

# **Bobbles and values: An ethnography of de-bobbling garments in postsocialist urban Romania**

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## **Abstract**

Based on research on clothing consumption in a provincial Romanian town, this article focuses on bobbling (pilling) and on reflections on its appearances and progression. Bobbling is considered an index of a faulty or decaying materiality, and an index of usage and, possibly, carelessness and hardship. It limits an individual's ability to project a desired self. It hints at an individual's inability to present a renewed self. It not only disrupts a common process of value creation through the act of dressing, but also exposes a disputed process of value creation through the consumption of certain objects. It foregrounds a predisposition to equate the value of objects with the value of people. It affects a sense of self-worth. The author demonstrates that a preoccupation with bobbling reflects deeper concerns and frequent deliberations over value in postsocialist Romania.

## **Keywords**

Bobbles, clothes, Eastern Europe, postsocialism, Romania, self, value

Clothes are fragile material forms. Their susceptibility to decay is inherent in their materials and related to their construction, their proximity to the body, absorption of dirt from within and without, and the uses to which they are put in everyday life. The propensity to decay might be purposely enhanced during their manufacture, as part of what Packard (1960) calls 'planned obsolescence'. More than any other industry, fashion has embraced obsolescence as its primary goal. Fast fashion has just raised the stakes: not only styles, but also clothes have life spans shorter than ever before; fast fashion clothes follow the

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trends, but are poorly made from low quality materials, with limited options for repair. The decay of clothes takes many forms: fibres age, yarn structures disintegrate, weaves break down, threads unravel, seams come out, hems fray, colours fade and shapes become loose; fabrics get worn, bobbed, stained, stretched, punctured and ripped.

This article focuses on a certain type of material decay – bobbling (pilling). This is manifested in the formation of small balls of fibre on the surface of clothes from the damaged fibres that were separated through friction and abrasion in wearing and washing from the fabric. These balls hang on protruding fibres which have not broken yet, and, therefore, give a rough appearance to the surface of the fabric (Beltran et al., 2006; Chen and Huang, 2004; Xu, 1997).

Unexpectedly, bobbling was often mentioned in my conversations about clothing consumption in a provincial Romanian town (this research, part of a larger doctoral project, was carried out between October 2005 and May 2006; it was conducted primarily with people of low middle class status and, in smaller numbers, with people of working class and middle class status). Bobbling affected clothes, that is, objects which, through their very materiality and how they felt and looked on the body, played an important role in the constitution of the self and the development of a sense of self-worth (Küchler and Miller, 2005). In passionate discussions or outbursts of anger, my interlocutors complained that their garments bobbed quickly, quicker than they expected. They explained why they invested in the maintenance of the surfaces of their garments. They stressed that bobbed garments could not be worn in public. They recounted how they tried to evaluate the propensity of the fabrics for bobbling. They claimed that bobbling was different from other forms of degradation and de-bobbling was distinct from other practices of mending and maintaining garments. They pointed out that at some point the tide inevitably turned, hope faded away, and they gave up the fight against bobbles and removed badly affected garments from the active wardrobe.

For these people, bobbling was an index of a faulty or decaying materiality. It pointed at the shifting materiality of value. It was an index of usage and, possibly, carelessness and hardship. It limited an individual's ability to project a desired self. It hinted at an individual's inability to present a renewed self. Bobbling not only disrupted a common process of value creation through the act of dressing, but also exposed a disputed process of value creation through the consumption of certain objects. It foregrounded a predisposition to equate the value of objects with the value of people. It nurtured a suspicion that the low value of objects was translated as the low value of people. It affected a sense of self-worth. In brief, their reactions and reflections showed that bobbling provoked intense deliberations over value.

I use value to refer to the evaluative terms in which individuals judge the worth and significance of objects and persons, and discuss how these reflect on one another. I take into consideration the colloquial slippage between value and values: in everyday life people use a single term, namely value, to refer to the monetary worth of an object as well as the values they hold dear in relation to individuals, family, community, morality or religion (Miller, 2008). Moreover, I take into account the way in which this colloquial slippage is reflected upon in a postsocialist context: many people living in postsocialist societies share a concern that value is increasingly reduced to monetary worth (Mandel and Humphrey, 2002).

Verdery (2003: 20) notes that value is a central theme in postsocialism. Theoretically, this centrality is predictable: if value, as many of its theoreticians emphasise (Graeber, 2001; Munn, 1986; Thomas, 1991), is a function of context, then alterations in context necessarily impact on value. Ethnographies of postsocialist societies extensively document processes of value creation and transformation engendered by the collapse of socialism and the opportunity and urgency thus created to conceptualise value in new ways. In Verdery's (2003) ethnography, she demonstrates, through a detailed exploration of processes of decollectivisation, privatisation and property restitution in rural Romania, how value is acquired, enlarged, reconstituted, destroyed and lost. Patico (2008), to give another example, focuses on how urban Russians reflect upon the changing relationship between individual merit and social status, and their materialisations in objects and wealth, and on how they accommodate themselves with the new conceptualisation of value that is being forged in the postsocialist period. This article contributes to this body of work on postsocialism: the bitter reflections and outbursts of anger it narrates indicate that bobbling points at ambivalent, if not failed, value.

