

„Bani albi pentru zile negre”: Nest Egg*

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Abstract : *The paper describes the practices associated with the sale of life insurance and private pensions through prieteni, cunoștinte, rude („friends, acquaintances, relatives”) in contemporary Romania. Built on business schemes known as multi-level marketing (MLM), insurance brokerage companies as the one explored in this paper promise to offer security and a worryless future at a time of intense social and economic marginalization. Focusing on the deployment of particular rhetoric strategies and the use of graphic artifacts during the sales meetings (the central communicative event analyzed), this paper illustrates the reproduction of social networks and their repurposing by contemporary businesses. This facilitates the understanding of the social practices that mediate the insertion of late capitalism in former socialist societies.*

Keywords : Actor-Network Theory, life insurance, rhetoric of marginalization, sales sessions, social networks, MLM

Cuvinte cheie : Actor-Network Theory, asigurări de viață, retorica marginalizării, ședințe de vânzare, rețele sociale, MLM

*Once upon a time there was a city whose inhabitants were either princes or beggars. In between them there was nothing but stray dogs ;
They were the middle class.*

Philanthropy¹

The above remark is the opening line of *Philanthropy (Filantropica)*, a film directed by Nae Caranfil and released in 2002. The film is an intelligent yet rough depiction of the increased fragmentation of Romanian society during the post-socialist period. It

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The Romanian correspondent of „nest egg”, the expression „bani albi pentru zile negre” – literally, „white money for black days”, has special resonances in the cultural context I describe given the numerous stories about corruption, theft and the black market. Whereas „black” money is used for conspicuous consumption and immodest display, „white” money is that saved for unforeseen events that can affect one’s family referring to moral activities.

1. „A fost odată un oraș în care locuitorii se împărțeau în prinți și cerșetori. Între aceste două lumi nu existau decât câini vagabonzi. Ei formau clasa de mijloc”. Opening lines in *Philanthropy*, directed by Nae Caranfil, Romania, 2002.

captures well the growing marginalization and economic deprivation faced by larger numbers of state employed and state assisted persons. The main character of the movie, a high school teacher of literature and writer, has to enact the sketches of the infamous Mr. Pavel Puiutz in order to get the money to entertain his much younger and attractive lover². Mr. Puiutz claims to have identified the „trigger of charity” in the stories told by the beggars and to have invented the profession of „writer for beggars” in post-socialism. Like the literature teacher, Mr. Puiutz also claims to author short stories. However, his stories have the advantage that they sell.

Not unlike Mr. Puiutz, the people whose work I describe in my paper promote an activity they claim to complement and even substitute the impoverishing state sector employment. Also similar to the movie character, the people on whose activity I focus both make use of a rhetoric of marginalization and suggest themselves as a solution to it. Becoming a „financial consultant” or, more narrowly, an „insurance broker”, and selling the various life and health insurance or revolving credit schemes for the company they represent is supposed to provide people (clients) with an alternative to the meager public retirement and health benefits. It also promises to provide „consultants” themselves with the opportunity of a rewarding entrepreneurial activity necessitating only a small investment but generating consistent

commissions. Such business practices are promoted as the handy solution to the acute senses of economic and social exclusion associated with the retirement and social security benefits provided by the state. Unlike Mr. Puiutz, however, the insurance brokers in Southern Romania emphasize the moral and secure character of their enterprise. This is often in opposition to other financial ventures that collapsed in post-socialist Romania – numerous pyramid schemes, revolving credit schemes, credit cooperatives, mutual funds, and even state banks, or with the morally ambivalent practices of the informal economy. At the same time, their practices during „sales sessions” (the most important „communicative event” [Hymes 1964] for the financial consultants and the main unit of analysis in this paper) are never exempt from moral evaluations made by the people they try to persuade.

This paper explores the practices associated with the sale of life insurance and private pensions through *prieteni, cunoștințe, rude* („friends, acquaintances, relatives”) in contemporary Romania. Built on business schemes known as multi-level marketing (MLM), such insurance brokerage companies promise to offer security and a worryless future at a time when people loose their jobs in the state sector, the value of social security or retirement benefits has plummeted, and the official or informal costs of medical assistance are hardly affordable³.

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2. The literature teacher has to attend fancy restaurants in Bucharest, those where the post-socialist *nouveau riche* socialize each evening. He goes there with the secretary of Mr. Puiutz, a former sex worker, pretending to be husband and wife. They simulate an anniversary dinner and the fact that they are not able to pay the ridiculously expensive bill. The waiter, himself an acquaintance of Mr. Puiutz, threatens to call security while the main character laments loudly about the hardships of life in post-socialism, the miserable state salaries and the ridiculously high prices practiced by the restaurant. The whole point of the scam is to sound as veridical as possible and thus determine the other customers to contribute sums of money to cover the bill in order to help what looks like a perfectly respectable family in trouble.
 3. The paper draws on fieldwork conducted in Caracal (a small town in Southern Romania) and Bucharest during the summers of 2004 and 2005, as well as the first six months of 2009. I draw on observation conducted during sales sessions and meetings between insurance agents and their potential clients, or during training courses attended by insurance brokers, on interviews with clients and insurance agents, as well as on the examination of graphic artifacts used during the meetings and later for record keeping.

I start my analysis from a number of questions such as: how are representations of marginalization and deprivation constructed and used during the selling sessions? What are the discursive strategies, material practices and graphic artifacts employed by insurance brokers during their meetings with clients? How are capitalist processes that reinsert themselves in this part of the world adopting and refashioning critical discourses on disruption and change just to insinuate themselves as the solution?

