-political change generates both scepticism and endorsement. On the one hand, pessimists regard popular music as an opiating force, rather than a mobilising one, or as a mere provider of entertainment. These scholars find a weak delineation between the transgressive possibilities of rock music and its political affectivity. On the other hand, however, the dominant academic discourse on totalitarian Eastern bloc politics suggests that rock music embodied “probably the most widespread vehicle of youth rebellion, resistance, and independence behind the Iron Curtain,” where Western genres, arguably, stimulated the “realisation of a democratic process.” Such optimistic ideas are primarily built on the presumption that rock music was incompatible with (totalitarian) socialism for several reasons. Firstly, the Soviet leadership understood rock musicians as metaphors of Western decadence, which represented nothing less than the triumph of vulgarity. Secondly, regarded as an antagonist to socialist collectivist values, rock music became “ideological, anti-Soviet pollution,” where its “rebellious, loud, aggressive, chaotic [character]” did not correspond with the image of the “new Soviet man.”

However, such “simple” dichotomies are not fully embraced by all scholars that deal with rock music in socialism. In fact, as this research shows, the relationship between rock music and the state depends on the type of creative control employed from above (e.g., scrupulous or pragmatic), the relativity of their autonomy (e.g., absolute or restricted), as well as on the source of dissent (e.g., domestic or abroad). If, for Yurchak, “it did not seem contradictory to be passionate both about Lenin and Led Zeppelin,” Pekacz indicates that rock musicians profited from the communist state patronage to the same extent that the state—which bore more pragmatic rather than dogmatic valences—succeeded in domesticating and appropriating rock music. Within this context, a complete ratification of the history of utter struggle between rock music and Eastern bloc politics needs to be approached with caution. Drawing on neo-Marxist and subcultural theories, the next two sections will theorise
the degree of autonomy that musicians possessed under socialism vis-à-vis the state’s mechanisms of creative control.

**Theorising Consent and Dissent: State Apparatus, Hegemony, and Autonomy**

For the greater part, the academic literature addressing the degree of autonomy of musicians in post-war socialist societies has prompted a dual negotiation of power to transpire: on the one hand, musicians negotiated their position with the state in order to obtain various advantages; on the other, they displayed a persistent desire to challenge the precarious conditions of musicianship, often controlled through extrinsic, non-musical, political forces. Drawing on Louis Althusser’s work, the formation of society favours the concept of structural causality, meaning that each level that embodies the social formation itself concomitantly determines—and is determined by—every other set of practices. In this way, dominant ideologies are top-down imposed through what Althusser theorises as ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) and repressive state apparatuses (RSAs). In our case, if the ISA functioned by means of mutating music—both form and content—according to a well-established set of ideological prerequisites, the RSA shaped the means of thwarting and censoring music, especially through state-police agencies. On the one hand, tangible steps were taken toward disembarrassing the alien genres established upon Western scaffolds (ISA), while, on the other, rock musicians were turned into state-run political organs who religiously followed bureaucratic rules (RSA). Althusser’s thesis fails, however, to account for any kind of dissent or counterhegemonic (re)actions, as he “postulates a system of social control from which there is virtually no escape.” In fact, regardless of the levels of ideological interpellation faced by subjects—and thus, despite the ideological and/or repressive rigidity perpetuated by Ceaușescu’s institutional control—subjects still managed to (somehow) evade ideology, for the creative space was unlikely to reconcile with such an absolutist approach.

Drawing from Gramsci and his understanding of cultural hegemony, the Birmingham thinkers produced a more nuanced and non-reductive framework concerning the notion of creative autonomy. First, cultural hegemony is an achieved process, whereby the state and its ruling classes present their own norms, ideas, values, and practices as important for society as a whole. Second, besides leaving space for negotiation, the level of cultural hegemony varies over time and between societies. Where it is strong, leaders need not rule by physical repression; they, instead, rely on achieved consensus. Here, power relations are mystified (“common sense”). Where it is weak, that is, where the socialist ideology has been undermined, physical coercion becomes necessary. The hegemony of a culture is, actually, never totally nor exclusively employed as, “at any time, forms of alternative or directly oppositional politics and culture exist as significant elements in the
Therefore, in order to provide a more comprehensive view of the music scene of Ceauşescu’s Romania, one needs to account for not only the state apparatuses controlling creativity but also the counterhegemonic (dissenting) practices of musicians.

For the purpose of this paper, we undertake an inductive approach to dissent: we seek to unearth how the state-apparatus defined and made sense of dissenting practices, what it considered to be dangerous to the socialist ideology, and how it reacted to such risky prospects. Therefore, drawing on Ekman and Amnå’s typologies of political/civic participation,31 we will be taking into account a great variety of patterns of dissent, in their broadest forms of manifestation: collective (e.g., organised, formal) as well as individual (e.g., unsystematic, informal). It needs to be acknowledged, nonetheless, that the notion of dissenting against the (cultural) hegemony presents several limitations, as it does not accommodate potential conflicts between dominated classes, in the sense that multiple (sub)groups might compete for the same resources, instead of collectively fighting against the system.32 Surpassing the explicit instances of dissent and consent, we are also concerned with the relations of power that transpire between (sub)cultural agents, such as rock musicians in navigating the overarching cultural hegemony. The empirical preoccupation, therefore, dwells not only in how the state makes sense of each individual’s ideological Weltanschauung but also in the state apparatus itself (its statements, values, goals, institutions, policies), so a clear distinction needs to be made between the official ideology and how that ideology is put into practice. Under these circumstances, this study can be placed in the broader sociological debate that provides insights into the political leaders’ ideological outlook onto cultural matters, how the political system reacts to cultural counterreactions, or how they are officially registered.

