

the three members of the Bednarik family, as well as their contribution to the development of Romanian art in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. It can be stated without hesitation that it thoroughly covers in detail all the relevant aspects concerning the three artists, drawing on a wealth of sources and deeply exploring their thoughts, feelings and emotions through their memoirs and journals. The abundance of reproductions of the Bednarik family's photographs and documents, combined with the excellent graphic and editorial design, makes this book a remarkable achievement that invites both reading and reflection, as a delight for both the eyes and the soul.



ELENA CRINELA HOLOM

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TRAIAN SANDU

**Ceaușescu: Le dictateur ambigu**

Paris: Perrin, 2023

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**T**RAIAN SANDU is a historian who teaches at Sorbonne Nouvelle in Paris and specializes in Romanian history, especially the interwar and the communist periods. His recent monograph is a well-documented biography, even if rather conventional in its approach and a bit too *French*—wearingly bombastic—in its style.

Its conventionalism is quite straightforwardly accepted by its author, and manifests itself at multiple levels: not only the conventional form of the biography as a genre, whose fetishism of subjective self-determination and all-roundedness might seem obsolete in an age of intersectionality, multicausality and combined and unequal developments. But also the rather conven-

tional conceptual tools that are put to use in the reconstruction of Ceaușescu's trajectory—namely, the concept of totalitarianism (even in the culturally infused more recent articulation), and the consequent emphasis on discourse and ideology, both aspects (totalitarianism + ideology) that constitute the pillars of the official condemnation of the Romanian communist regime established in Tismăneanu's Presidential Commission Final Report from 2006. Where Sandu's approach differs from Tismăneanu's is in its lesser interest in the mechanisms of terror and coercion, and in his emphasis instead on the popular support of the regime—a social grounding that Sandu explains (and evades) through the category of charisma, as the mysterious elucidation of Ceaușescu's discourse and ideology's hold on the population. In this articulation, the concept of 'charisma' reveals all its Weberian utility and aporias: it subjectivizes and thus turns into a mystery the mechanisms of power, de-socializing and de-historicizing the question of the efficacy and legitimacy of the political regime, the link between its discourse, ideology and performance, and the population's tacit or explicit support.

As problematic as this concept of 'charisma' is, it is nevertheless quite structurally indispensable for Sandu's approach. This is because, on the one hand, both in its conceptual design and in its main sources, the book focuses mostly on Ceaușescu's *discourse*, his various allocutions, whether in the Politburo's meetings, international gatherings, informal settings, or public speeches. On the other hand, however, Sandu rarely credits these discourses with any credibility. On the contrary, the book mostly consists in Sandu's acid comments on Ceaușescu's predicaments—in

a constant pendant for sarcasm, moral judgement and hyperbole, which make its style so tiringly “French.” Now, the only mechanism through which one can explain—but precisely as a mystery—the holding power and social efficacy of such a silly and vacuous discourse, besides mere coercion, is that of “charisma,” which notoriously also presents the advantage of pre-explaining its own limits, through the notion of “routinization of charisma,” the necessary realist shadow of this otherwise magical concept: charisma magically functions until it no longer functions because it is no longer magic, but merely routine.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the book is a useful companion in the study of Romanian communism. It goes through, in rich detail, the long yet ineluctable path of Ceaușescu’s ascension in the party and state structures; it documents well the mis-timing of his international strategy of interbloc mediation and relative autonomy—which, because of Ostpolitik and détente, became useless for both major powers and political blocs precisely when it was more desperately needed at home, because of the strategy of endless economic mobilization and hence dependence on foreign trade. It shows well how Ceaușescu’s political and economic strategy ultimately forced him to integrate into his ideological worldview both neoliberal, mercantilist traits (in its emphasis on productivity, exports and comparative advantage), as well as feudal remnants—even though these ideological imports apparently never altered, *pace* Sandu, its basic Marxist or Stalinist grounding. It contrasts aptly the free hand and self-centered nature of Ceaușescu’s rule at home, with the shrinking opportunities and constraining limitations imposed by the international