Insurance brokers, social networks and the selling of life insurance

This paper focuses on the practices of insurance brokers („financial consultants” according to the contracts they sign with the brokerage company) selling life insurance and various hybrid policies (e.g. life insurance with capital accumulation) functioning as quasi-pensions. My „key informant” is Petru [pseudonym], a teacher at one of the secondary schools in Caracal, owner of a gym, of a small grocery store he runs with his extended family, as well as insurance broker in the rest of the time. Petru represents TWQ⁴, an insurance brokerage company based in Bucharest and having extensive networks of agents throughout the whole country, but having a focus on Bucharest and Southern Romania. TWQ intermediates all types of insurance although its main area of specialization and most profitable line of business is that of life insurance and other similar products. It grew progressively since 2000, intermediating increasingly diverse financial products and building „structures” (that is, „networks of distribution”) in additional regions of the country each year. In 2003 the owner started up another two real estate companies which basically organize groups of investors that finance each other’s purchase

of cars and houses on the basis of rotating credit schemes. Since 2005, TWQ became a „consultant” (that is, an intermediary) for one of the major private owned banks in Romania facilitating the subscription of state subsidized mortgage loans by private individuals.

TWQ is organized on the basis of multi-level marketing (MLM) principles. Known also as „networking marketing”, MLM is „a system whereby vertically integrated networks of so-called distributors both consume and sell products” (Jefferey, 2002, 325). Enterprises based on MLM have spread rapidly all over Central and Eastern Europe but also China during the post-socialist period (Ghodsee, 2005) and sell a multitude of products or services – medical supplies, beauty products, house appliances, electronic products, foreign language manuals and cassettes, or various forms of insurance are just some examples. They create extensive networks of distributors, sales representatives and different levels managers, hierarchically organized according to seniority in the firm, personal performance in sales, and the results of those in ones own structure. Products and services are distributed through networks offering opportunities to earn money for a large number of dynamic people. The distribution networks grow continuously, every new customer being a potential distributor and manager to build his own small network of friends, acquaintances and relatives that will further sell the products.

TWQ depends on the development of hierarchical networks of agents that buy for themselves life insurance policies from one of the companies represented by their employer. After acquitting a small tax and attending several intensive training courses, each client can (is actually encouraged to) become an insurance broker and develop his own network of distribution. Furthermore, depending on ones diligence and specific training, each agent can intermediate the distribution of the products with which firms of the TWQ group are involved.

4. TWQ is a pseudonym and stands for „Trust, Wellbeing, Quality” (*Încredere, Bunăstare, Calitate*), the most notorious slogan of the Company.

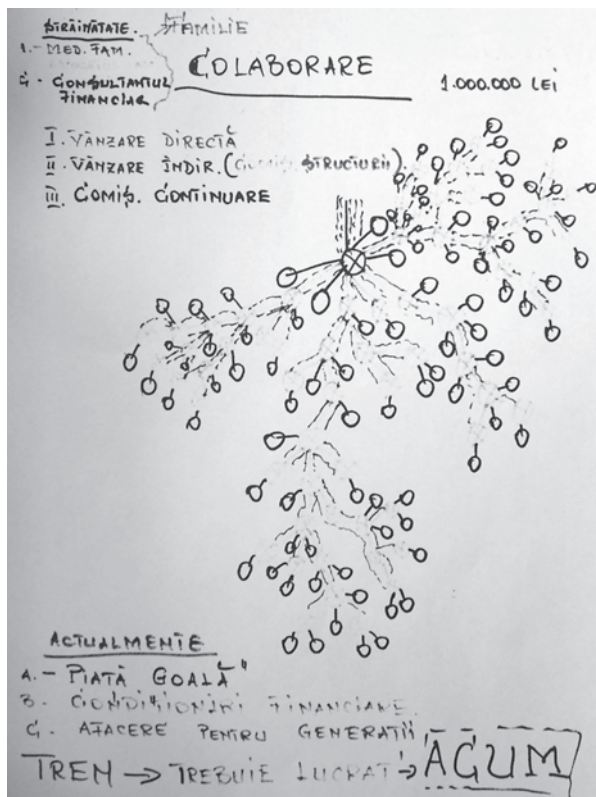


Image 1. A schematic representation of the arborescent structure of MLM networks used by Petru to explain the principles of his activity and the sources of gains for the consultants in his own structure of distribution

As Petru explained during one interview, „MLM represents the possibility for one to develop ones own business with a minimum of investment. Money comes from three sources : direct sales commissions, indirect sales or „structure development” commissions, and carry-on commissions” [see image 1]. The level of commissions earned by any agent increases with his own promotion in the hierarchy of the firm that is itself conditioned by a number of explicit criteria such as : the number and value of contracts facilitated, the wideness and depth of ones subordinated network, the financial performance of ones network and the level of dropouts from insurance and the network. All these criteria articulate into a set of powerful incentives towards the continuous spread of the networks by the incorporation

of more and more clients and geographical areas, as well as towards determining clients to buy a set of financial services rather than a single product stimulated by the promise to subsidize their own spending through the commissions earned as future agents.

Petru became an agent of TWQ in 2001 after having been the broker of a similar company based in Transylvania. The former company he represented has divided as its national coverage ambitions were broken by the plans of several of its senior agents that set up their own brokerage companies. As the first brokerage firm was distributing the policies of only one insurance company, Petru was easily persuade to shift boats by Sergiu [pseudonym], the uncle of his wife, a retired army officer and leader of the second most successful distribution „structure” of

TWQ since its founding. Sergiu was based in Bucharest but was traveling to various parts of Romania to expand his networks of distribution and area of activity. The easiest way to accomplish his goals was to follow the MLM model transposed into the slogan *prieteni, cunoștinte, rude* [P.C.R.] („friends, acquaintances, relatives”)⁵. He used his affinal nephew as his first contact and main agent in Caracal. Thus, Petru was easily persuaded to join the new company in part given his past experience and in part given his unwillingness to refuse a close relative.

