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Authoritarian and Post-authoritarian Practices of Building Collective Memory in Central and Eastern Europe

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Abstract: Among the most used expressions in scholarly articles concerning collective memory, is "dealing with the past", or its more specific alternative, "dealing with the traumatic past". This is a rather inexact formulation, because what scholars, artist, curators deal with is not the past in itself but the manner in which it is narrated and represented, or remembered, reconstructed. A series of questions are triggered by this statement: who "remembers", for what purpose, with what consequences?

The scope of this yearbook is to present two different ways of approaching the construction of collective remembrance: the authoritarian one and the post-authoritarian one. The articles discuss case studies of collective memory and identity building in Communist Romania, comparative studies of participative art in post-authoritarian regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, or intricate artistic approaches of traumatic collective memories.

Keywords: collective memory, Communism, museums, artists, participative art

Introduction

There are several characteristics of "collective memory" that are usually mentioned: they are "shared", "narrated", "constructed", "subjective", "emotional", easily "instrumentalized", they depend on "social frames" and have a decisive impact on "identity building". In my perspective, a meaningful discussion on collective memory and its social impact should take into account all these characteristics, but should also consider that it is ahistorical (meaning it is not temporally embedded and dependent on a certain sequence of events or fed by

historical research findings). While it is true that collective memory is a social process involving identity building through cultural mediators and elements of historical milestones, it is also true that the time frame in which this process takes place is always the present. It is the present of sharing, the present of narration, the present in which the re-consolidation of memories[1] occurs, the present of the discourse on the past, the present of the hegemonic political views. "Context" might be a better word: collective memory is rather context dependent than history dependent. What I mean here by context is the moment in which agency manifests itself (and this manifestation might be in a certain context that is social, cultural and political). Mnemonic narratives cannot be considered "universally true" – they are contextually true and cannot claim objectivity. Furthermore, we already know that human brains do not have a specific mechanism for differentiating present perceptions from imagination or remembering[2]. It is only at the choice of the individual conscience to interpret the present perceptions as different from the past perceptions and to name it "recalling" or "remembering". It is not the purpose of this introductory study – nor is there enough space – to investigate what consciousness is and what its relationship with memory and identity is. It might suffice to call it *awareness*[3]. Memory is, therefore, similar to imagination and perception, and the chemical process of retrieval of past perceived and imagined things is the same as that of imagination. This aspect is important because it shows how malleable memory is and how easily the syndrome of "false memories" can occur at the individual level.

Individual memory becomes collective through the process of sharing, and the medium of sharing is that of language[4], in generic terms.

Therefore, collective memory is not only *context dependent* but also *language dependent*, and this is very important to highlight because context and language are both socially framed. So we can talk about a social environment and a political context in which language is the medium for sharing and narrating not the events from the past, but the memories of the events that passed (either episodic or semantic). Consequently, once verbalised, the representations are tailored by language and context and thus altered in order to fit the social environment. The social environment itself is visible through symbols, or, in Alfred Schutz' words, society manifests itself in symbolism[5]. Collective

[1] Sam McKenzie, Howard Eichenbaum, 2011.

[2] Brockmeier 2010: 21.

[3] See Graziano 2013 for a neuroscientific explanation on *awareness*, a model constructed by the brain (Graziano 2013: 107) and for *the theory of mind*, which refers to the ability of a person to construct a model or theory about the contents of someone else's mind (Graziano 2013: 162).

[4] Halbwachs 1992: 45.

[5] Schutz, quoted in Halas 2002: 6.

memory issues do find their expression in these symbols and therefore are an important aspect of nation and identity building[6].

Both authoritarian and democratic regimes use collective memory symbols to strengthen their legitimation, but Aleida Assmann makes a clear distinction between them in terms of the tools used: "Collective participation in national memory is enforced in totalitarian states coercively via indoctrination and propaganda and in democratic states via popular media, public discourse and 'liberal representation'"[7]. In my point of view, the clear distinction between the two political situations (regarding this topic) is the negotiability of memory: in the first case, nation building and the symbols used in society are not publicly negotiable, while in the second case there is a larger room for debate and for alternative voices to be heard.

We do have to keep in mind, however, that there might be a hegemonic trend to instrumentalizing collective memory symbols in a certain purpose in democratic societies as well (such as in post-socialist societies, where most efforts during transition were directed towards replacing the *new man* that should have functioned during the communist regimes with, basically, another *new man* for which there was no generic term, but which we might call the *entrepreneur*; in terms of Romanian collective memory the accepted symbols were translated into an idealisation of the interwar period). Still, memory issues remain debatable and alternative narrations of the past are available and open for discussion. Not to mention that when dealing with symbols of collective memory expressed in art (visual arts, theatre, cinema, museumification etc.), lobbies and private financing are available and might impose a certain topic on the public agenda.

