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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TOTALITARIAN EXPERIENCE IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE TODAY*

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The word “totalitarianism” brings together the two extreme political regimes of the 20th century: Nazism and communism. Although this comparison has been contested, Hannah Arendt proves that, although different in form, the two have the same substantial nature.

According to Tzvetan Todorov, totalitarianism is the most distinctive feature of the 20th century¹. This is why we, the societies that had suffered this experience, cannot just ignore it.

I will not get into detail as to whether the Romanian regime was totalitarian or not (certain authors, following the classification of Linz and Stepan², characterize the Romanian regime as “sultanistic”³). It was anyway closer to totalitarianism than any other regime in Central and Eastern Europe. This is one of the reasons why, unlike the other CEECs, there was no organized dissident movement in Romania. Anticommunism, as a form of political and civic discourse, was born after 1989⁴. And it quickly became an instrument in the political competition, as one of the most salient cleavages of the post-communist political arena was the one that separated the successor parties from the anticommunist ones⁵.

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¹ TZVETAN TODOROV, *Mémoire du bien, tentation du mal. Enquête sur le siècle*, Robert Laffont, Paris, 2000.

² ALFRED STEPAN, JUAN LINZ, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation. Southern Europe, South America, and Post Communist Europe*, Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.

³ Linz and Stepan have taken this concept from MAX WEBER, *Economie et Société*; it designates a form of patrimonialism on which is superposed a strong domination of the Chief, combined with the personalization of power and a tendency to dynasticism.

⁴ ALEXANDRU GUSSI, “L’anticommunisme en Roumanie, 1996-2000”, in *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review*, VII, 1, 2007, pp. 117-132, p. 117 and *passim*; see also DANIEL BARBU, *Republica absentă*, București, Nemira, 1999, pp. 93- 99.

⁵ JEAN-MICHEL DE WAELE, “Consolidation démocratique, partis et clivages en Europe centrale et orientale”, in Jean-Michel De Waele (ed.), *Partis politiques et démocratie en Europe centrale et orientale*, Bruxelles, Editions de l’Université de Bruxelles, 2002.

My article will draw on the idea that the anti-communist discourse was used by the political parties whenever it could serve in the competition for power, thus overshadowing a genuine historical and ethical approach to the recent past. It will be built upon two important directions in what concerns the memory of communism. First, I will make an outline of how the political decision-makers approached the issue since 1989 until nowadays, by emphasizing the most important moments and processes in this evolution. Secondly, I will raise the question of several ethical and methodological difficulties posed by the way totalitarian memory is incorporated in today's political discourse.

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I shall begin by an attempt to understand what “dealing with the past” might mean. Certainly, a scientific investigation of a past that is still hidden in the archives is one important dimension of understanding what happened in the half a century of communist regime. On the other hand, “dealing with the past” has an ethical dimension, which brings to the fore the problem of responsibility. As one important Romanian scholar noted, the “criminal acts” perpetrated by the totalitarian regimes are not as impersonal as the Romanian political discourse of the 1990 makes us believe; they are the acts of concrete persons⁶. This process of ethical analysis of the past can take the form of transitional justice, which is “a range of approaches new democracies adopt in an effort to come to terms with their dictatorial recent past or human rights abuses”⁷. From a legal point of view, transitional justice has three dimensions: lustration, access to secret files and court proceedings⁸. But besides transitional justice, the meaning of the communist past can also be approached with the historian's instruments, in an attempt to reveal the way it transformed Romanian society and politics.

One important aspect for the overall attitude of Romanians towards their communist past was the political evolution at the beginning of the 1990s. The successor parties won huge electoral majorities in the 1990 and 1992 elections (around 67% in 1990 and around 30% in 1992; Iliescu: 85%, 47%, 61,43%). And, since the anti-communist discourse was monopolized by the opposition, it had no echo in the population⁹. This is one of the reasons why the issue of dealing with the communist past was not at all on the political agenda at least until 1996, while the successor party was in power. As several Romanian authors contend, the Front of National Salvation (later transformed into the Social Democracy's Party) opted for a “politics of forgetting”¹⁰, that was rather

⁶ DANIEL BARBU, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

⁷ LAVINIA STAN, “Goulash Justice for Goulash Communism? Explaining Transitional Justice in Hungary”, in *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review*, VII, 2, 2007, pp. 269-291, p. 271.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ ALEXANDRU GUSSI, *art. cit.*, p. 118.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 121; DANIEL BARBU, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

implicit, than manifest. Moreover, “the absence of a civic anti-communism before 1989 contributed to the absence of a common condemnation of the communist past assumed by the main emerging political forces, which could have laid the bases of democratization”¹¹.

