

Communicating the past into the present. Young voices about communism and communists in Romania

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Abstract: More than two decades have passed since the fall of communism; meanwhile, a new generation has come to age in the post-communist countries, with no direct experience of the past, yet still influenced by it. In the pages to follow I try to bring the voice of young Romanians to the fore, for it is a voice which has scarcely been heard. How do young people communicate about a past that they did not experience but which nevertheless influences them? How do they appropriate the past and what does it mean for them? The hypothesis emerging from empirical exploration is that “communist” is the term that the youth uses to mark their distinction and rebellion against the adult generation. It is not as much a political category but an everyday term that would silence the “other” of youth, the adults. “Communists” are described as authoritarian, dictatorial, limited, rigid, and indoctrinated. While “communist” is a term that seems easy to describe, there is no clear and coherent opinion when it comes to “communism”. More often than not,

young people adopt the standardised version of history textbooks and combine it with the stories heard from their parents. It is to be pointed out that often the two versions collide, the textbooks presenting the recent past in dark colours as abusive, dictatorial, totalitarian, while many parents emphasise the safety of work and lodgings.¹

Keywords: collective memory, communism, communist generation, youth

*Communiquer le passé dans le présent : les jeunes voix parlent du
communisme et des communistes en Roumanie*

Résumé: Plus de deux décennies sont passées depuis la chute du communisme ; une nouvelle génération s'est formée, une génération sans aucune expérience directe avec le passé, et cependant toujours sous son influence.

Comment communiquent-ils les jeunes au sujet d'un passé dont ils n'ont pas l'expérience, mais qui les influence ? Comment arrivent-ils à s'approprier ce passé et quelle est sa signification ? Ce sont des questions auxquelles cet article tentera de répondre à partir de l'hypothèse suivante : « communiste » représente un terme que les jeunes utilisent pour se distinguer et marquer leur révolte contre la génération adulte.

Mots-clés: communisme, communiste, génération, jeunesse, mémoire collective

Introduction

More than two decades have passed since the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe and a lot of ink has been put to paper to discuss, analyse and attempt to understand this specific regime. Nevertheless, I myself shall *use the ink once more* because, meanwhile, a new generation has come of age in the post-communist countries, with no direct experience of the past, yet still influenced by it. The main areas of exploration that I propose are: How do young people communicate about a past that they did not experience but which nevertheless influences them? How do they appropriate the past and what does it mean for them? In the pages to follow I try to bring the voice of young Romanians to the fore, for it is a voice that has scarcely been heard.

¹ This work was supported by a grant of the Romanian National Authority for Scientific Research, CNCS – UEFISCDI, project number PN-II-RU-PD-2011-3-0089.

In the first part of the paper I attempt to situate this work conceptually in the larger framework of relevant literature on memory and, more specifically, collective memory. The second branch of conceptualization has to do with the issue of generation and its link with the more methodologically grounded concept of “interpretative repertoire”.

In the second part of the paper I present the results of empirical research based on semi-structured interviews run in the spring of 2011 in Constanța, Romania. The corpus of the empirical exploration is represented by sixty-three semi-structured interviews with young people aged 17 to 23, thus young enough not to have direct experience of communism, but who face various narratives of that period in their everyday encounters. In order to understand the meaning of the past in their life, the research team asked the respondents to define and evaluate two terms: “communist” and “communism”. I situate the text represented by the content of the semi-structured interviews in the larger context of available grand narratives at the level of society. Thus, I briefly introduce the recent past as it appears in history textbooks, the formal version of the past. In addition, I consider some “vehicles of memory” of choice; movies about communism.

1. Theoretical considerations: on memory and generations

Memory is conceptualised as the way in which people construct a sense of the past which further serves the interests of a particular community (Confino, 1997). In this paper, I explore the way in which Romanian youth builds narratives about a past regime, the communist one. I attempt to see the versions of the past which predominate, the images that are selected, while others are silenced.

Another concept is that of “generation” as proposed by Mannheim (1952, 1970) and further developed in numerous academic works. The central idea is that there is such a unit as a generation, by virtue of the cohorts coming of age that have similar experiences in a specific social and political context, marked by certain events. One of the main methodological premises is that different generations share certain interpretive repertoires about major issues that allow for qualitative explorations even though the samples are not statistically significant. Thus, I argue that there is such an observable phenomenon as “the generation”, and that it develops specific interpretative repertoires on relevant issues, such as “communist” and “communism”.