Petru contacted me several years ago to persuade me to buy life insurance. In spite of the fact that I declined his proposition, he was willing to help when I contacted him later trying to find out more about his activity. The fact that we were distant acquaintances but also that he was „a friend of a friend” made it easier for us to connect in spite of my previous refusal. During subsequent meetings I engaged in numerous conversations with Petru and realized a couple of semi-structured interviews. I joined him at several „sales sessions” in Caracal, at meetings with the agents in his „structure” in the area, at a couple of meetings he had with his manager (that is, his affinal uncle in Bucharest that brought him into the company), and at one of the courses for the training of agents attended by over one hundred people. Subsequently, I realized several follow-up informal interviews

with people that bought life insurance policies including some that gave up their contracts after a few years of coverage.

My interest was in the ways the practices of life insurance brokers simultaneously make use of and reconfigure previously existent social networks. I was, at the same time, concerned with the arguments, actants and strategies that persuade people in a provincial and economically deprived area of Romania to buy life insurance, a rather new and expensive financial service for the region. Is this a „rational” strategy on their part or does it have to do more with a situated logic of practice or even with the social skills of the brokers? Are people able to refuse such a proposition when it is signified as a favor made by a friend or relative? How does one motivate such a refusal (how is it possible to say no)?

A growing literature created mainly by sociologists, but also by political scientists and anthropologists elaborates on the transformation of networks in the post-socialist societies of Eastern Europe. Treating networks as an alternative mechanism for the distribution of resources to both state (i.e. central allocation) and market (Sik and Wellman, 1999), as resources that „provide a more secure transaction environment” under conditions of risk and uncertainty (Cook *et al.*, 2002), or as social aggregates premised on trust (Ledeneva, 1998; Lomnitz and Sheinbaum, 2002), previous literatures usually associate

5. This is the first principle a new insurance broker with TWQ will learn and put into practice. It describes the first and most efficient method of identifying potential clients as well as the symbolic resources to draw on during the sales sessions in order to persuade one’s interlocutors into buying insurance. The triadic category stands iconically for the use of social relations as the main channels of distribution, that is, for the way existing social networks form the basis on which distribution structures are built by the brokers. Former social relations are resignified and rearranged by the profit maximizing strategies of MLM firms. At another level, such practices and the slogans they stand for are the adaptation for present purposes of practices widespread during the socialist period. Back then, *„prieteni, cunoștinte, relații* („friends, acquaintances, relations”), the functional equivalent of the Russian *blat* (Ledeneva, 1998), was the way one could go around the state distribution system and the scarcity built in the system of „rational redistribution” (Verdery, 1996), the way almost everybody from simple people to directors of state enterprises could make ends meet or fulfill the output levels specified by the plan. The fact that the acronym of this widespread social principle was similar to that of the Romanian Communist Party [PCR] was the pretext for innumerable jokes and became the mundane way of characterizing the former regime, an alternative to the ideological self presentations of the Communist leaders.

networks with informality and deal with trust as their unproblematic underside. Others scholars focus on networks of firms (Grabher and Stark, 1996; Stark and Verdes, 2006) and illustrate the complex ecologies of institutional development where distinctions such as formal – informal or local – global do not seem to make sense. Furthermore, networks can perform the „lenticular functions” of the entrepreneur in post-socialist societies mediating the adoption of late capitalist practices in the societies of Eastern Europe, Russia and China (Bonnell and Gold, 2002; Jeffery, 2002).

The literature reviewed above takes networks as something already existing, as something „inherited” from the socialist period and to be adapted for new purposes at present rather than something to be continuously produced by the business practices of the agents. Consequently, for most of these authors networks themselves are the focal unit of analysis rather than social actors or, equally important, their practices. Furthermore, with the exception of Lomnitz and Sheinbaum (2002), Grabher and Stark (1996), Stark and Verdes (2005), and Jeffrey (2002), most of the above actors equate networks with informality or with something escaping the visibility, control, or evidence of the formal economy, hence with a negatively defined category. Furthermore, trust is taken as an unproblematic category, something either present or absent, the quality that facilitates exchange when formal mechanisms for the sanction of contracts are not present. Most of the actors start from objectified representations of networks, trust, and reciprocity and either do not attempt or find it difficult to separate from such theoretical assumptions.

In this paper I make a number of different conceptual and theoretical choices that further inform my analysis. Although networks and

actors emerge as important units of analysis and illuminating their conditions of possibility is one of the goals of the paper, I prefer to focus on the practices that (re)produce them, on the things and actions that generate simultaneously networks and their actants⁶. I find useful the insights provided by actor network theory (Brown and Capdevila, 1999; Latour, 1999, 2005a, 2005b; Law, 1999; Collier and Ong, 2005) seeing actors and networks as being generated through the same processes, as distinct yet indissociable forms of existence for social reality, much like wave and particle are two alternative but non-exclusive forms matter takes in the physical world (Latour, 1999, 18-19).

