

COMING TO TERMS WITH A TRAUMATIC PAST: REFLECTIONS ON DEMOCRACY, ATONEMENT, AND MEMORY

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Abstract: The collapse of communism and the subsequent transition to democracy of the Central and South-East European countries have been characterized by a dynamic approach towards their recent past. In those countries having pursued some legal and extra-legal remedies, ranging from criminal trials and truth commissions to lustrations, parliamentary inquiries, compensations, restitutions or governmental based investigations, the transitional dynamic has been hugely analysed in a tremendous corpus of literature. Such clear „signs” as carried out measures and their nature are on the other hand the sheer evidence of some shaken order and of the attempt on re-establishing the trust. Besides the trauma of the early Stalinist period, all the countries in the region (Romania included) had and still have to deal with “the grey veil of moral ambiguity” (Tony Judt) that was a defining feature of really existing socialism. These societies and most of their members have an uneasy conscience in relation with the past: complicities are often covered by the thick veil of denial, collaborationism is presented as an inevitable choice, and resistance is underestimated.

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The still unmastered past of the twentieth century in Central and Eastern Europe prevents the countries in the region from institutionalizing the logical connection between democracy, memory, and civic commitment. Any departure from democracy can be resisted only if there is public awareness about the consequences of communism as an expression of radical utopian hubris, or, to use Hannah Arendt’s approach, of radical evil in history. Besides the trauma of the early Stalinist period, all the countries in the region (Romania included) had and still have to deal with “the grey veil of moral ambiguity” (Tony Judt) that was a defining feature of really existing socialism. These societies and most of their members have an uneasy conscience in relation with the past: complicities are often covered by the thick veil of denial, collaborationism is presented as an inevitable choice, and resistance is underestimated. At the opposite pole, stories of absolute victimization often ignore the transformation of the early Stalinist terror-base regimes into various forms of inclusive undertakings (e.g. Romania between 1963–1971, Kadarism, post-Ulbricht GDR). Memory is a part of a nation’s common good, it stands against collective amnesia. Its prophylactic dimension offers resistance to a trivializing and stultifying perspective on the

totalitarian experience. It counteracts deliberate mystification and revisionism. As in the case of the Holocaust, the statute of limitations does not apply to the crimes against humanity committed by communist regimes. These crimes must be documented, prosecuted, and punished by law. Victims should be honored and reparations should apply. In other words, moral justice, although indispensable, is not sufficient in order to overcome the psychological and political legacies of the Leninist dictatorships.

Communism as a system, ideology, and totalitarian movement was an experiment rooted in frantic ideological commandments, unbound ambitions and utopian obsessions. If we limit ourselves to the murderous dimension of communism, we will end up ignoring (or normalizing) its totalitarian and totalizing nature. The system's criminality lies in its cultivation of an apocryphal legality and contempt for the genuine rule of law.¹ Its lack of legitimacy led to an ideologically-driven desire to dismantle the old institutions, allegiances, loyalties lies. Communist regimes pursued a political and economic program aiming to an egalitarian heaven (what Karl Marx called the leap from the kingdom of necessity in the kingdom of freedom"). This metapolitical project, similar in this fixation of building the "New Man" to the fascist revolutions, was founded on the deliberate annihilation of traditional morals. The transcendent project of Communism needed to be internalized by all subjects, friends and foes of the regime alike.² In order to understand such criminality one needs to retrieve memory, to sort through the knowledge of these experiments, and to try making sense of their functioning, methods, and goals.³ The Institute for the Investigation of the Communist Crimes and the Memory of Romanian Exile has assumed this mandate in Romania. Salvaging memory, acknowledging traumatic moments, identifying the culprits, honoring the victims are fundamental steps that need to be followed, because, if ignored, the Romanian society will lose itself in the murky silence of gelatinous amnesia.

Both individual and collective identities can be reconstructed on the basis of negative lessons and *exempla* that national history can provide: "on the one hand, with the past that is being repudiated; on the other, with anti-democratic political actors in the present (and/or potentially in the future)."⁴ This process of putting into question the "actual intersubjective liabilities of particular collectives" can result into a redefinition of "anamnestic solidarity". The latter would be based upon an ethical framework circumscribed by both the knowledge

¹ Martin MALIA, *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917–1991*, New York: Free Press, 1994.