2. Memory and collective memory

One of the main theoretical premises of this paper is that the narratives built about past events speak about present circumstances. Thus, the images of the past as they are stored in the collective memory are about the present, rather than about past events *per se*. Remembrance is in very large measure a reconstruction of the past achieved with data borrowed from the present, a reconstruction prepared,

furthermore, by reconstructions of earlier periods wherein past images had already altered (Halbwachs, 1997 [1950]). Moreover, as the French author points out, one can understand each memory at individual level only if it can be located within the thought of the corresponding group. Thus, the individual has to be connected to the various groupings of which they are part, in order for the relative strength of various memories to become apparent.

Collective memory is an exploration of a shared identity that unites a social group, be it family or a nation, whose members nonetheless have different interests and motivations. The articulation of a particular perception of the past within the context of society represents a shared symbolic universe; “the past is constructed not as fact but as myth to serve the interest of a particular community” (Confino, 1997, 1387). In this case, it is youth which develops a distinct identity, even though it does not comprise a group, being instead united by generational defaults. Moreover, collective memory represents a precious resource for maintaining social bonds and claiming authority, mobilising and legitimising it (Irwin-Zarecka, 1994).

At the level of Romanian society at large, the emerging generation experiences the ‘politics of memory’ as shaped by the political actors of the country. It refers to “who wants whom to remember what and why” (Confino, 1997, 1393). It can be materialised in textbooks, political gestures, laws, educational programs, memorials and museums among other things. At the same time, “the contorted path taken by Romania to confront its communist past is not a finished process yet, but rather represents a dynamic field in which social actors are fighting over which events and actors in the past should be collectively remembered, and especially how they have to be represented in the collective memory of post-communist Romania” (Hogea, 2010, 16). In the case of Romania, there is thus no clear dominant version of the recent past, but the floor is open, at the macro-level, for various competing narratives. These are carried and become available via various “vehicles of memory” (Yerushalmi, 1989), such as books, movies, statues, and the like.

In terms of the Romanian recent past, consensus exists only around the idea of “anti”, in this case “anticommunism”, but the actual narratives are extremely diverse. Romania has not come to terms with its recent past, and this affects the stories which are available for the young people as well.

The “politics of memory” represents the context in which young people build their own version of the past. The narratives of youth are not necessarily identical, or even similar, to the official versions of the past. Even if the perspective of youth is not salient in the public space, it is nevertheless relevant to the protean nature of collective memory. It can provide a further glimpse into the future, for this is the generation which will eventually come of age and take power.

3. Interpretative repertoires and the issue of generation

One of the research premises of this work is that there is such a sociological object as the generation; a group which shares the same world view, common sense ideas and socially shared tacit knowledge, a sort of *doxa*, a world of common sense (Bourdieu, 2000 [1980], 91-92). Moreover, due to the rapid social changes that Romania has faced in the recent years, following Mannheim (1970), it is all the more likely that the generation of young Romanians is a cohesive one.

The objective element that makes a generation is the similar location of a number of individuals in a social structure, according to Mannheim. Thus, the individuals pertaining to a generation do not have to know one another, or even be physically close. They share the *locus*, however, which further enhances specific options or limitations in terms of their life path. The shared location exposes them to similar grand narratives, and enhances the chances for a specific interpretative universe related to the fundamental issues of their era. "Belonging to the same generation or age group, endow[s] the individuals sharing in [it] with a common location in the social and historical process, and thereby limit[s] them to a specific range of potential experiences, predisposing them for a certain characteristic mode of thought and experience, and a characteristic type of historically relevant action. (Mannheim, 1952, 291) The location in the understanding of Mannheim it a sort of *habitus*, as Pierre Bourdieu names it. Thus, "generation" as a social phenomenon represents a particular kind of identity of location, embracing related "age groups" embedded in a socio-historical process (Mannheim, 1970).

The existence of specific narratives of a generation is determined by the fact that it has come of age at the same time, in a specific and unique socio-cultural context. Moreover, a generation experiences the same founding events, in this case the immediate aftermath of communism. The time of becoming creates a distinct context where specific topics are relevant and loaded with meaning. "A 'generational location' is a cluster of opportunities or life chances that constitute the 'fate' of a generation. There emerges a 'generation as actuality' that shares a set of historical responses to its location and then within a generation there are generation units which articulated structures of knowledge or a consciousness that express their particular location" (Edmunds and Turner 2002, 10). The common temporal framework creates the premises for specific "culturally available understandings as to what constitute a topic" (Parker in Potter *et al.*, 1990, 210), thus a specific context for the development of interpretative repertoires about the recent past. The diversity of understanding is expected to be high; nevertheless, the choice of terms and constructions is relevant to the universe of meanings attached to the terms under study.