Hence, what becomes the objective of social analysis is to illuminate the generative principles of networked practices, the „engine” generating the endless performativity the results of which are networks and agents. Networks are the byproduct of numerous transformations and chains of signification; they are the trajectories left by new associations in the process of creating new assemblages (Latour, 2005, 7). Thus, networks and social groups are the product of „associations” realized continuously and not their cause (*ibidem*, 239). Actors themselves have no secure ontology. Like networks, they are neither fixed nor permanent. Rather, they are nodules of the networks, temporary points of concentration for the fluxes generating the networks themselves and, more important, have no conceivable identity outside of the networks they stand for (Latour, 1999). Furthermore, actors as loci of agency involve always „figuration” (Latour, 2005, 54-55), that is, the imaginative act of a putting into form. A more neutral term allowing for the agency of humans as well as non-humans, is that of „actant” borrowed by ANT supporters from literary theory. As Brown and Capdevila

6. I take the opportunity to thank the anonymous reviewer for the valuable suggestions about the more systematic study of network structures and composition. This would definitely make my study more valuable. However, given the scope of this paper and the theoretical concern with the premises of Actor-Network Theory, I have decided to focus mainly on the practices and instances where action, networks and actants are associated and reproduced.

(1999) point out, actants represent the monads, the elemental units in the materialism underlying ANT. In order to determine an actant (be it an insurance broker, a newspaper article, an insurance policy, or a graphic representation of one's circle of friends) and to understand how it produces social action one has to situate it in the wider networks of persons and artifacts in which it circulates and to follow the successive acts of translation that it mediates, as, according to Brown and Capdevila, „the identity of an actant must be formally indexed to the attributes it can present when it enters into relations” (41).

Action itself should remain a flexible concept and should be understood relationally. It should „be felt as a node, a knot, and a conglomerate of many surprising sets of agencies that have to be slowly disentangled” (Latour, 2005b, 44). Action should not be seen as strictly produced and determined by the structural properties of networks (themselves more fluid than most social scientists allow them), and „should remain a surprise, a mediation, an event” (45). It is the „under-determination of action” that creates the potential for meaning and value and that calls for social analysis.

Along the same lines, I prefer to problematize the category of trust rather than taking it for granted or simply as the trigger of social action and exchange in networks. Trust, as a characteristic of specific relations is something to be created or not in dated acts of exchange. Although admitting that certain social relations are endowed with a better potential for trust (given the actors involved, the history of past exchanges and interactions, the object of the present interaction or the milieu in which it takes place), I hold that trust is something always to be achieved and always open to renegotiation. Furthermore, exchange and interaction are conceivable even in situations of profound mistrust, while friendship or kinship cannot be simply equated with trust.

Social exclusion, sales strategies and the rhetoric of marginalization

One of the consciously pursued sales strategies described by Petru as being based on arguments that convince even some of his most reticent customers is that of portraying life and health insurance as ways of compensating for the dramatic depreciation of state provided health, welfare and retirement benefits, as well as ways of keeping up with the increased costs of medical and social assistance. Such a strategy involves preliminary preparation by the broker and is part of the more general creation of a „plan” for the persuasion of any particular client. Repeated reference to it is made in the internal documents of the brokerage company and it is related to the rest of the measures an agent has to take before actually meeting the client: gathering detailed information on the prospective client and her family, pre-selecting a few policies or financial products that the broker will support in front of the client rather than exposing a broad range of products, keeping up-to-date with the news and latest legal developments in the fields of social security and insurance. Thus, „The general algorithm for the preparation and leading of a sales session”⁷, [see image 2] reproduced by hand-writing and read repeatedly by every new insurance broker in Petru's network, contains provisions for the use of recent news in mass media regarding the declining state of health of the population, the deplorable condition of the state run social security programs, of the increasing costs of healthcare and medicines, or of the recent calamities (earthquakes, flooding, accidents) generating human and financial costs.

Such arguments are always illustrated with handy examples of persons the prospective client is likely to know and that have a stronger social resonance: the story

7. *Algoritmul general al pregătirii și efectuării unei discuții de vânzare.*

of some retired school teacher, the collapse in the street of a well known hard-working accountant, or the misfortune of a mother and her child that fell sick and had to be hospitalized are some of the examples repeatedly used during the sales sessions.

What helped all these persons recover and carry on were the compensations paid by an insurance policy without which the end would have been unimaginably sad? How would the client manage a similar situation? Wouldn't he rather buy insurance right away?

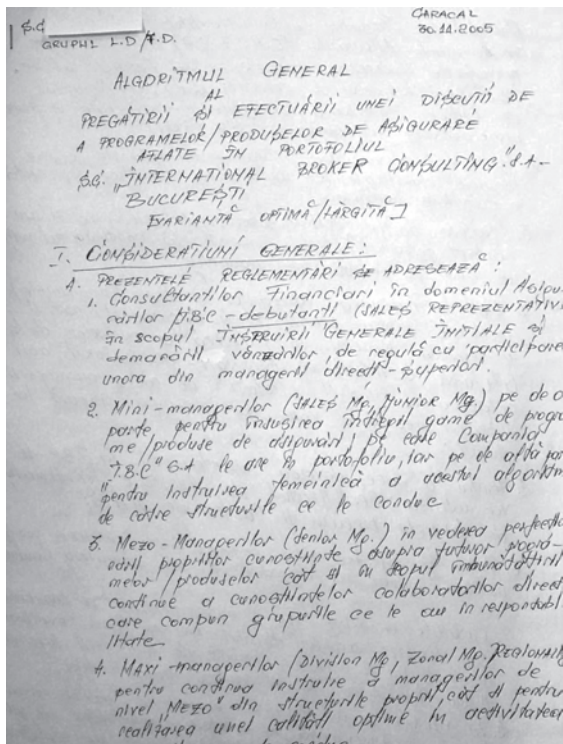


Image 2. The starting page of the „General Algorithm” read and used by every insurance broker for preparing the sales meetings