To define this type of value, I build on Verdery's (2003: 21) observation that 'the creation and definition of value is a process, often highly political.' I use the term 'ambivalent, if not failed, value' to capture a turning point in this process, more specifically in the evaluation of objects and persons and of their potential to impact on both the perception of value as immaterial and the understanding of value as inherent, and material. In this case, the appearance and progression of bobbling unites these two perspectives on value.

How can this kind of value be framed theoretically? Anthropology offers different theories of value, and those that emphasise that value emerges in action are perhaps the most intellectually stimulating theories (e.g. Graeber, 2001; Lambek, 2013; Munn, 1986). In their effort to lead to more universal approaches, these theories develop ambitious – and, occasionally, ambiguous – claims about what value is (see also Otto and Willerslev, 2013a, 2013b, for a critical discussion of levels of abstraction in anthropological theories of value and Miller, 2008, for a discussion of what value does, as opposed to what value is). However, their abstractness is of little help in the very material case of bobbling.

A more fruitful way to illuminate this type of value is to compare these bobbling clothes with the 'vanishing hectares' from Verdery's (2003) analysis of land restitution in a Romanian region after the collapse of socialism. In the early 1990s, villagers perceived the ownership of land as a guarantee of prosperity and individual and social fulfilment. Years later, after being unable to gather the necessary material and financial resources and after failing in their cultivation plans, these villagers were less inclined to regard land as a store of value in financial as well as social senses. Hectares thus began to 'vanish' – a verb Verdery employs not only to refer to the diminution of people's allotments or the false entries recorded on property deeds, but also to suggest the way in which land becomes a reduced site of personhood and economic value and a dwindled ground for the experience of locality. Verdery's account demonstrates the material tensions that lie at the heart of conceptions of value. Land begins to index an ambivalent, if not failed, value. The bobbling of garments prompts similar reflections upon understanding value as a project of making, rather than simply as inherently material or immaterial. Clothes are essential resources in particular value projects, in which individuals construct and evaluate their

own worth in theirs as well as in others' eyes. Transformation in their materiality impacts on these value projects. The bobbling garments expose the transformation of value in a quicker way than Verdery's 'vanishing hectares'. People try to de-bobble their garments, prolong their public life and construct their public selves. Ambivalent value crystallises in these moments. Then de-bobbling is no longer possible and the bobbed clothes must be discarded, developing a sense of failed or evacuated value.

This article also argues that bobbles can be placed in the anthropological record next to other ephemeral material forms that are 'out of place', but whose very position confers them with social and cultural significance. Dirt, for example, is, according to Mary Douglas (1966), 'matter out of place'; a focus on dirt, that is, on the inappropriate elements rejected from the system, permits an understanding of the principles that order a world. Dust, to give another example, is, according to Bataille (1995), a changing material form that exposes the flexibility in the supposedly fixed forms and ideals of architecture. To give a final example, substances that erupt from the body and detach from it, such as nails and hair, are discussed by Turner (2012[1980]) as powerful sites for the elaboration of the 'social skin'. This is the boundary between the self and the other, and the individual and the society. Bobbles too, for reasons that this article presents, have their significance.

## **Bobbles and clothes**

As bobbles are a somewhat normal occurrence in their life cycle, it was no surprise that they were mentioned in conversations about clothes, and their acquisition and consumption. However, the frequency with which they were mentioned, the passion that people put in their comments and the way in which they set bobbling apart from other forms of decay were rather surprising. The following ethnographic vignettes are illustrative of the range of comments about bobbling and bobbles that I came across and of the range of observations of reactions to bobbling that I made during my research (the names of my interlocutors have been changed in order to protect their identity). The vignettes are grouped around a particular idea about bobbling that they mostly illustrate. At the same time, each group contains more ideas which are fully articulated in a different group of vignettes.

Bobbling appeared during fieldwork as an issue of concern when shopping for clothes, as the following vignettes demonstrate. On one occasion, for example, I accompanied an informant to a second-hand clothes shop and tried to help her select 'good clothes' (by which she meant items of reasonable quality, without evident wear and not too outdated). Corina (a woman of working class status, in her early 40s, a high school graduate, unemployed at that moment) moved slowly around the shop and searched the shelves and racks. She relied on her skills at evaluating fabrics, although sometimes she could find worn-out fabric composition labels. She remarked more for herself than for me: 'we complain that clothes at our market rarely have such labels and the foreigners remove them!' I showed her what I had selected. I particularly liked a green woolly jumper. Corina looked at it for a second and rejected it: 'nice, but it is already bobbed.' I checked the jumper again and spotted only a few balls of thread. She shook her head again: 'three or four washes and there will be more bobbles. I can pick them off for a while, but then

there will be too many bobbles and I will not be able to wear it at work anymore.’ She explained to me that this was the reason the jumper was discarded in the first place. Many faults could be mended, but there was nothing to do against bobbling. For a long time, she had thought like me: she saw a few balls here and there, thought the problem was manageable and bought it. In many cases, this had proved to be a wrong decision and she ended up trying to remove bobbles from these garments. She eventually learnt to be more careful when selecting items that would be worn at school and work. She thought that bobbed garments would be interpreted as signs of carelessness and, even worse, poverty; therefore, she tried hard to police their presence in the active wardrobe. The shopkeepers usually put aside the tatty garments. She sometimes checked those piles too, as in some cases things could be mended or transformed. On this occasion, she bought a cotton table cloth with holes in it and planned to turn it into two pillow cases; she also found a long woolly jumper and planned to unravel it and knit a pair of gloves and a scarf. However, she disregarded bobbed garments. She and her family already had enough old clothes to use at home or when working in their countryside household, they did not need to add to that someone else’s bobbed clothes. What they needed were ‘good clothes’ in which to dress themselves decently for school and work and, in other words, present themselves as proper persons. I asked her if she could predict which fabrics would go bobble. She shook her head again: ‘This is really hard. These are second-hand clothes, so I check for signs around the armpits and elbows. It is even more disturbing when new clothes go bobble quickly.’