This paper aims to explore some of these meanings and connotations as they get shaped at grassroots level, in the case of regular people in their early twenties. I discuss the issue of reception because, unlike the "politics of memory", this is less

present in academic explorations of the past. The effort is ethnographic and there are no pretensions of generalization. At the same time, what this paper tries to bring to the fore is a voice which is less present in the public space, that of youth. This is because the agency of youth is quite limited; young people are still in the process of becoming and do not yet occupy important positions in the social hierarchy.

4. The context of memory of communism and communists in Romania

In order to make sense of the text itself and the meanings which young people attach to “communism” and “communists” respectively, I also introduce some elements of the cultural and political context. I refer in this respect to the available grand narratives as they get shaped at a meta-level, by local political players, and/or large international players, lately. In Romania, since the fall of communism, there has been quite a competition for the imposition of a main narrative about the past, but the sole articulated idea which has emerged is anticommunism, the official rejection of the recent past (Abraham, 2011). It is in this context, of negation, that the young generation comes of age and attempts to appropriate the past in its own terms; fitting their interest and vision about past, present, and future. “The narratives about the past construct linearity and/or causality of events so that the past, the present, and the future are presented as logically linked to each other” (Edy, 2006; Kitch, 2005; Irwin-Zarecka, 1994 in Hoge, 2010, 17).

5. The history textbook as a “vehicle of memory”

History textbooks can be considered part of the grand narrative about the past, enforced by the main institutional actor of the society, the state. They represent an important part of the context of collective memory building because all pupils come into contact with them.

I situate the text about communism against the institutional context that the most used 8th grade history textbook provides², in terms of institutional narratives about the communist past. The book represents the standardized version of the recent past, which Romanian pupils become acquainted with around the age of fourteen.

History textbooks have composed their version of the past in an anticommunist key. The players, who concurred to the rewriting of history after the fall of communism, were both local, institutional players at Ministry level - historians - and large international ones, like the World Bank or The International Monetary Fund (Abraham, 2006). The role of the World Bank, in this case, was to finance the introduction of alternative textbooks, so that pupils would not have a monolithic picture of the history of their country, but slightly alternative versions. In this context, there is to be further research how this approach has contributed to the

² There are several history textbooks in use at the moment in Romania; nevertheless, this one is the most widely used by History teachers: *Istorie Manual pentru clasa a VIII-a*. București: Humanitas Educațional

democratisation of the national narrative, or the breaking of the national identity vernacular³. Nevertheless, it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore this issue.

Nevertheless, the consistent characteristic of the alternative textbooks, besides the anticommunist approach, is the rather sketchy and limited approach to the recent past; a few pages in the textbooks. On the other hand, it is indeed the case that Romanians, historians included, have not come to terms with the recent past, thus it is not yet clear how to picture the events and the characters of the previous regime. Nevertheless, in this context, pupils from the turn of this century have been exposed to the powerful idea of anticommunism, yet with rather little - and not particularly sophisticated - information about the recent past.

One of the first observations when it comes to the history book under scrutiny is that it treats the communist period very briefly, in six pages. The terms are not fully explained and the approach lacks scientific distance. The reader is not allowed to make up their mind about the period, but is given direction in "reading" the recent past. From a scientific point of view, most of the questions already imply the "correct answer", rather than allowing the students to gather arguments to sustain an answer. The approach in the textbook does not encourage critical thinking, but rather adherence to a pre-existing point of view.

The history book states that the communists, between 1944 and 1947, "falsified elections", "purged the state apparatus", "imposed a single party", "imposed candidates, political leaders", "created political camps/prisons" (2000, 158-159). Moreover, we are told that they were not legitimate, since in 1944 the Communist Party had fewer than one thousand members. The negative aspects are not really balanced. Topics carrying fewer categorically negative connotations, such as agrarian reform, are emphasised in the textbook but the authors (Oane Ochescu 2000) mention that these processes were undertaken to enhance the popularity of the communists with soldiers and peasants.

For the years up to 1965, the Gheorghe-Gheorghiu Dej period (2000, 160-161), the universe of negative actions undertaken by the communists is overwhelming. Thus, it is the time of "collectivisation", "etatization", "work camps", "political police", "re-education". Moreover, the authors mention that the Popular Republic of Romania is not an expression of popular will, but a result of a Moscow dictate. The period between 1965 and 1989 is that dominated by Nicolae Ceaușescu. The history book depicts it as: "dynastic socialism" and "neo-stalinism". The partial liberalisation period between 1965 and 1971 is also mentioned in the textbook.

