

# “I Want ‘Rotten Bourgeois Democracy’!”

## An Interview With Rumanian Dissident Paul Goma

Theodore Jacqueney

To his countrymen, Rumanian writer Paul Goma is a combination of Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Andrei Sakharov. Like Solzhenitsyn, Goma writes about the world of the gulag—political prisoners, concentration camps, and repression. His first political arrest occurred in 1951, when he was a sixteen-year-old high school student. Five years later he was rearrested when, after the 1956 revolution in neighboring Hungary, he wrote an essay—and read it aloud at a public meeting—urging his fellow university students to follow the Hungarian example and throw the Russians out of Rumania.

As a result Goma was in prison or doing forced labor in internal exile from 1961 to 1965. His prison experiences inspired his books: *La Chambre d'a Cote* (1965), *Ostinato* (1970), *La Cellule des Liberales* (1971), *Elles etaient Quatre* (1974), and *Gherla* (1976). All of the books concern the treatment of political prisoners and related issues of human rights, and all save the first were published abroad but not in his own country.

Prematurely grey, Goma has the build and the beard of a lumberjack—one of his past punitive “professions.” His appearance suggests, not only the rugged constitution that enabled him to survive the Rumanian gulag, but also an



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identification with the ordinary workers of his homeland—not always a characteristic of dissenting writers and intellectuals.

Goma hopes that Rumania will someday achieve the political system that, he says jokingly, the Communist authorities in his country call “rotten bourgeois democracy.” In the 1970’s he became

the spokesman and leader of a vigorous and optimistic Rumanian dissident movement that perseveres despite the efforts of the regime to arrest and exile its most inspiring leaders. One of the landmark achievements of the movement was a petition organized by Goma and seven others that called on the government of Communist party chief Nicolae Ceaușescu to implement its own constitutional and statutory requirements concerning free expression and human rights. It was directed to the thirty-five nations who convened in Belgrade in October, 1977, to review the 1975 Helsinki Accords on security, cooperation, and human rights in Europe. The document was signed by six hundred Rumanian workers and intellectuals and was distributed to Western embassies and the international press.

In April, 1977, Goma was imprisoned and repeatedly assaulted. He even had the unique distinction of being beaten up by the deputy minister of the interior himself. Goma later described this experience to a U.S. congressional commission reviewing compliance with the Helsinki Accords. After intensive efforts by international human rights organizations and individuals in a number of countries to secure his release, Goma was permitted to leave Rumania in November, 1977. He now lives in Paris.

**JACQUENEY: What do you want for your country—what kind of government, pursuing what kind of policies?**

**GOMA:** I think only about existing conditions, because under the existing circumstances thinking about a future ideal seems like thinking about a utopian fantasy. I concentrate on thinking about improving the present condition of life in Rumania. If I were free to think about my ideal of government, it would be a “rotten bourgeois democracy.” Make sure you put those last

three words in quotation marks, because I am quoting the Rumanian Government’s words.

**What are the immediate goals of Rumanian dissidents? Are there any particular areas of liberalization that they regard as most important?**

First of all, they are not dissidents. They are simply Rumanian citizens who are not satisfied. They are opposed to the Rumanian Government, but, keeping in

mind the realities, they are reformists. Their *wish* is to overthrow the government, but it is impossible to do it. And so they are minimalists. They ask the minimal rights—specifically, the application of present laws and the international conventions. They would also like the application of what is written into the United States law granting “most favored nation” trading status to Rumania.

**What specifically are these “minimal rights” that Rumanian reformists would like to see applied?**

It is in the Rumanian constitution that Rumanian citizens are free to speak, are free to travel, are free to have their religious beliefs. Unfortunately, under the “most favored nation” law, the American Government right now concentrates only on the right to emigrate. This is not the whole range of human rights. Even now in America there are immigrants who are there in a sense against their will—what they really wanted was to have a free and decent life in Rumania, not to leave. The U.S. Government’s exclusive focus on emigration rights regarding Rumania serves to force such people to leave.

**If this is an error, what should U.S. policy be? What would you suggest be done?**

Have a universal or comprehensive concept of human rights. Don’t think only about the freedom to emigrate. America and Rumania are signatories of the Helsinki understandings, which comprise a whole range of human rights—the freedom to think, freedom of expression, religious freedoms, and so on. America ought to press Rumania to respect all these rights. All the credits and technologies that America furnishes to Rumania under the “most favored nation” status do not help the Rumanian people. They only aid forced industrialization and actually work against the standard of living of the population, because of how the government allocates the resources it obtains from this commercial advantage.