Ramona would agree with Corina. Upon hearing from her work colleagues about the new arrivals in a particular clothing shop, Ramona (a woman of low middle class status, in her late 20s, a university graduate, office clerk in a local bank) decided to see them for herself and invited me to keep her company. I was in her kitchen, waiting for her to get ready when her mother came, refilled my cup of coffee and abruptly declared: ‘this part with the bobbling is rubbish: you pay a good amount of money on your clothes and then you have to shave them!’ I must have looked puzzled, for the woman added: ‘My daughter tells me that you do research. You should know that our clothes go bobble after a few washes.’ Then she excused herself and returned to whatever she was doing on the balcony. That morning, while we were visiting clothing shops on the high street, I cautiously asked Ramona why her mother, whom I had just met for the first time, spoke of nothing but bobbling. She laughed: ‘my mother declared war on bobbles.’ Ramona’s maternal grandmother had died young so her mother had to take care of her siblings and father. Then she married and had her own children. This also meant that from an early age, she had been responsible for cleaning and maintaining many clothes, and dressing properly, even smartly, many children and adults. She had even bought her own sewing machine and used it for small repairs that did not require professional skills. In the last years, Ramona’s mother had begun to complain that bobbles were developing on their clothes more quickly than she was used to and, consequently, she had to put more effort into keeping them appearing smooth. I asked her if she shared her mother’s opinion. Ramona responded in the affirmative. Much to her annoyance, she also found it hard to predict which fabrics would bobble. She knew from her mother that wool was a material predisposed to bobbling, but the clothes she could afford were made with mixed blends or entirely man-made fibres, so this knowledge was not very useful. Information about the

real composition of these clothes rarely existed, so it was hard to draw upon previous experience and decide that this or that type of fabric would go bobbly more quickly. The garments she bought looked and felt good enough in quality, but many bobbled. She saw her mother picking bobbles off their garments and getting angry at bobbles, clothes, the people who made these clothes, the people who bought them and the people who wore them. Ramona thought her mother was right: it was one thing when clothes got torn and stained and another thing when they began to bobble. I asked her to better explain her mother's conclusion. Ramona emphasised that in the first case they could decide immediately what to do with that particular piece. In the second case, they could do nothing but continue wearing and washing these garments, fighting and ultimately losing the battle against the bobbles.

Bobbling was an issue of concern also when an individual wardrobe was evaluated by its owner. Bianca (a woman of low middle class status, in her late 20s, a university graduate, assistant manager in a local company), for example, recounted to me that the size of her wardrobe had increased considerably in the last two years. After finishing her undergraduate studies in the capital city, she returned to her home town, got married and moved in with her parents-in-law. She had always wanted to dress herself in 'beautiful things' and to have a big wardrobe. During her childhood, clothes had never been truly her own: her elder siblings wore them first and then they were passed down to her. Now she had invented her own 'game' for augmenting her collection. The main rule was to treat herself with something on payday. She got into the habit of visiting the shops and making a wish list with pieces she liked and considered to be 'a little bit of quality'. She spent the month fantasising about the 'beautiful outfits' she could assemble from these new things and her own clothes and about the occasions on which she could wear them. However, by payday, only some items were still desirable and only a few of these could be acquired within her budget. Bianca situated herself 'in the middle': 'I dress myself neither from malls nor from the €1 shop.' She and her husband, who shared her passion for clothes, were pleased with what they could find on the local market. As she put it, 'we have not got, I and my husband, anything extraordinary, rather things of a little bit of quality.'

She confidently declared that she was in fashion. Her wardrobe contained many colourful tops, blouses, sweaters, cardigans and scarves, along with black skirts, trousers and jackets, the colour that she thought best suited her plump body. Bianca spoke at great length about the various ways in which she combined these clothes, the social events where she wore these outfits and the compliments she received from her family and friends for her taste in clothes. She also pointed out that both her mother and mother-in-law sometimes criticised her for cramming her wardrobe with things that she only wore a few times. For her, clothes became redundant when they were no longer fashionable, whereas for them, garments became redundant when they were no longer usable. Her mother advised her to buy durable garments manufactured in Romania, no matter how beautiful the imports were. Other family members remarked that the clothes available on the local market – most of them originating in China and Turkey – lose their beauty quickly, tight-fitting turning into loose-fitting, thick fabric becoming threadbare or smooth surfaces going bobbly. Bianca found such comments curious, as those voicing them actually wore the clothes they said they would rather not buy. Her mother-in-law

urged her to buy branded garments. She reasoned that, if they really liked to dress smartly so much and had money to spend on clothes, they should opt for a few good quality garments from the malls in Bucharest instead of many not-so-good quality clothes from the local shops. Other relatives and friends also believed that branding guaranteed quality. Bianca did not accept this. Her classmates made an effort to clothe themselves from the malls, but also endlessly complained about the bobbles, weak seams and falling buttons of their branded garments.