Arguments, illustrations, and examples from the news or from the common circle of acquaintances are always carefully selected and used according to the situation and the relationship between the insurance broker and the prospective client. At the same time, the broker has to be ready to connected to the examples that the client himself brings to the fore, to repurpose them so as to support his own arguments, as well as to be able to reinterpret any story so as to deconstruct and contain any foreseeable negative answer. The success of the sales meeting and the persuasion of the interlocutor are intimately connected with the ability of the broker to

deploy a rhetoric of marginalization and economic hardship, to connect to a sense of social and economic exclusion experienced by the majority of the targeted clients, and to construct a scenario of inclusion that depends, first, on the purchase of a specific insurance policy by the client and, second, on his becoming an insurance broker and thus a small entrepreneur. Petru further details the things brokers do during their meetings with clients :

you provide many examples ... and when you provide a lot of examples, both from this field [i.e., insurance] and concrete examples he will understand. But, again,

here everything has to play out on the affective dimension. If you approach him [the client] at the level of affect ... with children, with this and that... „Look, you are going to reach old age. You will no longer be able to do too many things by yourself. Who’s going to take care of you then ? ”...

People usually accept the relevance of such arguments and, even if they decide not to buy insurance for other reasons, agreement is still reached among the interlocutors about the state of social security in post-socialism, about the hardships of life at present, or about the more accentuated and increasingly visible differentiations between the more affluent and the poorer segments of society.

Observation indicates that the success of insurance brokers is potentiated by their ability to deploy a rhetoric that indexes many of the anguishes and laments that gained currency with the radical social changes and their destabilizing effects on people’s lives. The plasticity of such discourses and the fact that what puts them into motion is the drive for profits of the insurance business does not mean they are displaced from the experiences of those they target. On the contrary, in order to have any efficacy they have to connect to deep senses of marginalization. A good broker, one fully exploiting the persuasive potential of such discourse is the one able to discriminate among various figures of discourse and to use the resonance they might have in local contexts or with specific clients in order to promote business. The ultimate test for the adequacy to reality of their discourses is the profit and loss account at the end of the year.

Given the poor state of healthcare, welfare and retirement benefits in post-socialist Romania (Vasile and Uegaki, 2003 ; Saunders, 2005), the claims by brokers that the hybrid products of life insurance with capital gains and the health insurance products they sell can constitute the only legitimate alternative to the impoverished system of social security in Romania are not without foundation.

Various forms of insurance or the rotating credit schemes, as well as the entire business algorithm promoted by my informants can be pragmatic responses to a sense of marginalization and exclusion associated with aging or illness. However, as it will be argued further, this is an avenue for material and social inclusion only for certain categories of people, namely those targeted by the brokers. It is people with enough financial resources to afford the relatively expensive insurance premiums and contributions and those with a certain social potential, that is, with a broad PCR circle, persuasion skills and a certain moral standing (all determinant factors for the development of distribution networks) that usually take advantage of these opportunities. Those at the bottom of the income scale usually do not make it this way.

Persons, artifacts and the ecology of actants during the sales session

The preceding sections have situated the rhetoric of marginalization used by insurance brokers in relation to the choice of services to be suggested to customers, as well as to the experiences of marginalization and exclusion of prospective clients, themselves connected to wider economic processes symptomatic for the post-socialist change. A third step in the analysis should be that of situating the rhetoric of marginalization within the whole range of discursive strategies employed by brokers, within the various sequenced practices that structure the sales discussions and in relation to persons and artifacts (more generally „the actants”) coming together during the sales session. This is all the more necessary as a focus only on rhetoric itself or on its conscious manipulation by skilled brokers may create an impression of rigidity and formulaic deployment.

Rather, I claim that discursive resources are only constituted in practice, in the very act of deployment and the strategizing they

facilitate cannot be understood apart from the milieus in which they take place. According to Petru, only an unskilled broker or a beginner would try to apply „mechanically” the sales algorithm previously learned by hart. Really effective is a form of patterned flexibility that brokers can adopt and enact during their discussions with clients. Petru tried to make that clear for me by creating contrasts between various possible approaches :

What matters a lot is the affective realm. Not going to the client with algorithms, with a pre-conceived discourse, but rather with a hearted discourse... trying to enter a sort of symbiosis, a sort of harmony with the client... To let the client see that you work for him, for him and his family. Not that you are actually earning money on his behalf by selling him just any product, a product without a soul... No ! „Dear friend, this is good for you. I do it for you. It’s for your own interest.” This aspect, trying to reach harmony with the client, this is what matters.

While the impression of flexibility and naturalness in performances during sales sessions usually creates trust and is conducive of business, formulaic phrases and rigid schemas tend to generate mistrust and make the client adopt a defensive mood in which any suggestion by the broker tends to be deconstructed and subsequently rejected.

The discourse on marginalization finds a specific place, as mentioned earlier in the paper, in the overall sales algorithm used by brokers as learning aid. According to the document⁸, sales sessions shall follow a sequential logic with clearly specified steps : 1. self-presentation of the broker ; 2. a short presentation of TWQ and its partners ; 3. a short history of insurance ; 4. arguments about the necessity of insurance ; 5. arguments about the safety of investing in an insurance policy ; 6. presentation of the

structural characteristics of the policy added by the graphic representation of its features ; 7. presenting the investments of the insurance company ; 8. further explanation of various concepts and terms in the policy ; 9 negotiation of the insurance premium and the insured value. The filling in of the application form is usually left for a second meeting between broker and client. The sales sessions I attended, however, never respected the sequentiality in the guidelines. Although all the above points have been covered by the brokers more or less explicitly, discussions followed a more circular pattern, with repetitions and movements back and forth among arguments and topics of discussion following the specific questions or objections raised by prospective clients. Furthermore, there was an overlap between various steps detailed in the guidelines and this seemed to increase the coherence of explanations rather than make them convoluted.