With this respect, Aleida Assmann identifies one of the problems in democratic societies: "A long-term collective memory of historical trauma does not arise without the cumulative efforts of 'memory activists', a political lobby, and economic support. […] The memory of victims is always contested, which means that it has to be established against the pressure of a dominant memory, as is the case, for instance, with the Armenians and the Turks"[8]. If we put things in this deterministic economic perspective, we may come to the conclusion that memory and counter-memory issues are in a competition for resources and powerful advocates, and the voices of the weak or the voices the majority does not wish to hear, remain silent. Unfortunately, this might be a valid conclusion, unless for the one important aspect of democracy: the fact that it can be empowering and participative and several weak voices joint together may acquire the necessary strength to add nuances to the dominating

[6] Halas 2002: 13.

[7] Wiliams 1998 quoted in Assmann 2006: 216.

[8] Assmann 2006: 220.

collective memory discourse. They may use the public space in participative art projects; use the social networks for discussing their views; use all channels of communication to make themselves heard and challenge hegemonic speech.

Therefore, while authoritarian regimes use different institutions of culture, such as theatres, museum or libraries to institutionalize the needed memory discourse and transform it into cultural memory[9], the democratic regimes may assume a plural perspective and promote inclusive memory policies. Ideally, when they do not, they subject themselves to the criticism of the underrepresented voices.

In post-authoritarian transitional societies, the difficult issue is to deal with previous institutionalised memory aspects that "have to be" reinterpreted and assumed anew. They cannot be erased or annulled, and although attempts of lustration of former elites are made everywhere, they are not necessarily successful. Not to mention that authoritarian experiences reach the depth of societies, so "purification" would be impossible and not exactly a democratic ideal or practice[10]. There is thus no point in denying the historical, economic and societal heritage, which has to be retrieved and discussed in all its aspects. The issues that are not publicly discussed are deemed forgotten[11] and they may create a symbolical gap in society.

With this respect, Elzibieta Hallas takes the example of the Polish case, where building the communist nation-state-people – the typical triad of collective identity to which I would add *collective memory* as the subtle social fabric that connects all the other elements – involved inventing symbols for the working masses to identify with easier. She further argues that these symbols "were neglected during the liberal transformation after 1989"[12] and this negligence opened a vacuum filled afterwards with populist and nationalist mobilisation. The Polish case was not singular and a rise of nationalist mobilisation was soon to be observed all over East-Central Europe after 1989.

There were attempts to deinstitutionalise the communist identity[13] which was perceived more often than not in a strict Manicheistic perspective. This triggered a confusion of the sense of purpose in the generations[14] born within it and turned them either nostalgic or towards embracing the new populist

[9] On cultural memory see Assmann 2006.

[10] On the myth of denazification, see Shafir 2007; on "purification" attempts see Gil Eyal, Iván Szelényi, Eleanor Townsley 1998.

[11] Stone, Hirst 2014: 322.

[12] Halas 2002: 13.

[13] The online edition of Cambridge dictionary mentions as a definition for institutionalisation: to make something become part of a particular society, system or organization, http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/institutionalize.

[14] See Koleva 2009 for a synthetic overview on the meanings of "generation". For the purpose of this article, "generation" is characterized not only by "temporal simultaneity" but also

discourses. In the definition of personal memory (*Erinnerung*), Éva Kovács highlights its very important role of keeping the balance between the personal identity and the collective identity and of their harmonization[15]. Thus what happened was that a clear gap was manufactured between the personal memories of individuals and the new public discourse which turned very rapidly from communist to anti-Communist. As mentioned in the beginning of this article, memory is dependent on context and language, and when the political context and the political language suddenly become the opposite of what they used to be, remembering the past undergoes a process of transformation and re-narration, repositioning and re-consolidation in the new context. The more inclusive the context and the language are, the smaller the gap between the individuals and the symbolic societal mediators.

In my opinion, harmonization would imply, first of all, a deep understanding of identity construction in the authoritarian regimes and, second, encouraging the affected generations to share their representations of the past, thus preserving their personal identities and giving them the opportunity to play a new social role. Therefore, "political memory"[16] should be replaced by collective memory and cultural memory should be less official and more open to informal initiatives.