These disagreements aside, Bianca was content. She could dress to her heart's desire. The pleasure of owning 'beautiful things' was matched by the pleasure she took in cleaning and maintaining her and her husband's garments. Her mother-in-law dealt with the bed linen, towels and other home textiles and helped with mending holes and hems, hand-washing delicate pieces and removing stubborn stains. They had a good washing machine and took care to buy good laundry detergents and fabric conditioners. Bianca confessed, her voice turning into a whisper, that her secret duty was to deal with the bobbles, for their presence could spoil efforts to impress her friends and acquaintances through her stylish outfits. She tried to evaluate materiality more carefully, but still could not resist buying some flimsy yet fashionable clothes in gorgeous colours. She would have washed many of these clothes by hand, but feared the reproaches. To prevent the development of bobbles, she washed everything inside out and doubled the recommended quantity of fabric conditioner. Whenever she was alone at home, she brushed, cut or picked bobbles off their garments. She also bought a bobble remover but never showed it to her mother or mother-in-law. She did not dare to simply throw away the badly affected clothes, the ones disgracefully bobbed all over that she would be ashamed to wear in public. She feared that someone would ask what had happened to those cherished garments. She could use some of these garments at home or donate them to their relatives in the countryside – the usual modes of domestic recycling. However, she thought it was better to hide damaged pieces at the back of her wardrobe and thus avoid unnecessary discussions.

Liviu (a man of low middle class status, in his late 20s, a university graduate, working as a teacher in a secondary school), to give another example, spoke at great length about the pleasure of dressing well, the difficulties of building up a reliable set of clothes and the challenges of keeping the wardrobe. When he moved out of his parents' house three years ago, he took only a part of his wardrobe with him and left behind everything that was old and outdated. Nothing was actually tatty, frayed, torn and stained, for his mother took good care of her children and periodically removed unusable garments from the wardrobe. Liviu realised how small the content of his wardrobe actually was. He was pleased with what he had, but felt that it was not enough. He got by on a modest salary and on the little extra he occasionally made from renting his old car and transporting petty traders to week-end markets around the district. Therefore, he had to accept that many garments he fancied were beyond his budget and that he often had to compromise and go for cheaper items. Nevertheless, he strived to put together a wardrobe that allowed him to be at least smartly dressed, if not in fashion.

When we went through his wardrobe together, Liviu selected some of his favourite items and recounted the stories of their purchase. He found his 'beautiful brick-red velvet blazer', for example, in a tiny shop. His girlfriend did not even notice the shop, but he

insisted that every place should be given a chance. He bought his 'gorgeous checked pale blue shirt' from a market stand, and even impressed the seller with his knowledge of fabrics. He discovered his 'good-looking tracksuit' in the shop of a friend who had just opened that business and even got a discount for spreading the news and convincing other friends to buy from that shop.

His weekly routine included at least one visit to clothing shops on the high street, to see if there were any new arrivals and to enjoy trying on garments and shoes. He admitted he often annoyed the shop assistants with questions about quality and trends and with his attempts to ascertain information about the fabrics through touch. His mother had taught him to pay attention to the smell of wool, the roughness of good cotton, the smoothness of polyester or the denseness of proper suiting. Sometimes he went to the capital city, in search not so much of cheaper products since buying on credit on the local market was a better strategy for him, but in search of garments that suited his own taste rather than that of the shopkeepers in his town. Every now and then he bought 'good enough rejects' and 'stolen stuff' from a friend who worked in a local clothing factory. If opportunities presented themselves, he snatched up affordable stylish pieces and deposited them in the wardrobe until he found other items that matched them to create 'perfect combinations'.

Moreover, this weekly routine included doing his laundry, brushing jackets and coats, and cleaning his shoes and work bag. A teacher had to be a model for his pupils in many respects, neatness in appearance being among them. When he moved from his parents' house to live on his own, Liviu bought a high-end washing machine. He had constantly invested in a wide range of cleaning products, from separate detergents for white, black and coloured clothes to fabric conditioners and, because he was a bit clumsy and spilled various liquids on clothes and home textiles, stain removers. When he thought an item called for hand-washing, he asked his mother to do this for him. Liviu stressed that all these precautions helped him prolong the life of his garments. He also pointed out that he often talked to his mother about the propensity for degradation of the garments available at their market, something she still had not got used to, and that he tried hard to prevent through various shopping, cleaning and maintaining strategies.

On one occasion, just after I had listened to yet another tale of domestic order and fresh-smelling laundry hanging on the balcony, I reminded Liviu that he had mentioned but not really elaborated on the difficulties of maintaining his wardrobe. Without hesitation, Liviu named bobbling as the most irritating problem. He could never be sure when and why bobbles would begin to develop. He disliked brushing bobbles off his garments or, even worse, using Sellotape to remove them, but had to include these practices in his routine. His mother did the same. He confessed that he had gone through a minor crisis before we met: while putting on his cardigan, he noticed the much-hated bobbles. 'Exactly three balls of thread clung to a sleeve', he emphasised. This cardigan, like most of his garments, did not have a fabric care label, so he had to decide for himself the appropriate washing programme. He had washed it twice so far on a short cycle, but it seemed that the cardigan called for hand-washing and, thus, his mother's assistance in keeping it in his wardrobe for as long as possible.