Paradoxically, the coalition of democratic, openly anti-communist parties, which won the 1996 elections, did not proceed immediately to any concrete measures of dealing with the past. The view was that the Democratic Convention (CDR) was so obviously anti-communist, that it didn't have to prove this commitment; instead, the new government fully dedicated to its efforts to get Romania into NATO and the EU – (I would like to note that this extreme pro-Westernism was also perceived as a form of anti-communism). Former president Emil Constantinescu affirmed his conviction that a lustration law was not necessary, because anyway the former communists would never return to power¹². The law concerning access to the Secret Police files, promoted by the chief of the Association of Former Political Prisoners, Ticu Dumitrescu, was blocked in the Parliament, and when it was finally adopted in 1999, its promoter declared that it was completely different from what he had in mind. As for court proceedings, there were very few complaints for institutional abuses committed during the communist regime; most of them were never brought before the Court. We know of only four cases that were given a solution until 2004. In 1999, for example, the Court distinguished between the individual responsibility of the perpetrator and a possible “process of communism” which “exceeds the legal framework” and which could only make the object of a “historical analysis”¹³. Thus, only individuals were condemned, but never institutions of the totalitarian State, or the regime itself.

The Law 187/1999 on the access to the *Securitate* files envisaged the creation of a National Council for the Study of the *Securitate* Archives, whose members would be appointed by the Parliament following a political algorithm (art. 8). Thus, control over the former *Securitate* archives was completely politically biased. In the first years of its functioning, the Council confronted a wide range of technical problems, among which the transfer of the *Securitate* files from the Romanian Intelligence Service, who jealously guarded its control over the files, as well as internal disputes between the members of the Council, which blocked decision-making for month. After 2005, though, there were several surprising decisions issued by the Council which concern the identification of a number of important public figures as former collaborators of the secret police. Among them, the liberal senator Mona Muscă, one of the initiators and the most vociferous supporters of the Lustration Law.

¹¹ ALEXANDRU GUSSI, *art. cit.*, p. 120.

¹² Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 123.

¹³ Military Prosecutor's Office, Military Court of Appeal, Indictment, in the File no. 15/P/1999, 7 September 2000.

Another political step undertaken in order to deal with the communist past was the creation of the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes in Romania. The Institute was created through a Decision of the Government in December 2005 as a public institution subordinated to the Government and co-ordinated by the Prime Minister. Its purpose is, according to the law, “the scientific investigation and the identification of the crimes, abuses and human rights infringements committed during the whole period of the Romanian communist regime, as well as the notification of the bodies entitled to take measures in cases of law infringement” (art. 2). The main objectives of the Institute are the gathering of data, documents and testimonies regarding all oppressive actions perpetrated by the system, as well as the notification of the state’s criminal investigation departments. Research methods used by the experts of the institute include contemporary archaeology, archive research, but also interviews with the victims of the oppression. Besides issuing a scientific review and books with the results of these investigations, the Institute also notified the Prosecutor’s Office concerning cases of human rights infringements (Enoiu case, 9 August 2007; 210 former officers, 22 may 2007; former Securitate officers who recruited under-aged). Another project of the Institute is the creation of several Communist Memorial Museums in former prisons throughout the country. The work of the Institute has three important dimensions which complement each other. The first one is scientific investigation, in order to better describe and understand what happened during communism. The second is more ethical and concerns the need to do justice to the victims of communism, by prosecuting those who committed crimes. Finally, the third dimension is related to the idea that we must not forget an important part of our recent history, and it is the memorial one.

Finally, another institution set up with the purpose to deal with the communist past was the Presidential Commission for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania, established in April 2006. The creation of this Commission must be also placed in the context of the political battle between the President and the Prime Minister. The Commission was composed of famous historians of communism and it released its final report of 665 pages in December 2006. The declared purpose of the Report was “to recover the memory of the past” and to “identify responsibilities” for the communist crimes. It has three main chapters, the first dedicated to the Communist Party, the second, to the repression, and the third, to the society, economy and culture.

This gave the President of Romania, Mr. Traian Băsescu, the opportunity to deliver a speech in the Parliament condemning the communist regime on the basis of this scientific report: “We have the data necessary to condemn the communist regime in Romania without right to appeal. A democracy without memory is one that finds itself in grave suffering. We must not forget, in order to avoid the errors of the past”¹⁴. I will further quote from his discourse, as I

¹⁴ Speech of President Traian Băsescu, in the Romanian Parliament, 18 December 2006, www.presidency.ro (official translation).

would like to underline some problematic aspects that this speech raises in what concerns Romanians' memory of the past. The main idea promoted in this speech is that "the totalitarian communist regime in Romania was imposed by foreign dictate"; the expression "imported communism" also appears. Thus, the guilt for the "illegitimate and criminal" acts of the regime is assigned to the "foreign power" which imposed it, on the one hand, and to the Communist Party and the Securitate, on the other. Băsescu says: "I want to be well understood. I do not for a single moment refer to the great mass of Party members, whose sole activity was to pay their dues and to take part in monthly meetings void of any meaning". The Romanian society is absolved by the President and by the Commission Report of any responsibility for the wrong doings of the communist regime.