² Jochen HELLBECK, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: Cambridge University Press, 2006; Igal HALFIN, *Terror in My Soul: Communist Autobiographies on Trial*, Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 2003; Sheila FITZPATRICK, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times, Soviet Russia in the 1930s*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

³ Stéphane COURTOIS et al., *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1999. Mark Kramer was the consulting editor and Martin Malia wrote the introduction ("The Uses of Atrocity").

⁴ Jan-Werner MÜLLER, *Constitutional Patriotism*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007, pp. 97–119.

of the truth and the official acknowledgement of its history. The destructive power of silence and of un-assumed guilt would this way be pre-empted. To paraphrase Gesine Schwan, the fundamental abilities and values of individuals are nourished in order to sustain their well-being, social behavior, and trust in the communal life. The moral consensus over a shared experience of reality is a precondition for the democratic life of the specific society.⁵

Communism was, and here I am using sociologist Georges Gurvitch's definition of social facts, a total and totalizing phenomenon. It was a political religion, a revolutionary-messianic gnosis, an "ideocratic partocracy" (Hannah Arendt, Waldemar Gurian, Leszek Kolakowski, Martin Malia), a gigantic deception, a set of terrorist techniques. Communist regimes promised of emancipation, but ended up destroying human dignity. They falsified and obliterated memory and liquidated traditional morals. There is no "original communism" with "humanist" propensities, there is no "Bolshevism with a human face". Leninism dehumanized those whom it branded enemies of the people, reducing the individual to the condition of reptiles, leach, or vermin.⁶ Going beyond the arguments between Robert Conquest, Richard Pipes, Alain Besançon and Martin Malia on one hand, and the "revisionist" school, on the other, it is clear today, on the basis of archival documents, that the Soviet-style regimes aimed at the annihilation of any niche of autonomy. The system was all-pervasive; it truly aimed to control all walks of life. Communism meant the reign of imposture, duplicity, and mendaciousness.⁷ We cannot be surprised then by magnitude of this phenomenon in the postcommunist world: former informants giving lessons to those whom they informed on; Securitate officers haranguing about national dignity; lackeys of the communist regime giving "informed" advice on TV about the present day political situation. Disturbingly often, historical truth is expelled and the characters of the traumatized and guilty past are deprived of their real identities. We see how victims and heroes are assigned pejorative counterimages, while perpetrators and bystanders find refuge in the absence of repentance.⁸

No matter the nostalgic Marxist argument, there never was a democratic-pluralist formula in communism.⁹ From Beijing to Prague and from Hanoi to Bucharest, the aims and methods were the same. What French philosopher Alain Badiou (a former admirer of the Khmer Rouges) glorifies now as "l'hypothèse

⁵ Gesine SCHWAN, *Politics and Guilt: the Destructive Power of Silence* [translation by Thomas Dunlap], Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press, 2001, pp. 54–134.

⁶ Alexander YAKOVLEV's illuminating books, *The Fate of Marxism in Russia*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993, and *A Century of Violence in Soviet Russia*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000 [with a foreword by Paul Hollander].

⁷ Sheila FITZPATRICK, *Tear off the Mask! Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005.

⁸ Amos FUNKENSTEIN, "History, Counterhistory and Narrative", in Saul FRIEDLANDER (ed.), *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1992, pp. 66–81.