³Alon Confino (1997) points out that what is amazing about the narrative of national identity is not the fact that it is a bottom-down version of who we are, but that it becomes a vernacular, which provides individuals, members of a nation with a sense of imagined community, despite their otherwise being very diverse and having life projects which frequently collide with those of fellow nationals.

Overall, it seems that Romanians have not managed to make peace with their past and establish scientific distance from the communist period. The perspective that the historians bring to the history books reverberates into society, among the young generations. It is to be expected that people in this age group adopt some of the standard ideas regarding the past, considering their lack of direct experience.

6. Movies as “vehicles of memory”

In the realm of popular representations, there are various “vehicles of memory” that carry meanings about a subject. In this respect, one can think of such artefacts as books, commemorations, museums and, last but not least, films. In this paper I only refer to the universe of films about communism, as relevant context for Romanian youth. The reason I choose these “vehicles of memory”, rather than others, is their presence in the life of young people, by means of their own choice, rather than as institutionalised rituals or scholastic duty. I consider going to the cinema as an expression of agency, as opposed to the structure provided by compulsory history textbooks, commemorations, even *reading books*. I chose cinema as a contrasting instance, which nevertheless contributes to the contextual framing of memory of the recent past.

Some of the young people we talked to do not know/recall any movie about communism. It can thus happen that this “vehicle of memory” is not relevant on this topic for some. I should add, based on a series of focus-groups that I recently ran⁴ that watching films is popular among Romanian youth, most often films downloaded from the Internet, because it is cheaper than going to the cinema. In the case of communism, it can be said that some young people simply do not actively search for information on the subject and thus exert their agency of not being interested.

For those having seen a film about communism, the most common references were to Romanian productions, both fiction and documentaries. The comments are telling as to the way young subjects situate themselves towards the past: “In 4, 3, 2 abortion was personalised – a forbidden aspect in the communist period”; “The autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu was presented in much too positive a note, for what Ceaușescu really was. But it captured his foolish pride very accurately, and that of his wife; the life they were living, how they were showing off. It makes no sense to pretend to be something when you are not”.

Movies made in the communist period, and played now on television represent another source of ideas about the past. It is interesting to observe, in this case, that the reception can be mediated by the context provided by the parents: “I was stupefied to find out that it was the first time they had seen these films too; because these films had been forbidden in the communist time.” The domestic narratives

⁴ 10 focus-groups with teenagers aged 13 to 20 from nine counties of Romania, in April and July, 2012; this cohort is slightly younger and is fond of vampire movies downloaded from the Internet.

about communism are supplemented by Hollywood productions, like ‘Che’, but generally speaking the references are overwhelmingly Romanian. Thus, when it comes to movies, it can be said that Romanian versions about communism are the most popular, thus stories about the past as produced and reproduced by adult domestic narrators. It might be said that young Romanians favour Romanian voices over foreign ones on this topic. It might also be that domestic productions are closer to hand than others.

7. Empirical exploration of the perspectives of youth on communism and communists

In order to understand the view of the youth on communism and communists, I designed a qualitative exploration. The research consisted in an interview guide with nine open items which the respondents, selected on the basis of their age, were asked to fill in. The interviews were conducted with 63 young Romanians from the region of Dobrogea, south-east Romania. The field operators were of the same age group as the interviewees, 19 to 25 years old, so that respondents would feel free to provide real answers, not socially desirable ones (Silvermann 2004, Marinescu 2009). In the first part of the interview, the respondents were asked to express their views on “communists”: to define what a communist is; to mention some features of communists; to evaluate whether communists are good or bad people. In the second part the subject was “communism” and the interviewees were asked to: define communism; to evaluate how it was in communism; to name features of communism; to evaluate whether it was good or bad. The young respondents were asked as well whether they know any communist. The last item referred to films about communism.

The interviews were performed in face-to-face encounters, the operators engaging in a dialogue with the respondents to clarify the items, as well as to reassure the respondents that it was not their knowledge that was under scrutiny, but their personal views on the matter. It is of course the case, that being a qualitative exploration, the results cannot be generalised beyond the limits of the universe of this particular research.

For validity's sake, I tested whether the results seemed plausible with Political Science students in Bucharest. They found the narratives pertaining to common sense, in line with their own ideas and feelings related to the subject. This was the case even though they were much more exposed to formal academic resources on the subject than other people of their age.

8. Communist: the youth repertoire

From the transcripts of the interviews, an “interpretative repertoire” about the past and its actors can be detected, with due caution though, given the qualitative nature of the exploration. The diversity of wording used to describe a communist is

quite vast, nevertheless a specific “interpretative repertoire” is detectable. The unifying element is the universe of negative connotations attached to the term. The reasons behind the negative connotations attached to communists are varied, but with certain redundancies. Some topics can be detached and considered in their own right.

