

In the Wake of Communism: A Review of
Alexandru Matei, *Mormântul comunismului românesc. “Romantismul revoluționar” înainte și după 1989*. București: IBU Publishing, 2011, 246 pp. Lei 28.34. ISBN 978-606-92284-6-3.

In *The Grave of Romanian Communism*, Alexandru Matei's view of communism in Romania comprises cultural, discursive as well as political perspectives, as he states from the very beginning of the book, and takes into account communism's double dimension as “political utopia” but also as a possible “human ideal” (15) [all translations mine]. More than a brief history and an analysis of the concept in its various contexts, covering Ceaușescu's dictatorship and afterwards, between 1989 and 2010, the book aims at reassessing communism from a different, more detached point of view. It circumscribes the political system to precise discursive and historical limits, and thus attempts to help us eventually relinquish a certain persistent, mental version of it. A second aim of the author is to provide a more balanced, more objective, because less emotional rethinking of the Left in the Romanian ideological context. Language is seen to play a key role in the process, the stress falling on the way in which discourse shapes political reality, modifying it in time. The use of “communism” as a word before and after 1989 (26) is of central importance.

One of the main ideas that the author discusses in the first half of the book is that of a persistent, nineteenth-century Romantic dimension of communism, which has aesthetic rather than ethical origins through its direct association with the concept of the sublime. Tracing the idea back to Marx's own, paradoxical and ultimately Romantic idealism as well as to Kant and Schiller, and showing how “Romanticism is intrinsic to the language of the modern Western world” over the entire twentieth century (17), Matei reconstructs the double filiation of Romanian communism which inherited both such Romantic and aesthetic traits. What the essayist criticizes throughout the book is the unwitting perpetuation of such features well into the 1990s democracy where they have continued to define public discourse to date.

In particular our prolonged attachment to aesthetic categories has led to a fast commodification and consequent inefficacy of public discourse in the new Romanian capitalist paradigm, which is rooted in affect rather than in reasoning or analysis. Such a process is the result of the ignorance by some Romanian intellectuals of the real, historical, i.e. market-based context that they themselves currently belong to, which, in Matei's view, distorts their public discourse (20), transforming it into a fast-selling commodity even if initially conceived of as “moral” and “ontological” (17). The critic thus witnesses the incapacity of those intellectuals to provide subtle yet effective language tactics that would cleverly manage to convey their message despite processes of capitalist reification, in a way “poaching” upon dominant capitalism, to use Michel de Certeau's famous term. Possible ways of deceiving the market include (self-) awareness of being determined by such mechanisms at work as well as, ideally, a consequent altering of public discourse in Romania. Matei relentlessly stresses the importance of renouncing pathos and elitism while accepting a more relativizing, language-determined perspective upon the past and upon communism in particular.

Public Romanian intellectuals are divided into two groups according to the author: “ethos intellectuals”, namely those (amongst whom Caius Dobrescu and Ciprian Șiulea, for instance) who are able to take language and historical determinations into account when discussing the past, and “pathos intellectuals” (28) (such as Valeriu Stoica, Gabriel Liiceanu, H.-R Patapievici and others) who absolutize, being unable to give up affect and to distance themselves from the political phenomena under scrutiny. Matei is himself an “ethos intellectual” who advises and employs as a model of felicitous analysis of communism a version of Anglo-Saxon cultural studies, or *pop’philosophie*, to use the French syntagm in the text, a model which he carefully adapts to the Romanian context.

Communism is discussed from the author’s own, admittedly non-traumatic perspective, which is supposed to provide greater objectivity in assessing things, although this might also limit his view, as those affected by trauma are likely to have their own, particular way of departing the past. If we take into account Matei’s own arguments in favour of relativity in evaluating controversial political issues (see, for example, his discussion of Alexandra Laignel-Lavastine and Sorin Lavric’s different yet tenable views of Noica, on pages 217-218), then the same objection could be raised in the case of his personal, non-traumatic view of communism, too.