Music, Subcultures, and Dissent in the Eastern Bloc

Youth cultures—forming as a result of consuming various types of music genres—play a key role in such (counter)hegemonic exchanges: as a matter of fact, it was rock and punk music, which have their roots in predominantly hostile capitalist soil, that became associated with a newly emerging youth subculture under socialism in the late 1960s.33 Subcultures resist through rituals, that is, symbolically, by creatively appropriating and redefining hegemonic meanings (e.g., “turning a safety pin into a fashion item”).34 Gelder identifies several characteristics of (Western) subcultures: a negative relation to work, a direct association with territory rather than property, a transition toward nondomestic forms of belonging, and ultimately, a refusal of the banal and of massification.35

However, the Western (youth) subcultural tradition has its restraints,36 as scarce efforts have been made to test the applicability of subcultural theories across geographical and political boundaries. Primarily, whereas such youth subcultures
contested the class hierarchy in Western capitalism. Eastern European youths attempted to challenge shortages as well as the lack of freedom in socialism. With the socialist youth being expected to maintain traditional conduct and cultural preference as expressions to a “commitment of a normal [i.e., socialist] way of life,” it is through everyday practices and routines that the youth resisted and countered the dominant ideology. For instance, by borrowing cultural products from the West (such as fashion, rock and roll, pop icons), Eastern European youths came into conflict with a highly paternalistic and controlling party-state. In addition to the tonality of the imported music—too abrasive and dangerous for socialist ideology—beat and rock directly impacted upon their physical appearance, thus creating a “crisis over modernity in the midst of the [party’s] attempts at re-modernisation.”

Through such a rejection of the imposed cultural codes, youths resorted to semiotic guerrilla warfare, where the dominated systematically harassed the forces of the powerful by obtaining trivial, yet highly emblematic, victories. Furthermore, by making the socialist regime seem “less commonsensical,” youth subcultures weakened the hegemony imposed from above. With these theoretical perspectives being especially valuable in the context of totalitarian political settings, such as Romanian late socialism, they provide fruitful departing points to study the relationship between music and political regimes.

The Romanian Cultural Setting: A Brief Contextual Framework

To understand the relation between Romanian musicians and the socialist regime, we need to address the contextual framework under which post-war Romania had developed. With Nicolae Ceauşescu’s reign starting in 1965 and ending in 1989, when the violent civil unrest culminated with his bloody execution, the regime fluctuated between sparse liberalising thaws (during 1968–1971) and harrowing oppression (through most of the 1970s and 1980s). One such enriching thaw was enabled by Ceauşescu’s 1968 refusal to join the armies of the Warsaw treaty, when his overt support of the Prague Spring conveyed anti-Sovietism. Furthermore, in addition to drawing to his side valuable cultural allies, such as well-known poets Ana Blandiana or Nichita Stănescu, impressive ideological allowances were made to popular culture: in the late 1960s, a Pepsi-Cola factory was inaugurated, while exhibitions that included the previously “degenerate” Jackson Pollock were hosted in Romania. Alongside the widespread attempts to break away from Soviet influences, the weekly journal of the Writer’s Union featured articles by Norman Mailer, Noam Chomsky, or Roland Barthes, while previously exiled avant-garde figures, such as Gellu Naum, Victor Brauner, and Eugen Ionesco, were cherished.

Notwithstanding this context of optimism and national approval, Ceauşescu made a tremendous ideological and cultural turn, by importing Maoist indoctrination tactics after his 1971 visit to East Asia. Romania, subsequently, embarked on an austere journey during which new peaks of ideological orthodoxy were reached. Mounting new
campaigns to promote amateur, *proletkult* art, society was dominated by folklore and historical pageants that promoted Ceaușescu’s cult of personality. Through mechanisms of distorting facts and implementing new creative prerequisites, the reality became “what the party wanted it to be, and not what the artists perceived it to be.” The Romanian music industry did not remain unaffected: the nation’s most popular music show, *Metronom*, was shut down after broadcasting “Back in the USSR.” As a result, its host, Cornel Chiriac defected to West Germany, where he continued to broadcast for Radio Free Europe (RFE), until he was found dead, in 1975, in a Munich parking lot.