One perspective which became salient in the encounters was that a person can be considered communist if they share communist ideas, beliefs and act in accordance with the communist ideology. Some illustrations are telling in this respect; thus, a communist is a person who: “has embraced the communist ideology”; “lived in the communist period and assimilated the doctrine”; has a “mentality in accordance with the Communist Party”; “supported the communist regime, shared the ideology, the program, communist ideas”; “applies and respects the communist ideology”.

It is interesting to note that the respondents believed that those who experienced the previous regime believed in it. It is common knowledge for the ones that lived under communism, as well as for the scholars (Elster *et al.*, 1998, Verdery, 1994) that actually people in communism were withdrawn in a second public sphere, out of the eyes of the authorities, where they lived their lives and mocked the system and its fallacies. The perspective of a uniform and indoctrinated communist population seems more like a gaze from the West. It is interesting to observe that quite many young respondents share this view.

The repertoire about being a communist is completed with ideas related to being rigid, inflexible and old-fashioned: “does not easily accept change/new things”; “inflexible ideas, one that lives by old-fashioned ideas”; “does not accept alternatives, their own point of view is the only valid one”; “not open to new things, with inflexible ideas, difficult to change”; “difficult to adjust in this era of all possible liberties”.

Unlike “communism”, which is described in more sober terms as “form of government”, “ideology”, “political regime”, the concrete noun arouses emotional reactions and a heavy load of negative connotations. Thus, the communist as seen by the youth is first of all overwhelmingly “authoritarian” (tries to impose only the ideas that fit him). The idea of the authoritarian communist is recurrent, and appears in various contexts during the discussions. Other words complete the picture: “dictator”, “indoctrinated”, “limited”, “rigid”, “severe”, “narrow-minded”, “selfish”, “mean”, “lacking initiative”, “tyrannical”, “strict”, “hypocritical”, “conservative”, “lacking personality”, “restrictive”, (too) “patriotic”.

The repertoire is clearly misbalanced in the direction of the negative features. At the same time, one can detect in the wording either attributes that describe the communist as over-powerful and discretionary, or as too weak and overwhelmed by fear and outer rules. In the first instance, the words chosen are: “brutal”,

“insensitive”, “violent”, “absurd”, “diabolical”, “paranoia”, “stubborn”, “manipulator”, “arrogant”, “intransigent”, “racist”, “narcissistic”, “propagandistic”, “demanding”, “not fair”, “expecting that other people do things for him”, “discretionary”, “terror”, “drastic”, “exaggerated”, “power”, “knowing how to impose himself”, “likes to control other people”, “cunning”, “domineering”, “cold”, “possessive”, “assassins”.

The second instance is illustrated by descriptors such as: “not-trusting”, “parsimonious”, “pessimistic”, “old”, “grumpy”, “weak”, “manipulated”, “brainwashed”, “idolatry”, “paranoia about always being spied on”, “lack of freedom”, “reserved”, “introvert”, “self-censored”, “obedient” (to central ruling). It might be that the legacies of the past, the *locus* in the communist social structure, run indirectly in the narratives of the present. The linguistic choices might point to the lack of balance between the powerful and the lay citizens under communism, to the social distance between the discretionary agency of some and the powerlessness of the others. Ultimately, it might be that, in sublimated forms, it speaks about the low institutionalisation of rational-legal authority under communism. Another narrative is that of the communist who is not living in the present, not being able to keep the pace: “lost in past tense”, “not living in the present”, “conservative”, “refusal to think beyond the doctrine”, “no social responsibility”.

There are a scant few positive terms used to describe a communist: “hardworking”, “disciplined”, “loyal”, “fair”, “honest”, “serviceable”, “determined”, “rigorous”, “orderly”, “dutiful”, “perseverant”, “ambitious”. At the same time, from the discussions, it appeared that being hardworking, waking up early and being dutiful are not necessarily positive features, because they can show that you do not live your life as you please, but as others have it for you. ‘Ambitious’ and ‘perseverant’ seem equally dubious to some young minds because they indicate having a plan, instead of being spontaneous and seizing the moment. Thus, the actual universe of positive connotations is even narrower if one is to take a closer look at the actual meaning attributed to the words.