As the previous vignettes also suggest, the 'bobbed look', to use an informant's expression, was considered a socially unacceptable form of self-presentation. To give



another example, a friend tried to help me with my research and introduced me to a relatively well-to-do neighbour of hers known for his passion for clothes. She pleaded with him: 'talk to her, otherwise she will do her interviews only with people like us, who dress in bobbled clothes.' This conversation took place on the steps in front of her flat. The woman wore shapeless bobbled clothes indoors that I never saw her wearing outside her home. I asked Adriana (a woman of low middle class status, in her early 40s, a vocational school graduate, office clerk in a local bank), what she meant by this, and she explained:

Poor people wear bobbled clothes. Or those who have lost interest in themselves and put on whatever. I make an effort to dress relatively well. People laugh at you or treat you badly if you don't pay attention. Nicu never wears bobbled clothes. Not even at home! He buys better clothes than most of us can afford. If his clothes do go bobbly, he won't wear them anymore. He will give them to the downstairs neighbour.

I insisted: 'Does this neighbour wear bobbled clothes outside his home?' Adriana replied: 'Yes, sometimes he does. He is a poor old man living on a small retirement wage. Nicu's bobbled clothes are better than his tatty garments anyway.' I went on: 'And people won't laugh at him, will they?' Adriana rolled her eyes in exasperation: 'I don't know. Maybe they do. Maybe our neighbour doesn't care', she concluded.

Another discussion I overheard on a bus revealed a similar line of reasoning about what could be worn in public. Two women talked about their household chores. One woman said she had to clean the bathroom floor every couple of days. Bobbles kept gathering around the laundry basket and washing machine. The other woman reported a similar problem. Everyone in her family dressed and undressed in more or less the same place. In those areas, the carpets were covered in bobbles, so she worked harder to vacuum them. Her companion advised her: 'Buy wool with acrylic, so it won't bobble quickly.' She replied: 'Here you are wrong. Mixed fabrics bobble immediately. We even have shirts, T-shirts and bed sheets covered in bobbles. Cotton mixed with plastic. Don't tell me only your wool jumpers bobble!' Her companion shrugged her shoulders, seeming to grow tired of the topic, but she went on. 'I can pick bobbles off a jumper, but not a T-shirt. My boys cannot wear bobbled T-shirts. Children will laugh at them. Even if they don't, bobbles make you feel bad.' Her companion concluded: 'Yes, we dress well, but in garments whose quality leaves much to be desired.' The other woman agreed: 'Yes, we strut around in our clothes and at home we pick the bobbles off them.'

The other side of this story, that is, people laughing at the 'bobbed look', was brought to my attention on a different occasion. One informant took pleasure in pointing out that bobbles had begun to form on the clothes of her acquaintances. Cristiana (a woman of low middle class status, in her mid-30s, a vocational school graduate, working as a beautician) envied women who managed to buy new clothes quite often. She knew that her wardrobe was rather lacking and that she was not exactly fashionable either. She spent most of her time in her beauty parlour, wearing old items underneath her white overall. Some of these clothes were bobbled, but the neat overall hid their shabby appearance. However, she was convinced that her bobbled clothes were no more prone to bobbling than the fashionable garments she could not afford. She believed that these garments had either a high percentage of man-made fibres or were entirely made in artificial fibres.

She insisted that these were more prone to bobbling than natural fibres, and that it was harder to remove bobbles from artificial fabrics than natural ones. Cristiana also knew that she could annoy other women by telling them that their new clothes were getting bobbed. She told me that she particularly liked to cause stress to one customer:

Do you remember the policeman's wife, the one who buys new clothes every month? A week ago I just happened to notice the bobbles on her top. Yesterday I did the same. I bet she brushes her clothes and checks them three times before she comes to visit me.

This vignette too demonstrates that in this provincial town a clean and well-maintained appearance is the social norm and that wearing bobbed garments contravened this norm. In addition, this vignette points out that the social ideal is a fashionable appearance. I was often told that people in this town put great store on clothes. Sometimes this local preoccupation was reported with pride, often through the idiom 'we might be poor, but we are also proud' (*sărăci, dar fudui*). At other times, this preoccupation was criticised, often by the same people. Other idioms were used to convey this disapproval: 'better to not have anything to put on the table than to not have anything to put on' (*mai bine să nu aibă ce pune pe masă decât să nu aibă ce pune pe ei*) and *sărăcie cu luciu*. The latter phrase is a pun, coming from *sărăcie lucie*, a Romanian equivalent for dire poverty. The adjective *lucie*, which translates as 'lustrous', connotes both a lack of possessions and cleanliness. The expression *sărăcie lucie* is used to describe dignified poverty, and can be transformed into *sărăcie cu luciu*, which translates as 'poverty with lustre'. The second expression is used to express disapproval of acts of consumption that are perceived as inappropriate for the relatively poor. In this context, 'lustre' stands for extravagance and excess. What was considered appropriate to spend on the self was a matter of debate; however, amounts were rarely mentioned in such conversations, instead the focus was on how often one should buy something new for oneself. Another matter of debate was whether or not one should buy clothes from the local market for new clothes, which was supplied mainly with products manufactured in China and Turkey. I often heard people saying, 'I would rather pay more for one thing of quality than buy ten fashionable T-shirts that last a month' or, in a different version, 'we are too poor to buy things of low quality'. In practice, many of the people I encountered during my fieldwork bought their clothes from the local market, mainly because they could pay in instalments, and only occasionally shopped for clothes in other places. Branded garments, largely out of touch for most of my interlocutors, were a complementary but less debated topic, with various individuals debating whether or not they were quality objects and whether or not they were status objects that 'made the man more of a man', to quote one of my interlocutors (see also Crăciun, 2014).