⁹ Agnes HELLER, "Legitimation, Deficit and Legitimation Crisis in East European Societies," in Vladimir TISMĂNEANU (ed.), *Stalinism Revisited: The Establishment of Communist Regimes in East-Central Europe*, Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2009, pp. 143–160.

communiste” has never been a genuine historical possibility. Leninism had in its genetic code the seed of violence, the disregard for law, the hostility towards private property and an unswerving conviction that history is on the side of the self-proclaimed saviors of humanity. If there was a hypothesis, for some of us there is also a conclusion, paid with massacres, concentration camps, deportations and persecutions. Communism was always, wherever professed, an illegitimate regime.¹⁰

In the process of dealing with the communist past there is no surplus of memory. To forgive doesn't mean to forget, but to forget is simply impardonable. This is what Alain Besançon called *hypermnnesia*. There is a need for an ethics of remembrance, of non-oblivion (Monica Lovinescu). It would be a moral and scholarly error to close the book on the communist past or to cynically apply to it a pretense of an excess of memory and/or history. IICCMER's activities, on the basis of its mandate, are, to use Timothy Garton Ash's phrase, “a state, public history lesson” during which the ‘truth’ about the communist experience is “officially proclaimed and publicly exposed”, that is, acknowledged. IICCMER's task is to encourage, to stimulate, and to foster “sovereignty over memory.”¹¹ It is the only means by which there is a possibility of resolving the “double crisis of memory” (Tony Judt) that still haunts Romania (and other countries from the Soviet bloc):

On the one hand cynicism and mistrust pervade all social, cultural and even personal exchanges, so that the construction of civil society, much less civil memory, is very, very difficult. On the other hand there are multiple memories and historical myths, each of which has learned to think of itself as legitimate simply by virtue of being private and unofficial. Where these private or tribal versions come together, they form powerful counterhistories of a mutually antagonistic and divisive nature.¹²

In Romania, the post-1989 practice of state-sponsored amnesia created two main dangers: the externalization of guilt and the ethnicization of memory. As both Dan Diner and Gabriel Motzkin argue, the process of working through the communist past raises a crucial problem: “How can crimes that elude the armature of an ethnic, and thus-long term, memory be kept alive in collective remembrance?” The domination and exterminism of a communist regime generally affected all strata of the population, terror and repression were engineered from within against one's people. Therefore, “the lack of specific connection

¹⁰ Robert SERVICE, *Comrades! History of World Communism*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007.

¹¹ I am employing here the concepts developed by Timothy Garton Ash and Timothy Snyder in: Timothy Garton ASH, “Trials, Purges and History Lessons: Treating a Difficult Past in Post-Communist Europe” and Timothy SNYDER, “Memory of Sovereignty and Sovereignty over Memory: Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine, 1939-1999”, in Jan-Werner MÜLLER (ed.), *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

¹² Tony JUDT, “The Past is Another Country: Myth and Memory in Post-War Europe”, in Jan-Werner MÜLLER, *Memory and Power*, p. 173.

between Communism's theoretical enemy and its current victims made it more difficult to remember these victims later."¹³ When no *Aufarbeitung* takes place, the memory field is left for "alternative" interpretations.

Richard S. Esbenshade identified two main paradigms in Eastern Europe, shaped before and after the fall of communism, for the relationship between memory and communal identity. On one hand, there is the "Milan Kundera paradigm", according to which "man's struggle is one of memory against forgetting" (that is, instrumentalized amnesia vs. individual, civic remembrance). On the other, there is the "George Konrád paradigm", where "history is the forcible illumination of darkened memories", presupposing a "morass of shared responsibility". However, the development and entrenchment of a society-wide "critically informed memory" (Dominick LaCapra) is still challenged by widespread cynicism and distrust at all sociopolitical levels and by multiple historical myths, anxieties, expectations, illusions, and memories. These claim legitimacy because of their private and unofficial character.¹⁴ Despite the ever-widening rescue operation of and working through fragmented memories (both individual and collective), transparency about a guilty and traumatic past by means of "politics of knowledge" (Claus Offe) has yet to be achieved. In order to be able to overcome such fragmentation, typical of the "legacy of Leninism"¹⁵, Romania must follow the path of national reconciliation by means working through its totalitarian past. A "post-totalitarian legitimacy"¹⁶ can be achieved in democratic reinstitutionalization freed from the burden of the party-state continuities. German writer Bernhard Schlink offers a thoughtful approach to the tantalizing task of "mastering the past": "What is past cannot be mastered. It can be remembered, forgotten, or repressed. It can be avenged, punished, atoned for and regretted. It can be repeated, consciously or unconsciously. Its consequences can be managed either to encourage or discourage their impact on the present or the future. But what is done is done. The past is unassailable and irrevocable."¹⁷ The process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* imposes criteria of accountability fundamental to reinforcing democratic values in Romanian society. For, as Jan-Werner Müller argued, "without facing the past, there can be no civic trust, which is the outcome