and regional context—a debilitating contrast that Ceaușescu, but also Sandu on his tail, tried to evade through increased ideological mobilization, through the voluntaristic and subjective “inner reserves” of the people that have to be animated and channeled so as to overcome any objective underdevelopment and obstacles. This ideological mobilization is, of course, the bread and butter of the operation of charisma—though, as argued above, the enchanting power of “palingenesis” (the mobilizing recourse to the myth of national rebirth), a central category in Sandu’s reconstruction, could be less mysteriously and more historically-sociologically grounded: after all, its charisma functioned when it was not needed, when its alluding tones of national progress and sovereignty were quite plausible and visible in the social context of the 1960s; and it ceased to function as charisma, it became mere routinized formula precisely when it ought to exert its magical powers, in covering and embellishing the declining social conditions in the late 70s and 80s. A charisma that holds only when it is persuasive could perhaps be better explained in more sociological terms as perceived social interests and class consciousnesses.

It is not clear whether this emphasis on discourse, this belief in the self-realizing capacities of ideological mobilization is a peculiar, defining aspect, or maybe an ultimately forced choice for Ceaușescu’s regime—forced to retreat into this repetitive call to palingenesis by the closing doors of the political and economic international contexts—, or whether it is a corner into which the book and its author deliberately painted themselves, through their methodological and conceptual choices. Its effect is, nonetheless, a certain imbalance

between the rich detail of the reconstruction of Ceaușescu’s decisions and utterances, and the much more fleeting reconstruction of the local and international social, political and economic contexts—which are briefly brought into discussion only when Ceaușescu happened to talk about them.

In its epilogue, the book returns to the question of this mysterious charisma—“En quoi résidait cette popularité paradoxale?” this enduring power of an otherwise clearly flailing perspective of national redemption. “Sans doute,” answers Sandu, “dans le dépassement de la malediction détectée par Cioran des petites puissances et le défi fasciste lancé à leur destin mineur . . . La seule issue était celle de l’exceptionnalisme dont se réclament tous les nationalismes, fondés sur l’indépendance internationale et le génie autochtone” (pp. 454–455). But if the fate of Ceaușescu’s palingenesis and its charismatic hold was fatally inscribed into Romania’s frustrating condition of “petite puissance,” this final explanation leaves the reader with more questions than answers: why, then, if this palingenetic mobilization is the necessary delusion of small states, do we find it, for instance, in the patriotic frenzy of the MAGA campaign of the world’s superpower; and why instead, and more to the point, was it then not the default position of the other “petites puissances” from the socialist bloc, which also had to negotiate, like Romania, a “minor destiny” in the shadow of an overbearing neighbor.



ALEX CISTELECAN

**BELLA DEPAULO**

**Single at Heart: The Power, Freedom, and Heart-Filling Joy of Single Life**

N.p. [New York]: Apollo Publishers, 2023

I FOUND OUT about the book in the title from a post on LinkedIn, the only ‘social’ (professional, though) platform I have an account on. I do not use it too often either, but I do check in on the activities of those who make up my little network from time to time. I thought it was an interesting research topic, innovative in general and, as far as I knew at the time, not at all known in Romania,<sup>1</sup> so I sent the author an enthusiastic message. I am very grateful to her, who not only replied, but also provided me with the electronic version of her work, so that I could make it known to the Romanian reading public, which is increasingly eager to be informed about new research and approaches.

Bella DePaulo is a social psychologist, a graduate of Vassar College of Liberal Arts (New York) and a 1979 Ph.D. from Harvard University. She taught psychology for two decades at the University of Virginia, and is currently affiliated with the Department of Psychology and Brain Sciences at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She has been writing the *Living Single* blog for *Psychology Today* magazine since 2008, has had a monthly column at *Unmarried Equality* since 2015, and has published pieces on the topic in the *Washington Post*, *Time*, and the *New York Times*, becoming the undisputed expert in the field that has emerged thanks to her.

She knows exactly how long she has been studying people alone: since 17 December 1992, when she created a ‘secret’ folder on her computer. Secret from