In her article discussing the Yugoslav communist heritage, Marija Jaukovic distinguishes the official, traditional institutions that deal with the preservation of culture and monuments from the informal ones. The latter have the task to introduce the participation paradigm: "The shared responsibility of constructing and maintaining heritage, through the active participation of individuals and the building of a collective will potentially result in the development of intimate and emotional subjectivity that could lead to the 'owning of' and not only 'participating in' the formation of heritage, memory and identity"[17]. In support of this perspective comes Habermas' view on what a mature morality implies in a modern democratic society: namely the ability to recognize, listen and accept perspectives other than our own, something that cannot be achieved on the basis of our perceptions but only in communication with the Other[18]. This is all the more important to highlight because collective memory scholars speak about a growing culture of remembrance in which the emotional investment is more emphasised than the historical knowledge[19], easily explainable considering the imaginative and un-

by "shared orientations", "developing common ways of coping with their generational destiny", in Koleva 2009: 189.

[15] Kovács 2007: 1.

[16] Assmann 2006: 215.

[17] Jaukovic 2014: 17.

[18] Habermas quoted in Luczwiski, Malanska, Luczewska 2013: 6.

[19] De Simine 2012: 15.

stable character of memory[20]. Therefore, a more inclusive regime of memory should characterize post-authoritarian societies in order to recuperate all aspects of the representations of the past, or in Alieda Assmann's terms, a dialogical memory that would not only be engaged in sharing but also in spreading alternative narrations of experiences of the past regimes.

From institutionalisation to (de)institutionalisation of memory

By and large, the articles grouped in this edition of the yearbook cover the aspects discussed above. Romania is attempting to find its own path of recuperating and representing the communist past, and the Foreword written by Radu Preda, Executive President of IICCMER stands for a guideline on what it would be imperative to remember, especially when debating the issue of building a Museum of Communist Crimes in Bucharest.

The first section of the yearbook, *Communism Embedded: Books, Shelves, Curtains* presents different aspects of institutionalization of the communist identity and cultural memory. The first article, Ruxandra Campeanu's "*Revis(it)ing the Romanian Cultural Heritage" during the Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej's Regime. The Role of Literary Critics in the Battle for the Canon as a Form of Preserving the Cultural Memory of a Community* explains how the Romanian literary cannon was profoundly revised for ideological purposes during the regime of Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej and the revision comprised not only authors, but critics as well. This article is written from an interesting angle, given the definition of the canon used by the author. Here the canon should be considered not a list, but a network with many connected elements and sensitive to displacements and restructurings, and the author's analysis is all the more inciting because she tries to trace all these sways and to tell the stories behind them.

Claudia Serbanuta's *Memory Exercises in Public Libraries* further deepens the insight into what cultural memory building meant during the communist regime in Romania. By offering rich information on the library system and its role in mass education, as well as a glimpse inside the functioning of the system through the interviews the author made with librarians, the article is very relevant for studying the institutionalization of the regime. The impact the system of libraries had on identity formation, considering both the free access it provided and the secret book collections or the errors in the functioning of the system that limited this free access, is of great significance both for the functioning of the regime as such and for the post-authoritarian transitional period.

Another tool used in communist identity building was the theatre, both as institution and space for leisure. Bianca Felseghi's *Profiling the Audience:*

[20] *Ibidem*.

Theatre and Repertoires in the 1970's Romania. Case study: The National Theatre in Cluj-Napoca analyses the effects of the regime's efforts to educate the urban population in the socialist ethics. The author tries to profile the public in the theatres of Cluj and to evaluate the consequences of this specific cultural policy in order to see whether the invested efforts had the envisioned results. She grounds her premises on the fact that the process of forced industrialization brought large numbers of poorly educated people to the cities, and this had a negative impact on the regime's efforts. These research findings seem to confirm her premises, especially because the loyal audience in the theatres remained made up of intellectuals, while the audience formed by workers could not be engaged in this kind of cultural entertainment. The author concludes that there were no real attempts at redesigning and directing the offer towards the larger audience.

It seems like the communist regime in Romania in its different phases tried to address the issues of nation building and identity building using different strategies. Just as in the Polish case mentioned above, the symbols reached deep and once bluntly criticized and destroyed just like the society they stood for, many individuals lost the means to connect with the new context.