Regardless of such repressive practices, Romanian popular music did not cease to exist, nor was it transformed into vain acts of patriotism, or transmuted into an entirely subservient entity. Rather, alongside party-supported nationalistic folk and patriotic tunes, other genres, such as rock, jazz, or pop, continued to synchronically and diachronically co-exist. Nonetheless, by virtue of its increasing popularity, rock music was, on the one hand, regulated and, on the other, allowed to flourish on the condition that it follow the “proper” form and content. For instance, the likes of the Beatles were frequently referenced in the mainstream discourse, only to serve the propagandistic purpose of negatively depicting Western youths/artists: “as a synecdoche for sleazy loafers, no-good youth.” In fact, if, throughout the 1970s, Romanian musicians were much more cautiously censored than their Western counterparts, during the 1980s, Ceaușescu banned the broadcast of foreign music on radios and television channels. Despite the certain detrimental impact this decision might have had on the music industry, it was not incidental that this decree marked the slow, yet steady, emergence of local sounds from 1975 to 1985.

A decisive role in blocking the capacities of Romanian musicians was played by the Securitate, “set up according to Soviet blueprint and under Soviet direction.” At the same time, other state-bodies, such as the ideological committees, and agitprop branches worked as ideological filters that consolidated the hegemony and ensured compliance with the socialist ideology. As Hebdige (1979) notes, instances of consent and dissent are measurable not simply by standardised categories of political science but through the adherence or rejection of cultural codes that are primarily expressed through official documentation. Following this empirical invitation, official institutions, such as the Securitate and the ideological committees, become methodological tools, accounting that their classified archival records contribute with a fundamental angle to achieving the purpose of the present research.

**Data and Method**

The present study investigates the relationship between the late socialist regime and Romanian (rock) musicians by making use of archival documents. Even though archival sources do not generally allow an enhanced level of control over how the data were recorded, these historical sources do offer a novel, insightful, and, usually,
hidden perspective into the cultural policies that marked Ceaușescu’s rule (1965–1989). Under these circumstances, our outcomes are established on materials gathered from Romania’s most resourceful archival institutions: the National Council for Studying the Archives of the Security/Securitate (CNSAS), and the National Archives of Romania with its National Central Historical Archives (ANR/ANIC).

The former institution provided extensive information with regard to issues of domestic/foreign dissent, but also the problematic aspects of youth culture, Western bands, and capitalist radio stations. With their primary function of disclosing the detected (and, eventually, corrected) dissident behaviour, the (usually restricted) Securitate records contained highly sensitive, confidential data, such as personal documents and statements given by collaborators, sources, and informers, but also the investigation of established suspects and their activities during the regime. The Securitate files consisted of 9,450 pages in the 27 files accessed in May 2016. The latter source supplied this study with official policies and documents originating from the Agitprop branch and the Ideological Committee of the Romanian Communist Party. Additionally, as a result of official transcripts recorded during such ideological meetings, the ANIC contributed to delineating the ongoing processes of politicising culture, the established ideological prerequisites and the main themes imposed from above, but also the role of creative unions. Throughout April 2016, a total of fifty documents, comprising 3,276 pages, was accessed from ANIC.51

This research’s systematic collection of data, its analytical and methodological process (open, axial, selective coding), but also its resulting theoretical means are all elements that led to the application of a grounded theory approach. In practice, we investigated nearly eighty records: (1) deductively, or from a top–down perspective, by following certain keywords, such as music(ian), instrumentalist, composer, song, band, tour, and other synonyms, and documents that bore a broad relevance to the topic (such as Arts & Culture files, Agitation and Propaganda, Education folders), and (2) inductively, or from a bottom-up perspective, by explicitly looking for personal data of certain individuals from the music sector.

The first results section delineates the ideological prerequisites (how music should or should not sound like), but also the mechanism of creative control and the subsequent margins of navigating between consent (rewards) and dissent (penalties). Shifting the focus from ideology to repression, the second section tackles the mechanisms of surveilling, recruiting, and harassing musicians. The third section concentrates on the transnational possibilities of dissent (both collective and individual) and the ensuing reactions from authorities. Whereas the fourth section illustrates the mechanism of navigating the ideology within national boundaries by focusing on the existent ideological loopholes and ill-behaviours of individual musicians, the fifth section brings forward key insights concerning the role of (youth) subcultures, collectives that coagulated around their shared cultural preference: rock music.
Creative Control through Ideology: Rewards and Penalties

The communist authorities incorporated all creative industries within the state’s own Agitprop department, which effectively served as a monolithic tool of propaganda, an ideological state apparatus accredited with delineating cultural regulations and licensing official socialist art. The music sector did not elude these ideological transformations and received a multifaceted, utilitarian role, carrying political and educational responsibilities. The Romanian leadership expected compliance from creators and, subsequently, introduced ideological prerequisites delineating how music should ideally sound like, and how it should not. On the one hand, music creations were required to bear a conscious revolutionary character, to convey messages that were “highly representative, relatable, and understandable to the working class.”52 Imperative subject matters were the grand tale of the construction of socialism, the labour and daily tasks of the proletariat, the venerable Romanian culture and its prosperous history, where the past played the main source of inspiration, out of which “appropriate heroes needed to be drawn for the younger generations.”53 On the other, alongside proletarian and realistic valences—that naturally matched socialist-realism aesthetics—music had to ensure a partisan spirit so as to educate the masses. In this regard, music was sworn to emancipate the Romanian people from the elitist culture inherited from the interwar bourgeoisie.