A second thing is, by granting these special commercial advantages to the Rumanian Government, Rumanian President Nicolae Ceaușescu can boast to the Rumanian people that he is backed by the Americans and is free to behave as he likes. Let me give you an example: After Ceaușescu visited the United States and saw President Carter he went back to Rumania and increased the repression. Conditions worsened for the people. He acted as if Carter had given him a blank check to behave as he liked in domestic oppression, as if he thought that America would continue to help him because America believed that he was independent of the Russians. Of course, it isn’t true that he is independent!

**You say that it is not true that Ceaușescu is independent of the Soviet Union. We have the impression here in the U.S. that while Rumania is one of the most repressive**

**regimes in Eastern Europe, it is relatively independent of the Soviet Union. Surely Rumania is more independent of the Soviets than East Germany or Bulgaria or Czechoslovakia right now—don’t you agree?**

For the people of Rumania the outlook is different. Of course Rumania has no Soviet armies on its territory. But while Ceaușescu claims to be independent, more and more the living conditions of the people continue to be bad, the conditions of freedom and liberty continue to be bad. Every Rumanian knows that even if it seems that Ceaușescu takes some bold action in foreign policy, it is taken within the framework of what the Russians allow. The Government of Rumania does not permit Soviet armies on its territory and does not want to increase defense spending—but it does not leave the Warsaw Pact. Rumania opposed the integration of the COMECON [the Soviet-led Eastern European version of the Common Market], but it did not leave the COMECON. Rumania accepts the principles imposed by the Russians for Central and Eastern Europe.

Immediately after the big strike of the miners in the Jiu valley in August, 1977, Ceaușescu went to consult with Brezhnev. Ceaușescu must go to consult with the Russians. He tries to play a nationalist role to be popular, but he never asks for the return of the province of Bessarabia, which has 2½ million Rumanians and was annexed by the Russians after World War II. In fact, he actually went to the capital of Bessarabia and declared that Rumania will never ask the Soviet Union to return Bessarabia. The Soviets call Bessarabia their Soviet Moldavian Republic now. But to the Western world he boasts that he wants to recover this Rumanian province from the Russians. The biggest minority in Europe is the 3½ million Rumanians in the Soviet Union, including the 2½ million in Bessarabia and the rest who were deported, many to Kazakhstan.

**I have the impression that the Soviets permit Ceaușescu’s forays into foreign policy independence because of his orthodoxy in domestic repression. I mean that if Rumania tried to move toward domestic liberalization as Czechoslovakia did in 1968, it might suffer the same fate; but since it does not, it is permitted flexibility in foreign policy. Is this what you mean when you say that Rumania is not independent of the Soviets and that its lack of independence harms its people?**

Yes. This is absolutely true. If Russia were really against Ceaușescu’s foreign policy, they would immediately occupy Rumania as they did in Czechoslovakia. If you compare Ceaușescu to [Alexander] Dubček, the head of the Czech Communist party during the 1968 liberalization, Dubček was a reformist Communist. He wanted to improve internal conditions. Ceaușescu’s external maneuverings, like being friendly with China and keeping relations with Israel, would seem to be more harmful to Soviet interests than the domestic liberalization begun by Dubček, but this is not the case. The Russians want to present the image of relative independence among Eastern European countries so that Western countries will fear them less. For this Ceaușescu’s actions serve their purposes. The Russians demand that in all the countries they control in Eastern Europe

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THEODORE JACQUENEY writes “Human Rights,” a newspaper column syndicated by Feature Associates. He is an Associate Editor of *Worldview* and is coordinator of The Democracy International.

liberties not exist internally. Liberties in some external policies they permit.