Bobbling impacted negatively upon efforts to approach the social ideal of a fashionable appearance. Bobbling – and rapid bobbling even more so – was thought to indicate the low quality of the new affordable garments on the local market. For instance, one person admired my cardigan and asked me where I had bought it. I told her I had been wearing it for some good years and did not remember where I bought it. The woman exclaimed: 'oh, and it has not bobbed yet! Mine go all bobbly so quickly. If I can wear them one year at the office I feel lucky.' On a different occasion, someone else admired

the jogging suit my companion wore. The man replied modestly that he had bought it from a second-hand shop. The admirer was not surprised: 'yes, foreigners have quality clothes. We buy what they don't like anymore and can wear them for many years. Look at your jogging suit. There are no bobbles on it.' While reminiscing about her youth, for my benefit, Maria (a woman of working class status, in her early 60s, a high school graduate, retired laboratory assistant) recounted how impressed she was with the clothes of the Japanese engineers who had come to town in the 1970s, when the chemical plant where she later found work was built. 'They wore cotton T-shirts and trousers and put on trench coats when the weather was colder. Their clothes were really beautiful, far more beautiful than those our engineers wore. We had not seen anything like this before.' Curious, I wanted to know what the Romanians wore at that time. She almost screamed: 'The Romanians! Poor them! They wore Tergal [i.e. a type of polyester fabric] and plastic. At least Tergal did not bobble. Today the clothes in which Romanians dress go bobbly immediately.' Then she paused, drank her coffee and moved on to another topic. Dana (a woman of low middle class status, in her late 20s, a high school graduate, filing clerk in a local bank), asked me if I remembered the beautiful top she bought when we shopped together and then informed me that it had begun to bobble. Her initial plan had been to replace it with an identical top. She could wear it the next autumn for a couple of months, before it went bobbly. However, her mother convinced her not to do such a foolish thing and promised to help her remove the bobbles from her beloved top for as long as possible. Dana was also learning that her mother had regularly been taking this measure with her clothes – the things she could afford were going bobbly sooner than she realised. An acquaintance (a woman of low middle class status, in her early 30s, a high school graduate, desk clerk in a local company), excused herself for not being able to spend the whole afternoon with her friends. She needed to go home and do some hand washing. Many of her clothes were too fragile to be machine washed. She explained: 'I have all these tops, dresses and jerseys. They can go bobbly if I wash them in the washing machine, no matter how short the programme.' A friend advised her to use fabric conditioner. 'I tried, but the best solution is to wash them myself. I cannot afford to buy new clothes often', she replied.

Bobbling is a form of material decay that might be related to the quality of materials, but whose development might also be caused by (too much) wearing and (too much) washing. These people usually complained about the rapid development of bobbles on their clothes. Thus, they indirectly eliminated the idea of overuse from their explanations about what caused the bobbling of fabrics. In addition, they often pointed out that they had to hand-wash many of the clothes they bought at the local market. In spite of investing in good washing machines, laundry detergents and fabric conditioners, the fragility of many of these clothes, especially the propensity for shapes to become loose, colours to fade and fabrics to bobble, forced these people to handle them with more care. Hand-washing was seen as an efficient solution for preventing such damage. Kelley (2009: 226) observes that, although closely associated, cleaning and maintaining clothes are processes that operate differently, even contradicting each other, in the sense that the process of removing dirt also gradually disrupts the fabrics. I do not have systematic data about laundry-related routines (Shove, 2003) and the particular histories of garments in use and wear – the types of fabrics that required hand-washing, cleaning products, washing programme

preferences, or frequency and methods of washing – and, therefore, I cannot evaluate the role that these routines played in the development or prevention of this form of material decay in general. However, the people I encountered in this town did not relate bobbling directly to washing, but to the faulty material properties of garments.

Neither did they directly link the bobbling with laundry habits. On a few occasions, I witnessed debates between mothers and their young or adult children about how often certain items should be washed (the ‘sniff test’ aside) and which washing programmes should be used for particular items and types of fabrics and garments. I listened to children concluding that their mothers washed clothes at higher-than-recommended temperatures and reasoning that they did so because they were still not used to the contemporary range of cleaning products and technologies, and that they still believed that boiling was the best way to disinfect clothes and that hand-washing was the best way to clean ‘delicate’ and woollen items (see also Drazin, 2011). I listened to mothers who disagreed about temperatures and their lack of knowledge about materials and technologies. They pointed out that there were no fabric care labels on particular items, that fabric composition labels were misleading, that they were not sure which programme to use and could not find the washing machine booklet, or that they forgot to put on their glasses while selecting the programmes. I heard mothers scolding their children for not properly washing their clothes, and children accusing their mothers of washing them too often. To these, I can add my own discussions with my mother in which, for example, I would suggest 30 degrees as the right temperature to wash my jeans, while she opted for 50 degrees. I also heard young people asking for advice on which garments to hand-wash and sometimes complaining that according to the advice they would have to wash half their wardrobes by hand, which would mean half of their free time would be spent in the bathroom doing the laundry (see also Kaufmann, 1998; Shove, 2003).