In their criticism toward the music sector, the committees, firstly, exhibited an ideological antipathy toward Western sounds. Present at one of the numerous ideological meetings, Nicolae Ceaușescu fundamentally sanctioned foreign, imperialist manifestations and influences in the music field.54 One report listed a series of bands that needed to be approached with caution because they propagated—either lyrically or stylistically—anti-communist, neo-Nazi, or rebellious sentiments: “The Killers, Vampir, Maniac, D.A.F., AC/DC” (the Securitate translated the last acronym into “Anti-Christ against Communism” to justify their criticism of the band).55 Secondly, the committees discredited and vilified music genres that they situated on the commercial side of the spectrum—through the all-encompassing notion of muzică ușoară (literally, light music)—one that lacked educational potential. They only condoned commercial genres if their message was comprehensible to the masses and was kept in line with the party directives. A champion in following these prerequisites remained Savoy: consenting to hide the lengths of their hair during live performances, the band thrived by producing a Schlager-oriented, toned-down version of rock music that crossed over various genres (including ethno-folk and pop music), and by structuring its music around the canonical lyrics of Ion Lotreanu, C.V. Tudor, or Adrian Păunescu.56

However, to “encourage” consent with the socialist ideology, the ideological committees used two main strategies of creative control in order to uphold the aforementioned prerequisites: offering rewards (in case of consent) or imposing penalties (in case of dissent). First, by reinforcing a reward system, the state made overt attempts
to keep its minstrels happy, awarding medals and decorations, significant financial benefits, and better payrolls for musicians, so as to stimulate a positive stance toward the party.\textsuperscript{57} For example, as the official band of the Union of Communist Youth, \textit{Savoy} enjoyed special dividends, having the largest number of LP records issued by a pop/rock band before 1989.\textsuperscript{58} On the contrary, the release of \textit{Sfinx’s Zalmoxe} was delayed for three years (until 1979) by the censoring bodies because of the record’s excessively intricate allegories. Second, the party established new unions of labour for each creative sector in order to ensure the professionalisation and close supervision of musicians. Just like regular workers, musicians became a thoroughly organised and rationally subdivided group composed of state employees; in the present case, the Uniunea Compozitorilor (Composer’s Union/UC) became vital within the official infrastructure. However, this process of professionalisation had detrimental consequences when bands stopped associating themselves with any kind of youth, student, or labour union. Without such protective safety nets, artists ran the risk of losing their membership/licensing and of being able to perform live. For example, the Craiova-based \textit{Redivivus} failed to maintain an official affiliation with creative unions and, subsequently, was dissolved. Third, upon the bands’ refusal to comply with the imposed ideological prerequisites, the professional advancement of rock musicians was hindered through penalising forms of censorship, where coercion became habitual. For example, \textit{Transylvania Phoenix’s} Nicu Covaci was deliberately offered a passport to Germany in 1976 so that the group would disband; heavy-metal band \textit{Iris} was suspended and became a “dangerous enemy of the state” after they turned the audience against the police during their show in Miercurea Ciuc.\textsuperscript{59}

Under such mechanisms of ideological control, a definitive kind of official \textit{prolet-kult} art emerged, whose purpose was to elevate the common worker by presenting his life in an admirable fashion, to create what Lenin called the “new Soviet man” with the help of artists, whom Stalin referred to as the “engineers of the soul.”\textsuperscript{60} The Romanian rendition of this proletarian sovereignty reached its peaks with the introduction of several music festivals and cultural assembles that sought to democratise art: “Cântarea României” (Song to Romania) and, respectively, “\textit{Cenaclul Flacăra},” led by Adrian Păunescu (The Flame Circle). Such hugely popular, Woodstock-like events not only (briefly) consented with the party’s ideological guidelines, but they also acted as effective stepping stones for folk artists (e.g. Mircea Vintilă, Victor Socaciu, Vasile Șeicaru), who successfully combined elements of mass culture with official stylistics and thematic prerequisites (e.g., canonical lyrics, toned-down folk/rock).

**Creative Control through Repression: Surveillance, Recruitment, and Harassment**

The Securitate received the crucial responsibility of preventing, detecting, and annihilating hostile attitudes toward the state. Notwithstanding the scarce number of
artists with prior criminal records or with refractory political orientations, musicians were more likely to have intentions of emigration or to maintain suspicious relationships with foreign citizens owing to frequent tours to the West. As a matter of fact, it was this growing panic, or an “occidental mirage” (which fits Yurchak’s theorisation of the “imaginary West”) that urged the Securitate to prioritise musicians over other artists (and musicians who toured abroad over musicians who did not) by implementing rigorous investigative strategies.