Thus, in general we are to know that communists are people who do not allow freedom of expression, ideas and actions different from their own. In the terms of the respondents: “against the diversity of opinions”, “not allowing the population to express their opinion”, “do not accept any other ideas except their own”, “the right to choose was annulled”, “restrict the freedom of citizens”, “try to implement in other people certain ideologies regarding social life”, “people who were limited in exercising certain rights”. Moreover, they: “oppress the intellectuals”, “back the existence of a mediocre class”, “without proper training in the intellectual realm”, “they get the taste of power and exaggerate the rules that have to be obeyed”, “widely known for their excess of power”, “they impose their personal politics”, “their way of ruling was excessively inclined towards violence and the limitation of freedom” “by means of violence, want to be all powerful”, “pursuing a policy of

terror”, “they imposed by force the communist system”, “impose fear”, “support wrong ideas about the way of life of the people in the regime (being strict, confiscation of the goods and their transformation into state property)”, “they hate the people”, “their good is built on others’ malaise”, “they do not promote equality and liberty”. In the phrasings above we find the communist mainly as a decision-maker, able to impose a perspective onto others in discretionary ways.

In other accounts, the recipient of communist decisions takes shape: “not open to the new, “during communism emancipation was not possible”, “do not want to step further than the limit imposed upon them”, “they live by drastic strict rules”, “indoctrinated with certain ideas (even if not their own) which they promote against the development of a society”. In the accounts about communists it is more common that they appear as powerful individuals who can impose their will, even by force, than as recipients of communist politics. It is interesting to observe that the young voices *provide with agency*, more often than not considering being a communist to be a matter of individual will.

The idea shared at the level of public discourse, among adults who experienced communism, is that people which lived under communism were at the mercy of their times, at the mercy of the all-powerful state; thus, a perspective of minimum agency. One of the reasons for the popular support for the fall of communism was the idea of the possibility of enhanced agency; the capacity for people to build their lives as they wanted. It is interesting to observe that two decades later, the versions about the past collide, for the young people of today perceive the full agency of the adults; thus it might be that they project this agency into the past as well.

One idea that is common in contemporary Romania is that people are free to do whatever they want. The instance that was overwhelmingly considered to limit agency was the communist state. Now that the state is not powerful, one shared idea is that there is unlimited freedom. Nevertheless, it might be that the young people perceive the relevant adults in their lives as limiting their agency. In the words of one of the interviewees, a communist “believes in the limitation of the rights of other people”.

For the adults, “communist” meant the oppressive state and its representatives, for the youth, it might be that communists were those who limited their own agency. It is thus a common meaning for the two generations: *communist is something/body that limits individual agency*. In both cases the connotations are negative. At the same time, while for the adults the meaning of “communist” is institutional, for the young respondents it is individual, and it is the adults themselves. It is not very flattering to be coined “communist”, but I argue that it is a mere linguistic reflection of the withdrawal of the state as main actor in the society, the fragmentation of power. It is about a transfer of agency to the individual. The youth perceives the empowered adults, yet I am not sure that the adults are aware of the capacity that

their individual agency has on limiting the agency of others, that of youth more specifically.

It might be that because the adults grew up in the communist system, one with low individual agency, they only perceive agency in relation to a higher institutional instance, the state, and not to themselves. At the same time, for youth, the only perceivable agency is that of adults. I dare say that it might be the case that, because they do not perceive their own agency, their own power, adults might unknowingly act in a limiting and oppressive fashion towards youth. The Romanian adults might not be aware of their own power, and the youth struggle to express this by coining them 'communists', thus having the capacity to limit the agency of other people. While the adult generation experienced a discretionary state, young people experience only discretionary people in their own lives; and this might be the reason they dub the adults "communists". I argue that "communist" can be considered the significant other for young people, somebody whom they experience as limiting their own agency. I thus conclude that when they speak about communists, they speak about the relevant adults in their life who limit their agency.

I believe young Romanians instrumentalise this term in their interactions, in search for their own space of identity. It is not a unique or mischievous undertaking, each generation having its own repertoire that would mark distinction and the distance from the older ones.

9. Communism: the youth repertoire

While "communist" is a term that seems easy to describe, the situation seems much more complicated when it comes to "communism" and its characteristics. Communism is generally defined in quite sober terms such as "form of government", "ideology", "political regime".

"How was it in communism?" was the fifth topic discussed with the young respondents. Some topics are noticeable, both regarding the positive evaluations, and the negative ones. The negative positions are more frequent than the positive ones, and they refer to such issues as: lack of freedom in general and that of expression, opinion, information, choice in particular, the state of fear and constraint, rationalisation of food. One respondent says that "the system was constructed like a Panopticon", another that "only the leader mattered", that people were "afraid not to upset the ones on top". Other answers refer to "the fear of civil society of being spied on", "the system kept an illusion of prosperous life with the help of the Secret Police". At the same time, quite numerous are the references to more mundane aspects, like: lack of television, foreign music, entertainment and new technologies. I believe that this repertoire is a blending of standardised version of the history books with ideas transmitted by people that lived under communist.