That is why the second part of the yearbook, *The Past behind the Showcase,* deals with the representations and artistic mediators and reception of the difficult pasts. By employing the term "difficult past," I do not simply mean a "traumatic past", but also a problem of the post-authoritarian context to negotiate over the meanings and implications of this past. Artistic efforts, be they formal, informal, grassroots initiatives, institutionalized or spontaneous, have the merit of mediating this necessity of expression and recreating/reinterpreting the much needed symbols. Irina Hasnas-Hubbard's contribution, *Memorialization of Challenging Topics. Artists' Interventions as Examples of Museum (Good) Practice* argues for dialogues between artists and curators and analyses the artistic potential of transforming museums into more than spaces of exposing historical narrations and collections of symbols. The author makes an overview of the evolution of museums in the 20th and 21st century and analyses possibilities of introducing "challenging topics" among the museums' preoccupations, especially by engaging more artists with innovative perspectives in designing and planning museum exhibitions. The artistic imprint would make exhibition spaces more engaging and more open for negotiations of meaning with the public, an asset that would be also useful for designing a future museum of communism in Bucharest.

Ewa Janisz' work, *Atrocity and Aesthetics. The Politics of Remembering and Representing the Holocaust in Polish Contemporary Art – Zbigniew Libera's* Logo Concentration Camp, is an applied example on an artistic perspective upon a difficult topic of History. Representing the Holocaust with the intriguing means of contemporary art may trigger difficult discussions, interrogate

moral stands, but also answers to crucial inherent questions (also present in the previous article): how to give artistic expression to mass crime, violence, torture and general infringement of human rights and how to keep the memory vivid, in order to impede forgetting and repetition of history.

The next contribution in the yearbook is Andrea Brait's *The Nation as a Victim – Perspectives in Hungarian Museums*. Brait identifies the grand narrative on the communist era that structures the exhibitions in three important Hungarian museums: *Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum, Terror Háza Múzeum* and *Hadtörténeti Múzeum Budapest.* While the museums have different approaches, among which the most challenging is that of *Terror Háza,* all the representations converge on building the image of a victim of history. The author walks us through the exhibitions and unwinds the narrative strings of a history of struggles, but one which does not engage its audience critically.

A different perspective on how to deal with a difficult narrative of the past comes from Ioana Hasu. In her article, *Recalling Trauma: Photographs as Links to a Memory Chain for Survivors of Armed Anti-Communist Resistance in Romania*, she gives a very personal account on the role of the artefacts in linking the present with the representations of the past and in memory reconsolidation. Using photographs in storytelling, she argues, is therapeutic and healing, especially in the cases of families which were torn apart by suppressive acts of the Communist regime.

Ioana Hasu's contribution links the second section of the yearbook to its third section, *Immanent Histories, Tangible Memories*, that explores the histories and memories that surround us, either in the street or in the virtual environment. Microhistories evolve in an endless unfolding of the macrohistorical events and people's and places' destinies are strongly connected and affected by this process. One such story is depicted in Melinda Harlov's article, *A Square that Has Seen it All: The History of the Nowadays '56-ers Square in Budapest*. The author manages to trace all the significations and re-significations given to this public space from the capital of Hungary, starting from the interwar period until present days. The scale of its historical instrumentalization is grand and it has gathered so many symbols that the tensions in debates regarding its current use are high and so have become the political stakes. The final article in this issue of the yearbook belongs to Maria Asavei. *Participatory Cultures of Remembrance: The Artistic Memory of the Communist Past in Romania and Bulgaria* is a comparative analysis on informal artistic initiatives, either tangible or virtual, that gather ordinary people and artists who share and give visual representations to their memories of the communist past. As they are grassroots, opened to all the interested public, and non-discriminative, they are both an alternative to the institutionalized and instrumentalized official narrative on the grand history and a means to its deinstitutionalization.

Conclusion

The articles and case studies present in the yearbook give a rich depiction on the myriad of authoritarian and post-authoritarian practices regarding the construction of a collective memory discourse. The questions who remembers, to what ends and with what consequences are important for trying to find nonintrusive ways of dealing with memories and identities built during the Communist regime. Furthermore, they are important because they can help grassroots initiatives to search for their symbols and find their dynamics among other already institutionalized trends of dealing with representations of the past. All practices tend to institutionalise, however dynamic and committed to change communities or societies might be, because "institutions are simultaneously symbolic-linguistic and practice-material"[21]. In his tropological theory of institutionalisation, James R. Barker still gives the remedy: irony. Irony involves humour, criticism and self-criticism, and an acute sense of awareness, and it acts toward deinstitutionalisation and creation of new metaphors. Therefore, one lesson to learn from history would be to keep collective memory and identity plural and open for negotiation and our institutions open for critique and transformation.

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