However, bobbling was never mentioned in these discussions about techniques of care; it was agreed that bobbling demonstrated the low quality of the garments themselves. Many of the people I encountered in this town deplored the fact that the new clothes they could afford were manufactured mainly in Turkey and China. They disparaged these objects as inferior in quality and durability and called them ‘rags’, ‘disposables’, ‘rubbish’ and ‘plastics’. These commentaries tended to imply a wider moral argument that applied to all these goods simply because they were found in a semi-legal commercial area on the outskirts of Bucharest, an enormous space that included rusty booths and hangar-like buildings that accommodated petty traders from China and Turkey, a false façade occupying a place where a Western reality was expected (Crăciun, 2009).

Bobbling is a somewhat normal appearance in the life cycle of clothes. However, as these vignettes have demonstrated, people from this provincial Romanian town reacted vigorously to the development of bobbles on their clothes and set bobbling apart from other forms of material decay that affected their garments. The concluding section of this article elaborates on the relation between bobbles and values.

## **Bobbles and values**

Bobbles are small balls of damaged fibres. They are formed from fibres that were separated from the fabric through friction and abrasion in wearing and washing. They cling

onto the surface of fabrics and give them a rough appearance. This article offers a local interpretation of bobbling. For the inhabitants of a provincial Romanian town, bobbling is a *peculiar* index of decaying materiality. These people consider bobbling to be different from other forms of material degradation of garments. In many other cases of material decaying, people know what to do and the results of their actions are predictable. To give some examples, they mend a hole, cut or cover a frayed edge, clean a stained fabric or throw away a torn fabric. In contrast, bobbling gives people false hope and then lets them down. These people know what to do, but the results of their actions are not predictable. They employ various tools and techniques for the maintenance of surfaces, from the manual removal of bobbles to the use of razors, sticky rollers and specially designed bobble removers. They believe that their knowledge of fabrics and of their predisposition to bobble would permit them to deal with this form of decay, but this never seems to be entirely the case. The disagreements among my interlocutors about which fabrics bobble more frequently or quickly reflect not only differences in experience, but also the fact that bobbling affects most of the types of fabrics from which their garments are made. These people hope they can prolong the public life of their garments and work to remove bobbles from their garments. Nevertheless, bobbles keep multiplying in spite of their efforts to pick, brush and cut them off. There comes a time when there is nothing they can do to prevent the disgraceful appearance their garments take on. Bobbled garments are eliminated from their active wardrobe, relegated to the categories of indoor clothes or outdoor working clothes, recycled or simply thrown away.

Bobbling is also considered a *clear* index of faulty materiality. These people relate the appearance of bobbles to the low quality of fabrics. They especially believe that the new clothes they can afford are of low quality and that is why they bobble quickly. This belief causes anxiety in a context in which the social norm is a maintained appearance. Dressing is a privileged outward self-extending act for the inhabitants of this provincial Romanian town. However, the clothes they use in the public presentation of their selves ought to be clean and well-maintained. This is a social norm to which they try to conform in everyday life and which translates into the repetitive work of cleanliness and various strategies of maintenance. The appearance of bobbles and the stubborn way in which they cling to fabrics limit people's ability to conform to this norm. Moreover, bobbling causes anxiety in a context in which the social ideal is a fashionable appearance. Fashion insists on 'pure contemporaneity'. As such, it renders the people who do not wear fashionable clothes 'out of date' and parochial (Comaroff, 1996: 21). The informants of this ethnography are well aware of this. They know they must renew the material forms through which they constitute themselves. They acknowledge that fashionable yet bobbled clothes undermine projects of value creation.

These attributes of garments, that is, their fashionability and the propensity of their fabrics to bobble, come together in unexpected ways. Discussions about bobbled clothes bring to the foreground the way in which younger people from this town differ from the older generations in the importance they attribute to the fashionability, quality and/or durability of garments (in this way, the above mentioned dichotomies of out-of-fashion/in-fashion and past/present acquire a new dimension though the dichotomy of socialism/postsocialism).

The material proprieties of objects preoccupied socialist consumers. Socialist consumption was marked by a ‘culture of shortage’ (Chelcea, 2002): the scarcity of goods during the socialist period influenced the ways in which they were consumed; not only practices of hoarding and rationing, but also practices of recycling and repairing were an integral part of the consumption process. Socialist consumption was also marked by a ‘culture of frugality’ (Fehérváry, 2009): relatively poor socialist consumers, with the sensitivity to the value of objects that poverty brings, took good care of goods and used them for long periods of time. However, they mainly had to make do with state manufactured consumer goods whose quality left much to be desired. In Hungary, to give an example, some of the most frequently used pejoratives for state manufactured consumer goods were ‘shoddy’ (concerns with quality), ‘uniform’ (concerns with diversity) and ‘unfashionable’ or ‘drab’ (concerns with indexing modernity) (Fehérváry, 2009: 444). In the Soviet Union, to give another example, people made do with goods that required not only frequent repair, but also intervention to make them fully functional (Gerasimova and Chuikina, 2009). In such a context, the material properties of objects, their quality and durability, were important.

The cultural age, style and design of objects also concerned socialist consumers. More relevant to this article, the fashionability of their garments concerned socialist consumers (Roman, 2003). State shops throughout Eastern Europe offered to the masses mainly clothes of poor quality and unfashionable design produced by a centralised fashion system that ideologically privileged practicality and modesty. However, socialist consumers ‘used a whole range of unofficial channels, from self-made clothes to the black market, private fashion salons and networks of connection to obtain desired clothes in their everyday life’ (Bartlett, 2004: 129). The second economy, which routed information about western fashion trends as well as fashionable goods behind the ‘Iron Curtain’, contributed to the development of these unofficial dress practices. Therefore, ordinary consumers brought together fashionability, quality and durability in a particular way during the socialist period and valued them all, although perhaps not equally.