Let me turn to another subject. Some dissidents in the Communist world, like Andrei Sakharov in the Soviet Union, Milovan Djilas and Mihajlo Mihajlov in Yugoslavia, and many of the Czech signers of the *Charter 77* manifesto for liberalization, say that what they want for their countries is what we would call liberal, pluralist democracy—what you just said you wanted for Rumania when you spoke ironically of “rotten bourgeois democracy” as your political ideal. What you all seem to be calling for is the kind of democracy that exists in Western Europe, North America, Japan, as well as in developing countries like Venezuela, India, Sri Lanka, and Costa Rica. On the other hand there are some dissidents who seem to want the Communist system to obey its own laws but are essentially satisfied with a Communist society and with a Marxist-Leninist single-party system. To some extent such people are also the “minimalists” you spoke about earlier, in which category you also seem to place yourself, at least for tactical reasons. I suppose I should also add that there are some dissidents of a third school, exemplified by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who seem to want a reversion to a nationalist religious autocracy. Of these three schools of thought, which would you say most closely represents, not just your views, but the views most influential among people like you who are, as you said, dissatisfied with the policies of the present Government of Rumania.

None of those three models holds for Rumania. Rumania is different. In a sense, the weakness of the Rumanian movement is also its strength, because our movement has not shown any of these predominant tendencies. First of all, because leftist ideas have been accepted by the Rumanian people much less than by the people of any other Eastern European country. Until the Soviet armies came, the Rumanian Communist party was just symbolic—it had no following at all. The only party members are people seeking material advantages, office holders and the like. The Rumanian people opposed communism until the Hungarian Revolution was crushed in 1956, when they realized that the West would not help them either. Resignation and apathy became the dominant mood after 1956. But in 1977, due in part to President Carter’s campaign for human rights, and in part due to the *Charter 77* human rights campaign by the dissidents in Czechoslovakia, a very weak movement started. Even now, the movement does not articulate the full range of what the opposition wants, or its real intentions. Rumanians are realists and, realizing that they cannot obtain everything they desire, they ask only that the noose around their necks be loosened a little. But Rumanians really do not want the construction of socialism with freedoms, as advocated by Mihajlo Mihajlov in Yugoslavia, because in Rumania the ideas of socialism and communism are forever compromised. In fact it is a tragedy, because the Communist regime has caused people to wish for the regime that existed before the Second World War. It had many faults, but compared to the present regime it was more liberal and democratic.

There is another difference between the Rumanian opponents and the opponents in other areas in Eastern Europe: In Rumania, workers participate in the opposition much more than in other countries. There really was no Communist movement among intellectuals in Rumania, as there was elsewhere in Eastern Europe or the Soviet Union. As a result, in these other countries intellectuals are the leading dissidents, and many of them are Communists or socialists who want to reform the system. In Rumania there are no dissident Communists who would like to improve communism. In Rumania the regime that claims to represent the workers has the workers as its opposition. Most of those who sign appeals and petitions concerning human rights are workers.

You are aware, of course, that there is serious worker representation in the democratic opposition in other Communist countries. The most active case to date is Poland, but now we even see a growing dissident movement among workers in the Soviet Union that includes attempts to form independent workers’ associations that seek recognition and support from international trade unions. Why is it that you believe the workers’ movement in Rumania is unique in comparison to Poland or the Soviet Union?

In Rumania the opposition movement is very new, and the workers participated in the movement from the beginning. In the other countries the movement for liberalization was begun by intellectuals with the workers joining in later. In Rumania, from the inception of the opposition movement, the workers were preponderant.

**You said that the Rumanian opposition rejects socialism, in contrast with some dissident leaders in other Communist countries. In that case what kind of economic system do people in the Rumanian opposition want? Do they want to restore capitalism, and, if so, how would they do this?**

The economic principle of the Rumanian opposition is that a new economic system would not be communism. For example, Rumanian peasants don’t really dream of going back to private property. They desire some form of genuine cooperatives. But what they definitely reject are the Communist “collectives” and “kolkhozes” and “socialization of the economy.” What the people of Rumania want is a liberalization of the economy in which they have personal, material incentives, because the standard of living under the Communist system is a disaster. You know that the private sector in Russia, in Rumania, and in other Communist countries, where peasants produce privately some fruits and vegetables, represents upwards of 40 per cent of production in these areas.

**When you speak of liberalization of the economy, do you mean that people should have the freedom to open a private business, such as opening a private manufacturing company?**

Yes. That would be the key to prosperity in Rumania. Rumania is a very rich country, but for the moment it is impoverished by the Communist economic system.