What seemed to be important during the sessions I witnessed (and this was confirmed to me later by Petru) was to create a counterpoint between the expected advantages of the various products promoted and the senses of marginalization or even the direct experiences of loss the client identifies with. Most of the times the contrastive elements were juxtaposed and the opposition between them explicitly articulated by the broker leading the discussions. Such a contrast was paralleled by that between various stories about known or hypothetical persons that found themselves in difficult situations and were or were not able to draw on the coverage of an insurance policy. At this point brokers presented newspaper clippings with exemplary stories about calamities and the benefits of insurance. Clippings as graphic artifacts, often including explicit pictures of the persons described, tend to reinforce meaning and allow the interlocutor to imagine an experience embedded in an otherwise displaced context. In the case of common acquaintances or notorious people in town used as examples, the

8. Vezi *supra*.

persons-actants are brought into conversation by the vivid stories meant to create empathy for the listener with the characters. Although physically absent, such characters are made present by broker's stories, narratives themselves being the medium through which displaced experiences are brought together and put in the service of the overall argument, that emphasizing the usefulness of an insurance policy.

Other graphic artifacts and objects help convert into action the contrast between the rhetoric of marginalization and the worryless future facilitated by insurance. Their efficacy is given by the timing of their emergence into the discursive arena, the eloquence of the broker introducing them, their „age,”

and their place in a series of artifacts and stories that are sequentially arranged and displace each other as the focus of attention. The concatenation of representations mediated by these entities create meaning and facilitate action. Thus, the arguments about the usefulness of insurance, illustrated richly with stories of misfortunes and means of coping with them, are reinforced through the presentation by the broker of her own insurance policie(s). Although not in itself the deciding argument, this is consider an essential element for the generation of trust in the product being advertised and a proof of the validity of the argument: how would a client be expected to buy a product if the one advertising it has not bought it herself?⁹



Image 3. Illustrates the frequency of insurance premiums, the inflation indexing of the value of premiums, the accumulation of profit attached to the policy from the investments made by the insurance company, and the value of the sums insured, all throughout the duration of the policy

9. Differently put, it is not the insurance policy of the broker itself that determines people to act. Rather, its presence in an argumentative sequence as proof of the fact that the broker is fully endorsing her own arguments is seen as „normal” and thus facilitates trust. As ANT supporters would put it, agency is not something that object [artifacts] themselves have or have not. It is rather the „foldings” of the networks that create the agency of actants and endow them with the ability to affect the enveloping of events (Latour, 1999).

At a subsequent moment during the discussion, the creation of another graphic artifact plays into some of the previously induced meanings further illustrating the ability of the insurance policy (rather of the processes it stands for: payment of premiums, investments by the insurance company, generation of profit, accumulation of reserves to cover calamities and of capital to be reimbursed at the expiration of the insurance period) to alleviate economic and social loss. The various elements of the policy (premiums, the value of the policy, deductibles, insured values, capitalization, period of insurance, annuities etc.) and the mathematical (financial) logic connecting them is explained by the broker as plainly as possible.

Throughout the entire process, the explanation is joined by drawing, the writing of formulas, of calculus, of values and results

obtained by the application of various provisions of the policy on large sheets of paper. Drown in vivid colors and filling almost any empty spot on the paper, such schemas act as vehicles for the various elements concatenated to produce meaning.

Although the drawings stay with the client after the end of the sales session, they are convoluted enough and become almost impossible to disentangle when they are separated from the verbal explanations they illustrated or helped construct. They occupy a prominent position in the overall ecology of actants during the sales discussion and are central nodes where many of the meanings promoted by the brokers articulate. After the sales session is over, they serve both as mnemonic devices and loci where some of the meanings negotiated during the discussions between client and broker are preserved.

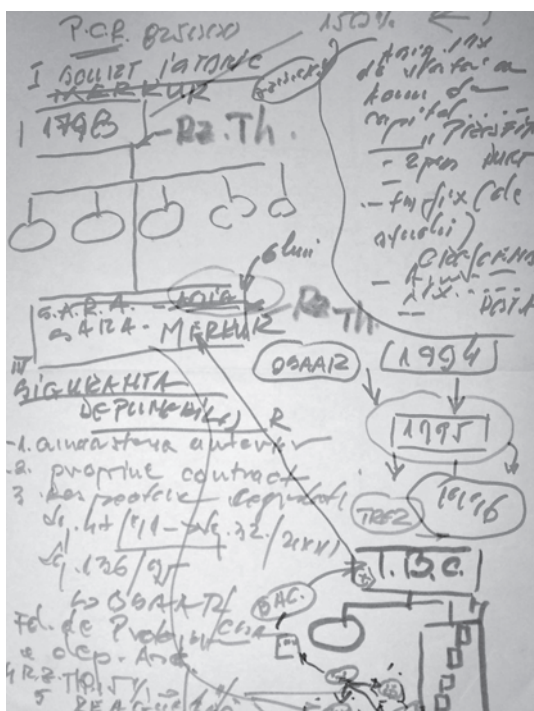


Image 4. A schematic representation of the entire business model implemented by TWQ. Realized towards the end of the sales meeting and produced on the spot, this new artifact comes to reinforce a similar presentation made in the beginning of the discussion, and thus to facilitate trust in the overall procedure and also to present a convincing argument to those targeted to become brokers themselves after buying life insurance.