One of the main criticisms in the book is levelled at the Romanian “pathos intellectuals”, whose discourses are analyzed at length in the second part of the volume. They are those who insist on holding on to their Romanticism and innocence, oblivious of most political and social transformations, continuing to “provide Romantic discourses in a society where most illusions have been abandoned” (136) and thus failing to bring about change. They also disregard the main factor that shapes their discourse, namely language, which they insist to see as neutral, secondary and transparent rather than opaque and problematic. “Pathos intellectuals” are also attacked in the book for denying in their texts the specific historical context they all belong to as well as ignoring market determinism.

According to his later declarations in the book (107), Matei is what the Americans would call a New Left rather than an Old Left sympathizer, although he often takes critical distance from market mechanisms, which brings him close to Fredric Jameson and this latter one’s attacks on “late capitalism”. More importantly, the author is influenced by postmodernist and poststructuralist incredulity towards metanarratives and by what Gianni Vattimo designated as “weak thought”, when he refuses, for example, to believe in any idealistic “moral improvement of human nature” or in the “often violent” possibility “to radically and consciously alter human nature” (107). He also admits that “Left” and “Right” no longer designate unambiguous concepts but that “their identity is weak, their shape is that of liquid aggregation” (229), especially given their discursive nature.

Employing a whole array of ideas from French philosophical and social thought (especially Roland Barthes, Deleuze and Guattari, Henri Bergson, Jacques Derrida, William Marx) and American cultural studies (Hayden White, Stephen Greenblatt or Fredric Jameson, amongst others), which he is probably the first to adapt to our specific Romanian context, Matei analyzes the traces “left by Ceaușescu’s communism in the anti-communist discourse that accompanied it and then followed it” (26). Although he admits the existence of our ravaged memory (yet without expanding much upon it, as Ricoeur did for example in his *Memory History, Forgetting*), Matei is against condemning communism, as this would only “compulsively perpetuate its trauma”,

making us addicted to that past moment when trauma occurred (91), rendering us incapable of escaping from it. We could free ourselves from our obsession with communism's violence and thus cease to perpetrate it through deconstructing violence, "framing it", "making its movement freeze as if in a photograph" (46), thus disrupting the chain that indefinitely perpetuates it. He himself takes distance from it, preferring to analyze it instead, denying the urgency of revenge and the resulting heroic image. Interrupting pathos and refusing affect (and therefore desire) is only possible in the context of a permanent awareness and control of the mechanisms of language that mediates all events (47). To the author, it is not the *idea of communism* as a language construct that is to blame for the crimes committed in time but rather "a specific historical context, certain people and dispositions" (47). Instead the idea needs to be pondered upon as a "speech act" and "utterance" which temporarily annihilates desire (48), allowing us to judge it with more rigour as well as with detachment and clarity.

Another cliché that is being deconstructed here is that of a mistaken identity between communism and the Left (even in the case of the "non-existent Romanian Left" (96)). Firstly, what precludes all debate about communism in our country is its immediate, subjective association with trauma. Secondly, what often occurs here is the unjust demonization of the Left in general, even of things such as French thinking, political correctness, Third Worldism, etc. This generates a lack of dialogue between Right and Left, establishment intellectuals often refusing to confront adverse opinions while young Left intellectuals have to deal mostly with a hostile public discourse addressed at them. In fact, just as it is the case with Right and Left paradigms whose liquid meaning tends to change in time, both communism and the Left are also determined by the utterances that contain them and which actually define and redefine them constantly (112).

According to the author, truly breaking with communism means a lot more than openly convicting in the belief that this would ensure a smooth transition to capitalist democracy. It means abandoning a certain thought paradigm to adopt a new one which might involve a kind of inner fracture of the individual, as a self-reflexive, different type of language needs to be individually assumed. The everyday and the mundane are to be given a place within this new type of thinking which gives up Romantic affect and binary judgment in favour of detachment and (self-)criticism. Renouncing communism is, in Matei's opinion, not so much about convicting communism as it is about contextualizing it, investigating the modern spirit that generated it, seeing it as defined by its condition of a human ideal and political utopia.

The Grave of Romanian Communism is a dense book, full of acute criticism, even if its rhizome-like evolution is rather hard to follow at times. It would be of help to anyone interested in the emerging new Left thinking in Romania as it provides an original, discursive analysis of communism and the Left before and after 1989, caught as they are in the vast networks of language, ideology and history that determine them and which they determined in turn.

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