Or, as I mentioned at the beginning of this article, the issue of responsibility cannot be relegated to impersonal bodies which, moreover, don't exist anymore and cannot be held accountable! These institutions were inhabited by concrete persons who committed abuses. Moreover, the society as a whole cannot be completely put out of the question, because of its passive participation in the perpetuation of the regime. While the speech of Băsescu states that "for the overwhelming majority of the population it was a case of mutilated existence, lived under direct or indirect terror", other Romanian scholars prove, with statistical data, that the majority of the population actually profited from communism¹⁵, in economic terms, because of secure jobs, wages, dwellings and education. This is one of the reasons for the passive or active submission of those who, although they never committed crimes, accepted the rule of the Party or even adhered to it. Or, this part of the Romanian society cannot be completely absolved of its moral fault¹⁶.

Briefly stated, until 1996, the party in power – a successor party – preferred to let go of the past as if it didn't exist, while the anti-communist discourse was rhetorically monopolized by the opposition. Things didn't change much after the change of government in 1996. It is interesting to note that the period after 2004 witnesses an inflation of political anti-communist discourse from the parties in power, who also took concrete steps to condemn the communist regime.

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Before emphasizing the way in which the discourse on the totalitarian past was affected, in Romania, by the political needs of its supporters, I would like to draw the attention on the double-edged relationship between the past and the present. Undoubtedly, the past influences the present, but the opposite is also true, that is, the present decisively influences the way we look at the past. In this line of thought, I will quote Benedetto Croce, according to whom "history is always contemporary", because "in reality, history always responds

¹⁵ DANIEL BARBU, *op. cit.*, pp. 83-92.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 99-100.

to the needs of the present and to the present situations for which past events have consequences¹⁷. The historian not only tells a story; he/she begins by *constructing* his/her object of study, which is never given as such, but depends on the way reality is interrogated/questioned. The history has a social function, inasmuch as it organizes the past in accordance to the needs of the present¹⁸.

In Romania, the anti-communist discourse was monopolized by a part of the political class. Some authors make a distinction between civic and political anti-communism¹⁹, but a closer look at the facts shows that civil society always supported those political parties which had an anti-communist discourse. This is the case for the Democratic Convention who governed between 1996 and 2000, but also for the President Băsescu, in office since 2004, who managed to attract a large segment of the Romanian civil society and intellectuals *because* he finally took an official position to condemn communism. The anti-communist discourse was always used as a political weapon, either to delegitimize political adversaries (the case of the Democratic Convention until 1996) or, more recently, to give an aura to the President in office. Unfortunately, this politicization of the memory can only overshadow a genuine understanding of how the Romanian totalitarian regime was possible.

Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the positive aspects of this recent inflation of political gestures in the sense of “dealing with the past”. Because forgetting the past would only bring us to repeat its errors. An effort to understand the past and to take responsibilities – and maybe to accept our mistakes, as a society, is necessary. There are two extreme attitudes which can be observed in the Romanian society as to the problem of responsibility. One is to consider communism as a fatality, which was instituted because of the Soviets and continued for 45 years because of the terror. This completely exonerates any guilt for what happened. The other extreme attitude is to consider that everyone was a collaborator, which once again exonerates responsibility, because it pleads for the idea of forgetting everything. This sentiment begun to appear when, in 2007, the Romanian society discovered that some of the most respected public figures – politicians, intellectuals, priests – collaborated with the Securitate.

Between these two hypostases, we need to try to avoid generalization, while being aware that we have to *assume* guilt – and not to *assign* guilt – in order to come to terms with the past. This can only be done by historical inquiry, which should distance itself from the political struggle as much as possible.

I would conclude by saying that, apparently, there is no common historical narrative of communism in Romania; rather, there is a competition as to who – of the political forces – is more anti-communist than the other. It will still take time and research in order to truly understand the conditions of the existence of the communist regime in Romania.

¹⁷ Quoted in JACQUES LE GOFF, *Histoire et mémoire*, Gallimard, Paris, 1988, p. 188.

¹⁸ LUCIE FEBVRE, *Combats pour l'histoire*, A. Colin, Paris, 1933, p. 438.

¹⁹ ALEXANDRU GUSSI, *art. cit.*