It is not only the mathematics behind such graphic representations that matter – which for many of the clients seems difficult to reproduce, but the things they stand for, the whole deployment of arguments and examples, and the interactive construction of meaning in conversations (Moerman, 1988), during the sales sessions, that gives the value of such graphic artifacts, thus creating their power and agency. Returning to the starting point of this section, it can be said that, similar to each of the narratives, texts, objects or artifacts introduced during the sales sessions, the agency of the rhetoric of marginalization and exclusion, the way it can mediate clients' decisions, cannot be understood by itself but only within the broader ecology of actants upon which discussions are constructed. Rather, it is only within successive representations that mediate meaning and action that the agency of such rhetoric is constituted.

Rhetoric, registers of thought and persuasion

Although the analysis in the previous sections tends to emphasize the efficacy of various elements (rhetoric, graphic artifacts, the broader economy of motives drawn into discussions) constitutive of the representational economies (Keane, 2003) of sales sessions, these are not always so. Actually, as Petru told me, most of the people approached by the consultants would either reject the offer of insurance or cancel their policies after a few years influenced by the rhythmicity and continuous increase in insurance premiums. For the purposes of this paper, however, interested mainly in the ways rhetoric and various persuasive strategies mediate social action, a statistic argument is not the most relevant. Important is the concern with what determines people to accept the offers made by consultants beyond the strict rationalities of economic calculus. Equally interesting are the people's motivations to reject offers made by the consultants and the ways they communicate their decisions to them. Saying

no is, after all, not an easy thing in circles of friends, acquaintances, and relatives. Within a broader economy of social relations based on favors and more or less reciprocal exchange, refusing somebody is not simply non-action; it is rather a consequential form of social action that has to be enveloped in complex symbolic gestures, the play with social distance, and the pragmatic use of context.

One of the best ways to understand the intricacies of the interactions between consultants and their clients is to explore the cases and situations in which the „magic” veil spread by the brokers has been lifted. Such a situation is that Maria [pseudonym], a physician in Caracal, who has bought a life insurance policy for herself and has subsequently cancelled it. As the succession of payments was so rapid, coming „one after another, one after another”, she faced financial difficulties and found it no longer comfortable to cover ever increasing rates. Maria was terribly disappointed because she was reimbursed „less than the value of a [semi-annual] premium”, corresponding to the capitalization attached to her policy after three years of coverage, but she thinks she has made a good decision to cancel the policy. At the same time, letting Petru know about her decision, a close family friend and the one who convinced her to sign the policy, was not easy. Thus, Maria found it easier to tell Petru's wife, a chatting friend of her own, also involved, even if not as intensely as Petru, in the brokerage activity :

I told her [that I want to cancel the policy] because I felt closer to her... but I did not think about telling her until I heard her talking on the phone with another woman that wanted to cancel her policy. That made me tell her...

The example of another person and the spontaneous manipulation of the arguments presented by the other person made it easier for Maria to articulate her thoughts. Hiding her own agency behind the example of

the other woman, Maria was able to save face and to strategically „misrecognize” the exchange of arguments that could have otherwise be taken as a personal affront to her interlocutor (Petru’s wife).

When asked why she did buy insurance in the first place, Maria states bluntly: „because I was stupid, that’s why!” Later, she reinforces that:

So, I don’t know why I did it [buy the policy]... maybe I was stupid... maybe I didn’t know... And then, the fact that I knew him [Petru, the one who persuaded her] made it difficult for me to refuse.

Maria is not convinced she understood everything very well from the beginning: „I didn’t know too well... maybe he would have explained more if I knew how to understand”. She further tries to rationalize what happened in the past and claims that what made her buy insurance were not the rational arguments presented by Petru but rather the way he talked to her:

...he had not convinced me... he bewitched us [ne-a vrăjit], he made us dizzy, he talked us into buying that insurance...

„Bewitching”¹⁰ people to make them sign policies was a common strategy for Petru and many people are nowadays canceling their policies once they realize that, thinks Maria. As with other people, Maria thinks „he pretended to explain me honestly [about the policy]... I pretended to understand...”. In the end, she blames herself again: „I was stupid [proastă]... but not dumb stupid [nu proastă bătută-n cap]... I just didn’t know how to think...”. Maria tries to convey a

notion of stupidity as gullibility. It is not that she was not able to understand either the elements or calculus involved by an insurance policy or the *in abstracto* arguments about the advantages of being insured. Rather, she was gullible because she did not know how to judge this situation. In what was a pragmatic situation where a more „rational” register of thought would have been more useful – one used, for instance, in the market, for interested calculations, Maria applied a different register of thought. She did not find the power to escape the kind of thinking informing practices among friends and acquaintances and could not refuse the proposition made by Petru. Stupidity as gullibility does not equate with a low intellectual capacity. Rather, it has to do with a low „practical intelligence” and the inability to apply the right register of thought to specific circumstances.

The power Petru and other consultants establish over their clients is derived from their ability to manipulate their relationship, the context and the ongoing conversation so as to make it seem appropriate for the clients to apply a „moral” register of thought, one based on affect and the presumed intimacy of the interlocutors. It is by presenting the offer made by the consultant as an act of generosity initiated by a friend and as the possibility to do something good for the future of ones family and children, that Petru and his colleagues try to „make” (that is, force) their clients think in affective terms and accept the advice. Doing otherwise, the PCR people would challenge the „misrecognition” involved in any interested act.