The young consumers I encountered in this provincial Romanian town, some with no memories of the socialist period, emphasise that spending on the self and constructing a fashionable appearance are of increased importance in the contemporary period. They consider them to be essential means in the creation and promotion of their own value, a widely acknowledged strategy to secure a rendering of the self in favourable terms by significant others (see also Ranova, 2006, on fashion in urban Bulgaria). However, a concern with the quality and durability of garments surfaces when these postsocialist consumers evaluate the fashionable clothes they could afford. Many of my young interlocutors are consumers of fast fashion and low-cost clothes, out of choice as much as out of necessity (in this context, this does not mean clothes from H&M or Zara, which are too expensive for many of them, but clothes made in Turkey and China). More often than not they have to explain to their outraged parents and older acquaintances that styles and clothes are not meant to last in the contemporary consumer culture. Occasionally, some describe their low-cost clothes as a compromise: they allow them to dress smartly on a limited budget (for some, this might be a permanent situation; others might see this as a temporary situation, until they are able to afford or willing to buy the more expensive and presumably higher quality branded garments). When fashionable clothes go bobbly,

efforts to enhance the self become futile, in one's own eyes and in those of one's observers. Cherished garments must be discarded not because the short fashion cycle makes them outdated, but because their short life cycle makes them unwearable. Therefore, these feelings of betrayal, annoyance and disturbance that the bobbles provoke among postsocialist consumers of lesser means temper a tendency to herald a dramatic shift in values from socialism to postsocialism (with fashionability claimed to be more important than quality and durability) (Veenis, 1999). Such postsocialist consumers are still reluctant participants in a 'throw-away' society in which low-quality clothes allow one to follow fashion styles that change faster than ever.

Furthermore, this inference that bobbles clearly index the faulty materiality of clothes is troubling in a context in which people have become more aware than ever of the relationship between the value of objects and the value of selves (Patiko and Caldwell, 2002; Rausing, 2002). Older generations went through a period in which this relationship had a particular (political) significance. During socialism, the low value of the state-manufactured consumer goods was interpreted as evidence of the state's contempt for its own citizens. Furthermore, these goods were evaluated by ordinary socialist consumers in the context of an increased awareness of and contact with western consumer goods, which seemed to reflect the high value the capitalist states attributed to its citizens (Fehérváry, 2009). Socialist consumers dreamt of a world in which their hard work would translate into access to consumption pleasure and the attendant positive sense of self-worth that people elsewhere seemed to enjoy. For many of the socialist consumers, this dream was shattered after 1989.

The postsocialist generations might not be familiar with this interpretation, but they experience similar feelings of being second-class citizens through their own encounters with low quality consumer goods. My interlocutors, postsocialist consumers of lesser means, often choose their garments from the commodities imported from Turkey and China that are available in small shops and markets throughout the region. More often than not, they interpret these garments as objects that are produced and sold by second-class citizens (Turks and Chinese) in improper locations (semi-legal bazaar-like commercial areas) to second-class citizens, Romanians among them. These commentaries echo the remarks of other postsocialist consumers, who also have to make do with affordable commodities. In Russia, people refer bitterly to the 'Great Trash Road' that brings flimsy clothes and trinkets into the country from 'Asia', a vague concept that includes China, Turkey and the states of Central Asia (Humphrey, 2002). In Mongolia, Chinese goods are considered to be of such a low quality that they are not worthy of being sold in a 'modern' Mongolian market (Pedersen, 2007). In Bulgaria, people are disappointed with the quality of the kinds of goods they can afford and often describe them as 'garbage' from China and Turkey (Creed, 2002). Postsocialist consumers have internalised the equation of the value of objects and the value of selves. They have heard ad nauseam the capitalist claim that the authenticity of selves can be attained and maintained in relation to its authentic commodities, that is, branded goods (Crăciun, 2014). They have understood that, in a neoliberal world, value accrues to those who have access to valuable goods and environments (Berdahl, 2005; Patiko, 2005). Bobbles are a negative value signifier: they index the low value of objects, and can also be interpreted, people suspect, as indexes of the low value of persons.

This local interpretation of bobbling affords glimpses into types of subjectivity and senses of self-worth articulated in tumultuous periods of transformation like those experienced in postsocialist societies. These are marked by a sense of ambivalence, if not failure: these people reflect upon who they are and what they have, what they wanted to be and have, and what they could become and could accumulate given the larger circumstances of their lives; and reach gloomy conclusions about people as well as things. As Verdery (2003) notes, the sweeping changes brought about by the collapse of socialism impacted upon people's ideas about what is valuable and what value is, often in a dramatic way. Bobbling is a quality of transformation in the materiality of clothes, which is assumed to be inherent in this inferior materiality. This article argues that bobbling brings to the surface a result of the transformative processes that characterise the postsocialist period, namely a nagging feeling that one's life is marked by ambivalent, if not failed, value. At a more general level, the article contributes to the enlargement of the empirical field of the value debate in anthropology and the consolidation of a theoretical proposition that accounts more fully for the inherent ways in which value is both material and a social and political project.

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