The positive aspects that are mentioned when it comes to communism are overwhelmingly about a stable job and lodging provided by the state. The specific accounts illustrate the positive evaluation of the past: “nobody was starving and everybody had a job, a house”, “in the country there was not that much chaos, and when it comes to students, after finishing their studies, they were offered a place to work”, “they received apartments from which they were not thrown out, even if the state was the owner”, “our parents had bigger salaries, more money”, “everybody had something to eat”.

A second topic that emerges, even though less acute, is that of the order of the past, as contrasted with the chaos of the present; the dichotomy rules versus chaos. The young interviewees seem to have mixed feelings about this subject nevertheless it appears in connection with communism and communists. Some comments are telling in this respect: “good because of the rules from the community, rules that they respected, thus avoiding chaos”, “communists are good people because they follow a certain system of rules imposed by a superior, that is supposed to be a leader by his determined nature”, “have their own ideology and they follow it”, “strongly believes and sustains what he does”, “the ideologies that they were following were good”, “good living standards via respecting strict rules”, “they managed to prosper by their own forces”. I read these arguments not as characteristics of the past, but as symbols of what young people experience in their immediate lives, especially flaws in the rule of law and wanting a meritocracy. It might be that, because they experience chaos, they long for rules as a space of security and predictability. Other accounts complete the picture: “in the country there was not that much chaos”, “there was more order (maybe as well because of the fear) and I believe it was cleaner”, “the rules were respected, out of fear, while there is no such feeling anymore”. I am not sure whether the last account proposes positive connotations to fear; that would be a disturbing fact.

It seems that by these answers, the young respondents are not evaluating the past, but the present state of affairs. Memory has a point of reference the present, and not necessarily the past that it is to refer to (Halbwachs, 1997 [1950]). The main challenges that people in this age group face are finding a rewarding job and being able to afford separate lodgings from their parents (Preda, 2009).

It is also to be noted that some respondents take a distance, and clarify the fact that they do not have direct experience when it comes to the communist period. The expression of the distance they take is noticeable in the phrasing: “I did not live in that time”, “from what I heard”, “I believe”, “from the many opinions that I heard”, and so on. The distancing expressed in linguistics terms is interesting when compared to the answers about ‘communists’. The answers to these questions are firm and thorough, which might indicate that in the universe of the youth, communism is an abstract thing, but communists are concrete in their lives. This difference in the positioning on the two nouns creates additional grounds for the

validity of the hypothesis that the term “communist” is an emotionally loaded marker of distinction from the adult generation, the one that lived under communism.

“Communism” is a rather abstract, distant subject, not perceived as part of their lives in its concrete dimensions. This situation might as well point to distance that these young people have from Romanian institutions that actually preserve many of the communist features like autocracy, top-down rule, low enforcement of rational legal authority in a context of elite continuity (Gheorghiu, 2008; Sparks, 2010). It might be as well that features of the present society are not read as “communist” by representatives of this generation. This, I believe, is a danger, for it might lead to the reproduction of the existing, inertial institutional setting, rather than to its change. It is usually expected that a new generation has transformative power. At the same time, if this generation considers an autocratic setting as normal, and tries to fit in, then I believe the grounds for a substantive change are limited; but this is a separate discussion that requires exploration of its own and is beyond the scope of this paper.

The generic references to “people”, “population”, “everybody” seems reminiscent of the egalitarian discourse that the communist regime enforced, which was not however paralleled by an actual classless society. It is interesting to notice how these generic, equalizing references are reproduced by young people who came of age in a very polarized, stratified society. It is indicative as well of the rampant inequalities of the post-communist societies in which the young people live. The projection of an egalitarian past might actually describe the reality of a polarized present.

When it comes to the features of communism some redundancies are noticeable, but also some contrasting elements. The respondents were asked to mention three to five of the most characteristic elements of communism. Among the choices were: “prosperity, authority, violence”, “a lot of restrictions, jobs, little food, safety - not worry about the next day”, “based on rules, equality of rights, imposition”, “censorship, fairness, legality”. One of the most striking combinations to my mind was: “everything was in common; the state offered people just as much as they needed, *the state offered censorship*”.

10. Textual inconsistencies: state, rules, and work in the imagination of youth

The exploration shows that there are quite many issues related to communism that the respondents do not have a clear and coherent opinion about. Nevertheless, inconsistencies are to be expected when dealing with everyday life repertoires (Tileagă, 2012). One of the issues is the state and its role. In some answers the state is provided with quite many positive connotations because it “gives”, “provides”, “offers” such things as jobs, lodging, decent living conditions. In yet another discussions, the state is pictured in darker colours: “the state was worshipped in order to manipulate the goods and properties of the members of the state”, “political

system adopted by a country, based on dictatorship and where the state means everything; everything is done for the state and the communist party", "state regime of dictatorship", "single party, censorship of the press, planned economy, no private property, everything belongs to the state".