First, close surveillance was used as a mechanism of creative control. The Securitate comprised highly voluminous and systematised genealogies of the musicians’ families, their social and marital status, when and under what circumstances they entered the Securitate evidences, their intentions to acquire personal goods, the level of understanding and harmony in their family, the comfort of their home, extended descriptions of their vices, passions, personalities, interactions with neighbours, and, finally, the probability of receiving visits or parcels from foreign citizens. A report issued by the Securitate shows that in April 1978 more than ten thousand individuals were actively involved in the music sector, among whom 257 artists were under surveillance and 111 under direct investigation. In 1980, out of the 115 inadequate individuals from the arts and culture field who illegally fled the country, more than half came from the music sector (mostly as a result of legally touring abroad). The phenomenon escalated and became worrying for the Securitate by 1982, when 886 artists were reported to have “exited the country illegally, out of these 43% being musicians.” For instance, in February 1985, several musicians from Sfinx, Cromatic, and Roșu & Negru attempted to cross the border illegally, but were intercepted by the Securitate. Their actions led to supplementary “surveillance, multiple checks at their residence, workplace, or studios, their written correspondence seized, and (international) phone calls monitored.”

Second, in addition to surveilling artists, the Securitate resorted to recruiting band members for a closer supervision of targets. Through a device that showed the intricate tangles spread by the secret police, band members were mobilised to spy on each other and to inform the Securitate regarding any potential acts of dissent. In fact, the Securitate interfered to such an extent in the music scene that it instituted an unimaginable mechanism of controlling musicians, urging artists to subscribe to a dual, highly duplicitous role: musicians by night, undercover agents by day. Despite not being an isolated case, Sfinx perfectly illustrated how such compromising, yet opportunistic, practices were put into operation. The source known as “Marian” (who proves to be the band’s leader, Mihai C.) was recruited in 1982 with the objective of gathering resources on anti-socialist targets from bands touring abroad. Appropriately following the internal rules of conspiracy, “Marian” supplied his superiors with a number of more than thirty useful notes and reports, concluding that the internal ruptures of the band were caused by the insubordination of other members, such as the Romcescu brothers, Ecaterina O., and Sorin C., who disobeyed the regulations and refused to return to Romania. In truly dramatic fashion, another source
infiltrated in the band (by the codename Spătarul) revealed that Mihai C. himself had a severely anti-socialist behaviour: in addition to engaging in intimate relations with other band members, Mihai C. was accused of bribery, maintaining relationships with renowned fugitive and RFE broadcaster Cornel Chiriac, and, ultimately, of having intentions to repudiate socialist Romania over the Netherlands. With Mihai C. actually emigrating to the Netherlands in 1989, it ultimately seemed that the West was not just an artificial mirage construed by the Securitate: in fact, such acts of defection existed and they palpably shaped an unwanted image of the emancipated, socialist (wo)man.

Third, after being surveilled and/or recruited, artists were systematically intimidated or harassed, and, upon more serious charges, ruthlessly prosecuted by the state police. Singers, composers, and instrumentalists were most frequently charged with hostile stances against the social order, agitation of the masses, war crimes, fascist attitudes and propaganda, illegal border crossings, political and social hooliganism, “milder” punishments including workplace relocations or displacement into labour camps.

Navigating Creative Control from Abroad: Émigré Movements and Individual Dissent

The Securitate feared emigration, not only because defection revealed internal weaknesses and deficiencies but, especially, because the Western world stimulated the emergence of a transnational space where various forms of dissent took place. The examined archives showed that such international devices of challenging the regime were either collective, through organised, concrete, formal, music-related initiatives, based on antipolitical drives, a sense of belonging to a collective, and direct engagement through voluntary civic actions, officially systematised by exiled musicians; or individual, through unsystematic, informal, often unintentional, behaviour-related, symbolic initiatives, based on apolitical drives, selfish/individual/financial desires, articulated through everyday/mundane resistance, and issues of decadent morality and marginal unlawful acts.

If Paris represented the cultural capital of Romanian exiled writers—such as, Monica Lovinescu, Virgil Ierunca, and Emil Cioran—Munich became the most important cultural hub for the Romanian music scene of anti-socialist dissent, where multiple associations and cultural assemblies coagulated. With RFE—the provider of one of the most disparaging anti-socialist criticism—having its headquarters in Munich as well, the Romanian authorities engaged in hostile intelligence activities, but also violent attempts to destabilise Munich’s émigrant community. Through what is popularly known as the “ether war,” the involvement of Nicolae Ceaușescu in the 1981 Munich bombings represented the most powerful example that denoted the uneasiness propagated by Romanian émigrés. Coincidence or not, in 1983, RFE
increased its airtime devoted to young Romanian listeners to nineteen hours per week by broadcasting what the Securitate described to be “an intense, insidious, and hostile propaganda with the purpose of indoctrinating the Romanian youth and of creating an ideological sabotage.”

Around the same time, 1,635 letters to RFE were intercepted and four hundred pseudonyms that had made it on RFE’s live airtime were introduced into official evidences. The Securitate registered the activity of student groups Discomanii (The Discomanics) and Melomanii (The Melomaniacs), which repeatedly made solicitations to RFE under referential, Westernised pseudonyms (e.g., Bruce Dickinson, Fernando von Ard, Lemmy Kim Mister).