¹³ Dan DINER, "Remembrance and Knowledge: Nationalism and Stalinism in Comparative Discourse" and Gabriel MOTZKIN, "The Memory of Crime and the Formation of Identity", in Helmut DUBIEL and Gabriel MOTZKIN (eds.), *The Lesser Evil: Moral Approaches to Genocide Practices*, Portland: Frank Cass, 2003.

¹⁴ Istvan DEAK, Jan T. GROSS, Tony JUDD (eds.), *The Politics of Retribution in Europe: World War II and its Aftermath*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000.

¹⁵ Kenneth Jowitt defined Eastern Europe as a "brittle region" where "suspicion, division, and fragmentation predominate, not coalition and interrogation" because of lasting emotional, ethnic, territorial, demographic, political fragmentation form the (pre-)communist period. See "The Legacy of Leninism" in *New World Disorder: the Leninist Extinction*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992. For a recent discussion of this thesis also see Vladimir TISMĂNEANU, Marc HOWARD, Rudra SIL, (eds.), *World Order After Leninism*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006.

¹⁶ Jan-Werner MÜLLER, *Another Country: German Intellectuals, Unification, and National Identity*, New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2000, p. 258.

¹⁷ Bernhard SCHLINK, *Guilt about the Past*, Toronto: Anansi Press, 2009, p. 43.

of a continuous public deliberation about the past.”¹⁸ The public use of history is a vital antidote to oblivion, denial, and partisan distortions.

In Romania, the condemnation of the communist regime had an essential cathartic value because “unless the trauma is understood, there is no possibility of escaping it.”¹⁹ The Final Report of the Presidential Commission for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship fixed the memory of the totalitarian experience in place and in time, it overcame the burden of the denial of memory, of institutionalized amnesia. It set the ground for the revolutionizing of the normative foundations of the communal history, imposing the necessary moral criteria of a democracy that wishes to militantly defend its values.

More than twenty years have passed since the demise of communism in Europe. Most of the countries of the former Soviet bloc have reached the conclusion that a healthy civil society and a functioning, sustainable democracy can exist only if the present is the result of overcoming the past. For some time, though, formal and informal amnesia estranged the lessons of the totalitarian experience from the present. The discomfiture with democratic challenges and the prevailing constitutional pluralist model was not only linked to the transition from Leninism, but to the larger problem of legitimation and the existence of competing visions of the common good, of rival symbols of collective identity.²⁰ Nevertheless, Eastern Europe has the example and the model of the West, where the process of democratization, of building sustainable postwar societies and transnational bonds, was fundamentally based upon coming to terms with the traumatic and guilty past. In other words, to return to a more general framework of interpretation, the memory of both Auschwitz and the Gulag, if remembered and taught, can go a long way to the entrenchment of the societal values and the political culture destroyed in the region by last century’s totalitarianisms. After 1989, the present and the future must “stand up to the scrutiny of a gaze educated by the moral catastrophe”²¹ produced by the experience of the twentieth century. Otherwise, the web of lies becomes oppressive, and the imperturbable fog of amnesia or nostalgia extends infinitely into a state of moral perplexity.

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¹⁸ Jan-Werner MÜLLER, “Introduction: the Power of Memory, the Memory of Power and the Power over Memory”, in Jan-Werner MÜLLER (ed.), *Memory and Power*, pp. 33–34.

¹⁹ Gabriel MOTZKIN, “The Memory of Crime and the Formation of Identity”, in Helmut DUBIEL and Gabriel MOTZKIN (eds.), *The Lesser Evil*, pp. 200–205.

²⁰ Vladimir TISMĂNEANU, *Fantasies of Salvation: Democracy, Nationalism, and Myth in Postcommunist Europe*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009 [paperback edition].

²¹ Jürgen HABERMAS, *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians’ Debate*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989, p. 234.