Moreover, internal inconsistency is present within individual respondents' answers. One interviewee who says that everybody had a job and financial means during communism also says that communism was a system where the state meant everything and that everything was done for the state and the party.

Another issue that is puzzling is that of "rules" and "order". The topic appears in contrasting contexts and with very different meanings in various parts of the exploration. It receives negative connotations when it appears in the definition of communism, for example: "a regime that is based on many rules, being a drastic one. It has pre-established principles which have to be strictly respected; not respecting them leads to punishment", "communism was a totalitarian regime where power was in the hands of the ruler who organised the state according to his own rules, these having to be respected by the citizens", "system of government based on strict rules; there is no liberty". In these cases, the rules appear in the context of strictness, discretionary conduct and lack of freedom. On the other hand, in other answers, we find 'rules', 'order' versus 'chaos', sometimes juxtaposed with 'fear': "there was more order (maybe also because of fear) and I believe it was cleaner and there were more green areas", "it is for sure that communism was better than nowadays; back then rules were respected, out of fear, while there is no such feeling anymore", "communism was good because in the country there was not that much chaos". I am equally left wondering whether fear is a good thing.

"Work" seems to be yet another controversial topic. It is considered a feature of a communist person by some of the respondents: "hardworking", "appreciates work", "woken up early to work", "work for the future". At the same time, sometimes it appears next to: "drastic", "discipline", "order", "authoritarian", "self-censorship", which are not highly praised by the representatives of youth. It is indeed the case that other contexts include: "loyal", "duty", "fighter", "equality of people", and "honest". It is difficult to make sense of the meaning of 'work' for these young Romanians; when asked about the main features of communism, the idea surfaces that: "the main preoccupation was work". On the same question, another respondent places "work" together with "hunger" and "idolatry".

I argue that an interpretative repertoire about the past does take shape in discussions with young people about the past. It has as central features: the state, rules, and work. At the same time, these topics receive both positive and negative evaluations, the palette of connotations being quite impressive. It seems that the state, rules and work do define the communist past. At the same time, internal inconsistencies when it comes to evaluating them are running high. The state can be

giving and oppressive, rules are rigid and avoid chaos, and work was important because people were hungry.

Conclusions: “communists” versus “communism”

The most consistent and coherent answers are on the questions regarding the communists as people. The term “communist” is loaded with negative connotations that suggest that something more than mere history is at stake in this case. One of the tools that the young Romanians use to silence the significant adults in their lives is to coin them “communists”. Thus, it might be said that the representatives of the young generation instrumentalise the mainstream image of the past in order to mark their distinction (Bourdieu, 1979) from adults and be able to build an identity niche of their own. It is plausible to hypothesise that youth challenges the authority of adults by dismissing their attempts at imposing it as a communist feature. “Communist” does not seem to be a political category for the respondents, but rather a marker of distinction and distance from the adult generation, in a classical situation of generational conflict. The adults are those limiting the agency of the young Romanians, just as the state was the limiting instance of people living under communism. To conclude, ‘communist’ is something/body which limits the agency of others in the Romanian imagination.

When it comes to “communism”, the inconsistencies are high. It might be that abstract notions are more difficult to be put in a coherent framework, especially when the versions of the history books and public discourse collide with those of the parents and people from the reference group. One unfortunate consequence is that these young people do not seem to find the space to form and express an articulated idea about the past and its meaning. It really looks like a post-modern situation, where bits and pieces coexist, with no clarity and coherence. It might be argued that the post-modern framework breaks the *grand narratives* that could mobilise people in wrong directions. At the same time, I am not sure whether the lack of any coherent picture of a major collective issue like the recent past is of any help for young Romanians.

The exploration shows that the respondents do not have a clear and coherent opinion when it comes to communism. More often than not, they take over the standardised version of the history textbooks and combine it with the stories heard from their parents. It is to be pointed out that often the two versions collide, the textbooks presenting the recent past in dark colours as abusive, dictatorial, totalitarian, while the parents emphasise the safety of work and lodging.

What is the role of the state under communism and in democratic conditions? What are rules for and how are they to be implemented? Is work good or bad? These and many others are unanswered questions that remain underexplored in Romanian public space. I believe they require separate discussions in their own right, the chance for youth to find its own direction and answers.

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