Subsequently, at the beginning of the 1980s, 139 sources ensured a closer surveillance of the Munich scene and its organised forms of dissent. First, it was determined that a group of fifteen fugitive musicians of Romanian origin set up the Ars Libera movement, also known as the Union of the Free Romanian Artists. The declared purpose of the association was to unify the creative forces of all Romanian musicians trapped in the communist exile in order to prevent the alienation of genuine Romanian traditions. Second, through the vigilant eye of undercover agent “Someșan,” the Securitate detected the dissident activity of the Apoziția Cenacle set up in Munich, under the patronage of the RFE. Third, the secret police intercepted an interview given by Romanian chansonette singer Mia Braia to the RFE, praising the launch of a music studio and label in Munich by a Romanian fugitive, where exiled artists were invited to record their music. At the same time, Braia denounced the censoring practices of the Romanian state, especially the precarious working conditions (e.g., tiny, unlit studios, which lack a proper canteen, musicians eating their lunches on the piano), and the bureaucratic regulations of Electrecord (the procedure to release albums taking up to one year or even longer).

In addition to these arguably better-organised forms of bypassing the ideology from abroad, musicians individually engaged in a symbolic kind of resistance, echoing the previously mentioned semiotic guerrilla warfare: by challenging official expectations, Romanian musicians proliferated a bad (i.e., immoral) image of the socialist society. In this sense, it was not their creative means of expression that bore anti-socialist messages, but rather the way musicians exploited their opportunity to temporarily (and legally) tour Western Europe. The Securitate detected numerous cases of possession of foreign currency, smuggling activities, achievements of illicit earnings, petty thefts, hooliganism, or even prostitution in exchange of goods and financial advantages. For example, members of Romanticii were charged by the FRG Polizei with stealing from local shops, while renowned instrumentalist Gheorghe Zamfir (who was to compose the Kill Bill soundtrack a couple of decades later) sold his music to porn film producers from the FRG. Furthermore, members of Sfinx managed to smuggle foreign currency hidden inside their amps, and under their car’s hood and tires. After extensive checkups, it was revealed that Sfinx had used a fabricated contract with a fictional touring agency from Denmark in order to prolong tours abroad and to avoid state income taxes. In the leadership’s attempts
to understand the motivations behind such actions, the Securitate concluded that musicians had an excessive desire to work abroad as a result of the ongoing economic shortages back home (especially food, gas, energy), the lack of concerts and interest from the Romanian public, and not least the mismanagement of the music sector and of the radio–TV network.78

Navigating Domestic Creative Control: Individual Dissent through Loopholes and Immorality

In contrast with the overall freedoms that the abroad space brought, dissenting through music within Romanian borders was much more complicated, given the closer and more effective mechanisms of oppressing creative autonomy. For the most part, the Securitate discovered a series of denigrating comments directed toward the leadership of the party, the circulation of false rumours and news originating from anti-socialist media outlets (primarily, RFE), eulogistic comments regarding the occidental lifestyle, and augmentation of the emigration psychosis. Another conclusion of the Securitate was that renowned musicians had failed to act sufficiently so as to positively influence the rest of the artists, especially those who might be susceptible to hostile acts.79

Regardless—or perhaps especially due to—the strictness with which ideological prerequisites were imposed, individual musicians sought ideological loopholes and creative strategies in their pursuit of creative autonomy. Since literary or folk sources were part of the already well-filtered canon, musicians turned to the Romanian past and its ancient traditions in order to—paradoxically and compromisingly—improvise and create more freely. Although transgressing genre boundaries was regarded as politically provocative, the fusion with local music traditions remained among the few concessions rock music was granted, and thus, it became a dissenting practice. In this sense, the production of folk-infused music was strongly recommended because of the genre’s inherent connection to Ceaușescu’s protochronist, national-communism. This can also serve as an explanation for the growing number of folk singers and folk-inspired records that had saturated the national music market starting with the early 1970s, with performers such as Valeriu Sterian and Nicu Alifantis representing the ethos of the urbanised peasantry, and bands such as Transylvania Phoenix pioneering the ethno-rock subgenre. Nonetheless, examples of overt dissent were scarce, poorly articulated, and, as we showed in the previous section, quite often expressed through other means than the music itself. When it came to politically imbued messages, the Securitate hardly ever missed metaphorical denunciations directed at the state. One of the instances when artists bypassed the rigorous censoring mechanism was Phoenix’s utilisation of allegorical messages in their piece Canarul (The Canary), in which “a canary dies of a broken heart just when he thought he might be freed.”80
Yet, despite such rarities, many Romanian bands—sometimes unintentionally—performed dissent though various what were deemed immoral acts. For example, the all-female Venus (or Roşu & Negru) outraged authorities with “the volume of their music, the length of their hair”\(^81\) rather than their music compositions. A truly interesting example was the case of Florian Pittiş, widely considered the most representative figure of the Romanian youth during communism, who had played an active role in the Romanian theatre and music scene throughout the 1970s and 1980s.\(^82\) After recognising his capacity to influence the youth, the Securitate focused its investigation on Pittiş’s embodiment of a purely decadent morality: his spiritually oriented, or sometimes nihilistic Weltanschauung, was regarded as a form of symbolic rebellion against the state.\(^83\) Moreover, he was repeatedly identified as an individual who treated his parents very coldly, and as a cocky, proud, libertine element in the local community, who still hesitated to settle down and get married (which is, according to the Securitate, “the only change that could bring him back to reality”).\(^84\) Moreover, Pittiş’s physical/sartorial appearance seemed to be completely pervaded by the Hippy movement: in addition to wearing outfits representative of the movement, which, after all, inspired neither seriousness, nor trust of the authorities, Pittiş refused to have his hair cut despite repeated warnings, knew the English language particularly well, and owned an extensive collection of music records, developing a true cult of worship for bands like The Beatles.\(^85\) As a result of the Securitate’s investigations, it was not only Pittiş’s worrisome morality but also his subsequent disobedience exhibited through daily practices and attitudes that built up to symbolic forms of countering the regime.