Petru is able to describe succinctly the strategies involved in his activity. He tells about the gathering of information with regards to the potential client, about his

10. *A vrăji*, literally „to bewitch”, refers to a specific form of power that spoken words and, correspondingly, the ones iterating them have. The expression can be used metaphorically to refer to the oral performances of poets, politicians, or men courting young women. The term also has a pejorative connotation referring to somebody’s talk (verbiage) that seems empty of meaning and done just for the sake of it. By using this expression (*m-a vrăjit*), Maria was able to draw on both connotations of the word projecting a combined image of shrewdness and moral ambivalence on Petru, more efficient than any lengthier description.

family or economic situation. What works best, thinks Petru, is „hitting on a sensitive string”: „Dear friend, you might not want one [insurance policy] for yourself, but would you do it for your children?”. As people would come up with various motivations and objections to his arguments, the consultant has to insist on similar motives:

We approach him on the sensitive, sentimental side... And, of course, the sale goes mostly at a sentimental level rather than at a logical, rational level. Most sales in Romania are worked out at the level of affect [planul afectelor]... ”

Some people would bring rational objections to the arguments developed by brokers arguing that they do not have enough money, that the premiums are too expensive, or that the duration of the policy is too long. This is not difficult as the brokers themselves make use of a lot of calculus and economic jargon to illustrate the elements of the insurance policy. However, the successful and experienced broker would always try to redirect the discussion and the relevant registers of thought towards motives akin to affective domains even if this means getting out of the algorithm of sales sessions described earlier. As Petru confesses:

In the beginning I was acting according to the plan. But no, the sales discussion is not something rigid! Your have to adapt it! The main idea is to be positive and to redirect everything the client throws at you. You have to redirect everything one way or another... but not towards himself [the client]: „dear Sir, maybe I could try to explain this to you in a different way” then you provide many concrete examples from this area [insurance]... And then he will understand. But everything has to play out at the level of affects.

Such discursive practices illustrate very well the logic of private insurance business and, at a more general level, the logic of

late capitalism out of which MLM schemes emerge. As analysts of late capitalism have shown (Harvey, 1992; Appadurai, 1996), in its ceaseless search for niches of profit the capital reinvented itself towards the end of the twentieth century by becoming ever more flexible. One of the most successful capitalist business principles lately, illustrative of the regimes of flexible accumulation, has been the selling of global products tailored for each individual consumer to an increasing numbers of clients. The sales strategies analyzed by this paper illustrate well the practices through which post-socialist subjects are transformed into unconditional supporters of capitalism by coming to recognize themselves ever more into its products. That everything is done in the name of alleviating social and economic exclusion is all the more efficient and all the more ironic.

Concluding remarks

This paper is an attempt to understand and conceptualize the rhetoric of marginalization and loss performed by insurance brokers at sales sessions with clients or during discussions with the new brokers entering the networks of distribution. This rhetoric draws on senses of exclusion of those they target and tries to resignify some of their experiences or stories about friends and acquaintances in the process of suggesting life insurance and other financial products as the solution for many of their economic problems.

The paper draws on a semiotic approach. More specifically, I claim that the efficiency of such cleverly constructed discourses in producing meaning and informing action is premised on their ability to index many of the real and even harsh experiences of the people they target. It comes equally from the relations they stand in with the other objects and graphic artifacts used to construct the arguments, as well as with the present or absent persons whose coming into the collective of actants assembled during the sales sessions is either direct or facilitated

by the numerous stories told by the brokers. This suggests an alternative perspective on the understanding of social networks and some of the practices through which they are repurposed to facilitate broader processes of change in post-socialism. Following ANT, I argue for the simultaneous decentering of networks or actors as the main object of social analysis. I suggest, instead, a focus on the relational practices that produce actors and networks as two faces of social reality coming into being temporarily as loci for meaning and action, themselves produced by numerous chains of signification. Furthermore, as networks of distribution are always less stable than many would like to think (people buy insurance or cancel their policies, brokers work, stop working or move to a different company), I propose that one should focus on the zone of production itself, on the liminal spaces where clients are won or lost and on the fluidity of practices that generate both networks of distribution and profits for the company. It is at these loci in the wider networks that the articulations of „global assemblages” (Collier and Ong, 2005) of clients, brokers and insurance companies are generated.

Such an approach can shed light on the nitty-gritty details of wider processes through which existing social networks or loose relations of friendship and kinship can be repurposed for business, illustrating the versatility and malleability of practices and forms consecrated in late capitalism in the search for newer niches for profit. While promising to substitute the state run systems and the role of public budgets in dealing with economic exclusion, attempts to run the system of social protection entirely on business principles are often productive of further inequalities, fragmentation and exclusion (Smith, 2005). Private insurance is not a universal option and tends to favor categories of people already possessing a certain economic capital and endowed with social potential. At the same time, it favors an economic and, more specifically, financial

reading of marginalization ignoring other dimensions of social life (cultural, work related, the realm of daily interactions).

Last but not of lesser importance, insurance and the various investment opportunities advertised by my informants offer a solution in the future indexing senses of marginalization that are felt acutely at present by broad categories of people. While trading present financial resources for the expectation of future affluence is symptomatic of the temporal displacements facilitated by acts of social imagination that capitalism manipulates as part of its alchemy of profit (Appadurai, 1996), one realizes that they are at best partial solutions for phenomena of economic impoverishment manifest at present. By all means, the rhetoric of marginalization analyzed in this paper supports action that can only constitute a limited response to a much broader set of social symptoms in spite of its pretensions of generality. At the same time, the rhetoric discussed here plays a very important role in the overall economy of argument used by insurance brokers to promote their business. After all, one can say that Mr. Pavel Puiutz, the movie character introduced at the beginning of this paper, understood very well what separates good business from useless verbiage :

Have you ever been interested in the mechanism of charity? It's a fascinating field. What is the secret trigger that controls compassion? I'll tell you: a story. An out-stretched hand without a story to tell gets no charity¹¹!

Even the beggars have to be able to articulate their own misfortunes in order to get something.

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