**You said earlier that what you wanted for your country was “rotten bourgeois democracy.” What are the specific qualities of the democracy that you seek?**

The democracy I seek for Rumania would be comparable to the Western democracies. In fact, in my opinion socialism has proved that it has not given a valuable solution to mankind and always comes into conflict with freedom, democracy, and justice. Socialism has failed in Eastern Europe, and in Cuba, and in China. Even in Chile, where of course socialism did not come to power under the late President Salvador Allende through military means, their ideology was driving the nation toward disaster. Of course I don't agree with the present military regime in Chile and I abhor its violence, but I think Allende was headed toward dictatorship too.

The qualities of democracy that I seek include a multiparty system, freedom of religion, freedom of expression and freedom of the press, free development of the ethnic groups that form a country—all the values of bourgeois liberties that were advocated in the French Revolution of 1789 and developed during the nineteenth century. I also mean free trade unionism, rather than the system under which I have lived, where workers are tyrannized in their own name. And regularly scheduled elections. But I don't really want to provide too many details of my concept of the mechanism of democracy, because I am a writer. I would never enter political life in Rumania, if such a thing were possible. Basically, I would like a regime where people can participate in political life freely. In Rumania this does not exist. In our elections all candidates are from the same Communist unit—we have no ability to choose our leaders.

**We have been speaking about what we might call the political and civil characteristics of democracy. Many people believe that democracy also has economic and social qualities as well, including the right to food, shelter, education, employment, and health care. How do these economic and social needs of people enter into your thinking, and the thinking of other Rumanian opposition leaders, as you contemplate the democracy you want?**

When I speak of wanting “liberal bourgeois democracy,” in quotation marks, I of course mean that democracy requires rights to food, education, shelter, and so on.

**As I understand Rumania's economic situation, it could qualify as a developing nation. These days there are many people who argue that for developing countries democracy is irrelevant, a useless luxury that only impedes progress. They condemn concepts of pluralist democracy by calling it mere “formal democracy” and say that people in developing nations are concerned about food and having a roof over their heads, not about democracy and freedom. You have had the experience of living in a country where democracy was irrelevant and where freedom had no influence on development. How do you respond to this argument?**

It is true that Rumania is a developing nation, but it has a very advanced industrialization, an industrialization that is proceeding much too rapidly and is in fact harming the whole economy. Rumanian Communists

took Lenin's precepts to the letter: industrialization at any price. In fact, the price is too heavy for the Rumanian people. For example, the steel industry in Rumania is enormous, but it operates at a tremendous deficit—it costs far more than it produces. In Rumania the cost of producing steel is much higher than it is in England, which itself is no longer among the world's most efficient steel producers. Consider how much this expensive Rumanian steel costs each individual Rumanian citizen. And to whom can we sell this expensive steel, which is of very bad quality?

Communist economists in Rumania, instead of limiting themselves to what was possible in our country, such as producing good food and petrochemicals (because we have oil), have just concentrated on heavy steel industries despite the fact that we don't have iron ore, we don't have coal, and we don't have the know-how either to manufacture it or to sell it. We should have concentrated on light industries, on food and petrochemicals, and on some mineral development.

All of this happened because there was no democratic participation in determining economic policies. People who argue that democracy is irrelevant should go to live in a Communist country. Let them spin their theories on their own backs, and not impose them on the people who have had to live under these regimes that lack democracy. The argument many sound good as a theory, but the moment it is applied food is not available, concentration camps develop, and all the miseries of life under a dictatorship come into being. Under this theory of the irrelevance of democracy for economic development the Rumanian people have suffered for thirty years.

**You have been arrested a number of times. When you were released you wrote four novels, published abroad, about various aspects of political prisoner abuse and repression in Rumania. What is the common theme or message of your books, since you take on these inherently political subjects?**

The message is freedom and the different forms of the lack of freedom. In my first book I wrote about political prisoners. In my second book I wrote about the potential prison, about people who were so terrorized about going to prison that they forged their own prisons while they were free. And in the following books I dealt with similar themes.

**Besides informing ourselves better about conditions in Rumania, what can people in the democracies do to assist the cause of political liberty and democracy in Rumania?**

We ask that when Western countries give something to the Communists, they ask for something in return. Listen to us, not just to the official propaganda of people who work for the government in one way or another. Help us through the press, through international human rights organizations like Amnesty International and the International League for Human Rights, and through other institutions that fight for human freedom. Action that stirs public opinion can be very helpful and is very important to us. 