**Navigating Domestic Creative Control: Collective Dissent through Subcultures**

Whereas the symbolic forms of domestic dissent discussed above were largely individual (unsystematic, informal, often unintentional), Romanian youth subcultures offered a more collective (intentional) type of dissent. Among others (such as new wavers, hard rockers, and hippies), two main youth subcultural movements were identified by the Securitate: csöves and punks. Despite differing through distinctive practices, sartorial choices, and, of course, music preferences, both groups exhibited the same anti-socialist, pro-occidental characteristics and, thus, similarities with Western sociological traditions and Eastern peculiarities.\(^86\)

Also targeted by Ceauşescu’s purge directed toward Hungarians,\(^87\) csöves groups were mainly composed of Hungarian-ethnics who lived under bridges and inside sewer networks (their name comes from the Hungarian cső, meaning tube or pipe), and who were influenced by Hungarian magazines (Nők Lapja, Világ Ifjúsága, Ifjúmunkás) and radio shows (Kékfény).\(^88\) In a turn of events that led Romanian authorities to question the capacity of Romanian bands to positively influence the
local youth, various photomontages and audio materials were discovered (with *Edda*, *Dinamit*, *Piramis*, *Scorpio*, *Khartado*, and *Omega* from Hungary), with some youngsters even maintaining contact with these Hungarian bands in order to acquire records and Western-bound goods. Punk groups got their influences from foreign publications that documented the punk phenomenon, such as *Neckermann or Best*, and, consequently, infused their vocabularies with English phrases, being known for their affinity toward what the Securitate identified as “aggressive types of music.”

Drawing elements from the West and re-appropriating them according to local settings (e.g., listening to cassettes of *Deutsch Amerikanische Freundschaft* and *Nina Hagen* in the basement of derelict buildings), it can be argued that such youth groups formed at the intersection of capitalism and socialism. To a certain extent, they exhibited similarities with Western subcultural movements, while, at the same time, embodying the manifestation of a distinctive kind of youth that emerged in different, totalitarian circumstances. Seemingly subscribing to Western moral panics, the Romanian youth engaged in various anti-system practices allegedly under the influence of occidental music: consumption of alcoholic beverages, brawls and violent disputes (manufacturing makeshift firecrackers and firing them at various events), petty thefts and robberies, vagrancy, or truancy. If at some *Holograf* live performances, the police had to stop the shows to restore order, in more extreme cases, the police dealt with a teenage rioter who paid tribute to “all metalheads from block nine” by unleashing the lions from the local zoo, creating havoc among the population.

Fitting the Western tradition of a sociology of deviance, all subjects investigated by the Securitate were, indeed, deviants, as they rejected the traditional, mainstream community in favour of establishing subcultural hubs or micro-communities. Furthermore, Romanian subcultural youths managed to win space, by claiming their own territory: csöves disciples gathered in obscure places in order to listen to foreign cassettes of “hippy bands,” while *Panchistii* (The Punks) regularly rallied at the regional cultural house and at Hotel Dacia’s pastry shop in order to listen to foreign rock/punk bands. By utilising various accessories and household items—what Lévi-Strauss referred to as “cultural bricolage”—in an unorthodox manner, Romanian subcultures referenced the material deficiencies of the socialist society: csöves distinguished themselves by attaching locks, crosses, blades to their ears, and *Panchistii* decorated their clothes with various ornaments (shaving blades, shells, crosses, knives) and inserted needles or safety pins in visible parts of their bodies (forearms, necks, faces, ear lobes).

In addition to these processes of deterritorialisation and anti-commodification, Romanian subcultures presented preeminent anti–working class traits, which made them stand out in the Western–Eastern dichotomy. By performing anti-proletarian rituals, csöves and punks rejected the sense of working-class community promoted by the socialist authorities, indeed, fitting the lumpenproletariat layer that Marx was so critical of, being by no means typical working-class individuals. Starting with
simple mottos, such as csöves group Síxa’s “Laziness is not a sin,” the Securitate was chiefly worried about the increasing levels of individualism and uselessness that the youths seemed to propagate and that directly countered the socialist working-class culture. For instance, the main activity of Diszko was accounted to be that of “having fun,” while other csöves embraced a total parasitic life, “refusing to conduct useful activities within the socialist society.” The Securitate also identified several problematic songs which seemed to be csöves favourites: if Edda’s Minden Sarkon Álltam Már (I Stood at Every Corner of the Street) promoted an inadequate message to the youth, discouraging them from working, and dismissing the precise utilitarian function of the youth that the socialist ideology proclaimed, two other songs (A Keselyű /The Vulture and A Hűtlen /The Unfaithful One) were identified as allegorical messages of revolt against the system.

