

Adrian Neculau (ed.)
Viața cotidiană în communism
Everyday Life in Communism
Polirom, Iași, 2005, 367 pages

An anthology of texts joining different contributors, psychologists, historians, sociologists, writers, under the aegis of assessing the cultural impact of everyday life in communism brings to discussion various aspects of method and why not, within the framework of the omnipresent discourse of transition, the issue of how images and the imaginary of transition are being shaped. In other words, such an anthology earns from the very beginning the interest of a large category of readers, as it merges scientific approaches to the study of communism, rather rare by the way, with the account of personal experience, confessions and cultural points of views on the quality of life in communist years. Methodological aspects are tackled by the reputed psychologist Adrian Neculau in the prefatory study of the volume, highlighting on identity and social representation, thus enhancing the importance of the formation of a new habitus, striking its roots in a historically and politically determined span of time between the end of WWII and the end of the Cold War. Professor Neculau is also the author of a highly interesting study of the Stalinist “re-education” carried on secretly in Romanian prisons in the 50’s. Romanians’ passive subordination to the communist regime seen

as a “learned” habitus is not so unexplainable as it would appear at first glance. If one digs deeper in the history of the Romanian modern society it would be not difficult to find out how deep-skin such notions as liberalism, citizen and citizenship, civil society were. On the other hand, the communist regime never claimed a rigid ideological stance comparable to the Asiatic one, opening an ambiguous space between the fervor to obey and mute obedience or indifference to civic life, a crucial factor which cemented the communist pretense of legitimacy. It is worthwhile mentioning that such a comprehensive study of life in communism was delayed for quite a long period, until a safe distance could distance Romanians from the dire times of what sociologists called the “culture of scarcity”, and naturally ideological repression and its host of restrictions.

Generally the culture of scarcity covers the drastic reduction (or almost complete lack) of food, fuel, heating, information, communication which were forced upon all Romanians (excepting the nomenklatura and the secret services). Starting with the 80’s, the culture of scarcity worsened its course down to unthinkable examples for a civilized country of the 20-th century, until December 1989. The Stalinist cult of personality, which was never properly debunked in Romania, but quite on the contrary, was latently nurtured and actually revived by national communism, was closely related to the culture of scarcity, as the last years of Ceaușescu fully demonstrated. The culture of scarcity has undoubtedly left not only humiliating memories, but a collective scar, transforming citizens into non-heroic survivors. Presumably, the mind of the new generations, though not so much exposed to ideological distortions or brainwashing, had to witness the dire struggle for survival which addressed every family or individual, as if the country had fallen under the siege of an invisible enemy. Actually, re-establishing a normal course of life after a long troubled period when identity and social representation of citizens were almost denied, meant also to explain people why communist order resorted to the tactics of the economic and political siege in order to rule. The ending phase of communism testified the denial of all previous socialist utopian prom-

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Key words:

everyday life, communism, re-education, Romani, Ceausescu, Adrian Neculau

ises, and the cruel realities of the return of the dictatorship. The issue of everyday life in communism is so the more appealing not only to foreign researchers, but also to Romanians, since, the “small history” of the unimportant, less visible citizens came now under the limelight, so that the “mass” effect of the communist discourse is finally dismantled, and accordingly, one can not only remark the traces left by the ravaging ideological repression, but also contemplate repercussions in immediate future, to mention only corruption or the passivity of civil society. It is an ascertained fact that Romanians trust more than other institutions the Church and the Army as the credible ones, not vouching thus the significance of the Parliament or of other organizations in representing civil society.

A fragment of social biography emerges thus from under the scalpel of historians and psychologists to the readers’ attention. It is to note that consideration given to the otherwise conspicuous aftermath of communism does not come naturally after an epoch of suffering, whether physical or moral, usually mellowed down, or even completely obscured by the wish to forget. Yet it is rather difficult to struggle not only with people’s general opinion that communism is already a stale story so that one should stop looking for other pieces of evidence since we have a promissory claim, as for instance, entering the UE. Communism should not be primarily analyzed for the sake of demonizing the moral culprits or rewarding its last survivors. It is equally difficult to tell truth from the subjective memory of both victims and victimizers, in the sense that the magnifying lenses should not be focused only on some aspects and not on the whole picture of Romanian society lacking in the main traits of modernization. Communist terror was grafted therefore rather easily on the pre-modern mindset of rural or sub-proletarian masses. The lack of any noticeable resistance to communism as compared to other neighboring areas, to mention only Hungary and Poland, speaks for itself about the absence of any major civil development in the modern Romanian society, in order to secure or preserve to a certain extent the identity of the community against social catastrophes. From this point of view identity

and social representation proved their relevance for the study of everyday life. The claim of reconciliation or of social harmony rings hollow when one comes to share the widely accepted evidence of economic polarization in Romanian society after 1989, which stands for a tardy avowal of deep inequalities underlying communist order. Even if some of the main major sources about repression in communism are still being kept secret (the Securitate documents), one could perhaps realize the unprecedented impact of the totalitarian society on the Romanian mindset. Which does not mean however, that Romanians are nowadays unable to implement the rule of democratic institutions, though the delay of modernization and / or its distortions add a new distance to catch up with for them as for the sons and daughters of a hopeless straggler. The interest for studying the past communist everyday experience should not be gauged only from the perspective of the historical timeline of Romanian communism, which shows noticeable variations in the repressive state control on the individual and society, but as this volume proves, in bringing to light an isomorphism of fear and repression within the whole rule of communism. It is interesting to see how fear and repression merged in the experience of endless queues for food, fuel, etc., as queuing up was the most preoccupied and at the same time the most debasing activities of Romanian population in the 80’s. The planned infliction of fear, hunger, cold and cultural isolation on “the masses” had never brought to justice other authors than the deceased presidential couple, which shows the present-day drawbridges communism still keeps shut.

It would be hard to make a selection of the most inciting and equally informative contributions. Actually all articles bring their part to the half-disclosed puzzle of everyday life in communism. Articles are signed by: Adrian Neculau, Alexandru-Florin Platon, Andrei Cosmovici, Radu Clit, Aurora Liiceanu, Gilles Ferreol, Tatiana Slama-Cazacu, Septimiu Chelcea, Germina Nagăț, Liviu Antonesei, Laurențiu Șoitu, Liviu Chelcea, Puiu Lăteș, Dan Lungu, Paul Cernat, Ruxandra Cesereanu, Lavinia Betea, Dana Bichescu, George-Florian Macarie, Dan Goglează.