Conclusion

Drawing on the margins between consenting and dissenting against the state in late socialist Romania, the present article has critically explored the hegemonic exchanges between the Romanian leadership, its mechanisms of creative control, rock musicians, and their navigation of the control imposed from above. Such intricate mechanisms functioned through various strategies of creative control, ranging from offering rewards in order to ensure compliance, to censoring and repressing ideologically unwanted materials. Furthermore, the state’s mechanisms of creative control operated by means of surveillance, recruitment, and harassment, as (some) musicians engaged in this duplicitous stratagem employed by the state in order to gain the trust of the system. The investigated archival documents showed that the so-called Occidental psychosis drew artists to dissent from abroad (not unexpectedly given the high levels of control inside the Romanian borders), rather than from within the system. Domestically, musicians were much more rigidly controlled and, subsequently, they failed to form a coherent movement of dissidence against the state. However, they did show (scarce) signs of resistance (e.g., the case of Pittiș and the subcultural youths remain sparse instances of evading control).

A twofold relationship ensued between rock musicians and the socialist leadership: a compromising, duplicitous one, and one of (collectivist/individualist) dissent. Difficult as it may be to determine with complete certainty the motivations that prompted musicians to resort to such dual tactics—ranging from artistic survival, professional opportunism, or a mere race for resources—what can be stated with certitude is that this duplicitous nature of artists and their tacit allegiance to the state was beneficial for both fractions. Therefore, the idea that musicians were manipulated, while they also manipulated the system itself, shall not be entirely rejected. After all, despite the creative compromises it endowed, duplicity was a different manifestation of cultural resistance, a deceitful stance allowing Romanian musicians
to access various resources (from domestic gigs to international tours, medals to financial resources), and owing to their privileged position, to briefly negotiate with the hegemonic state and navigate their creative control. Ultimately, it seemed that both the state (through its application of the ideology) and the artist (through his or her behaviour) were driven by a hunger for financial capital. At the same time, musicians were found guilty of plenty of prohibited activities, but very rarely of dissenting through their own music. Such dissident practices were conducted through two main means: collective (organised, intentional, music-related activities abroad) and individual (unsystematic, unintentional, behaviour-related activities domestically). The Securitate was, in fact, particularly worried by the moral values of artists, as indecency became a (distinctive and symbolic) form of dissidence that stained the working-class paradise image of socialist Romania.

Furthermore, the present study adds to the sociological debate regarding the configuration of subcultural cultural youth movements in the Eastern bloc. In the case of socialist Romania, the rebellious aura that music proliferated led to the formation of youth groups, such as the ones constituted by csőves and punks. In addition to their universal characteristics shared in the West–East dichotomy (e.g., deterritorialisation, anti-commodification), Romanian youths became symbolic structures that practiced anti-proletarian rituals, as they attempted to carve out a space of private existence, away from the Securitate’s vigilant eyes. Operating within micro-sites of cultural struggle, such individuals that coagulated around their shared music preferences were endowed with erosive and counter-hegemonic capacities. With their separation from mainstream collectives representing a possible reaction to decades of socio-cultural repression, the existence of such youth groups represented a symptom—and, at the same time, an effect—of a broken social system that aimed to include all social classes but failed to do so.

Overall, during Nicolae Ceaușescu’s reign, music became the perfect vehicle for the construction of a new narrative of a local, re-invented modernity, one where electric guitars, power amps, and loud drums could freely mingle with the archaic, folk themes and styles into a sonic and ideological hybrid that, ultimately, represented a way of eulogising a communist past and justifying a communist present and future. Following the prerequisites set by the committees of creative control, the music industry was run onto the same proletarian populism that gave birth to a perpetually claimed “our music,” where the artist was a worker for the greater and, especially, the collective good. As cultural institutions were turned into mere feeder clubs to the greater cause of the party, the musician became a genuine *primus inter pares*, where his or her talent was no longer individualised and unique, but regarded as the good of the entire society.

We also need to acknowledge that by relying exclusively on official archival records, the chances of finding failing operations of resistance were naturally higher than successful ones, owing to any detected manifestation against the state being immediately documented, abolished, and penalised according to its gravity. Romanian bands, nonetheless, lacked cohesion and consistency—in their line-ups,
discourse, or style—while musicians seemed to fall into a self-sufficient state of being, overly satisfied with scarce, yet satisfactory, resources, maintaining an apolitical or, quite frequently, a subservient position toward the establishment. Ultimately, it seemed that the only responsibility was claimed by the socialist youth who, not incidentally, was to become the generation that put an end to Ceaușescu’s dynasty, and whose actions expressed the ethos of a different kind of generation, one that, despite its proverbial laziness, was committed to change.

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