CULTURAL CODES AND MORAL REPRESENTATIONS IN POST/COMMUNIST FICTION

Dan Țăranu
Lecturer, PhD, "Transilvania" University of Brașov

Abstract: This paper argues that in order to define what morality and immorality meant for the people who lived in the Communist regime one must abandon pre-determined frames of interpretation and must engage in an exercise of moral scaling. Seeing the world through the eyes of the social actors as they were created and represented in some of the novels written at the end of Communism helps us move from a polar, disjunctive vision of what a moral life is or should be. Making (moral) sense out of an amoral, corrupted context meant a personal effort to harmonize a confusing juxtaposition of cultural codes, of Communist ideals and rituals and their very different daily life counterparts and, at the same time, of alternative influences (Western models and expectations, humanist traditions). Some of the Romanian novels of the 80s capture this personal, non-heroic quest, of adapting and carrying on, by giving us a thick description of the Communist regime, thus helping us immerse in a universe that was still unfolding without an end in sight. In this case, morality can be best understood if we employ concepts such as marginality, living simultaneously in several worlds without being fully integrated into one of them, a condition which distorts cultural codes and molds identities in unpredictable ways. Exercising our moral faculties together with unexceptional characters, "thrown" into a world without solid roots and deprived of external systems of reference, may help us understand how someone could still try to create a meaningful life even in the direst of circumstances.

Keywords: social marginality, Communism, moral identity, hybridity, ordinary life.

One way to look at the cultural life created in the Communist regimes of the yesteryear is to use the instruments and vision of oppositional rhetoric. Inspired maybe by the revolutionary impetus which mimicked and then destroyed the democratic values of the interwar period, we are used to apply an inflexible *either/or* logic when discussing the cultural options and behaviors of those who lived under a totalitarian regime. Imbued by a necessary moral sense and trying to restore what some might call the concept of civic virtue, this perspective only applies to a small elite of dissident intellectuals, like Paul Goma or common individuals, like Gheorghe Ursu, who were able to forge themselves and for themselves a "strong" moral identity. But these examples were few and far between and I think we risk to seriously distorting the image of the life under the Communist regime if we generalize this radical opposition to the social texture *en ensemble.*

If we look at the Proletcultist novels of the Fifties, we can easily see the battle between the forces of evil and the righteous red-tinged apostles of justice embodied by the Communist ideologues, supporters and practitioners. Titus Popovici or Petru Dumitriu stands as perfect examples for this kind of Manichaeism, well-known even today. Even the problematic heroes of Marin Preda's novels, such as the troubled intellectual, Niculaie Moromete, or Victor Petrini are disenchanted with the current state of events, trying in a true post-Marxist spirit to right the wrongs of the shortcomings due to the insufficient grasp of the Communist ideals. They are true

Communists, nurtured by the authentic values of the utopian future set in opposition with the petty spiteful and individualistic ideologues who confiscated the political power. This sort of organic intellectual is echoed in Czeslaw Milosz's famous definition of *ketman*. What transpires in the employment of religious concepts such as *ketman* is a doublefold identity, but one that is essentially hierarchical and, again, structured as a dichotomy. The simultaneity of the mutually exclusive cultural codes to which an individual adheres (or to which he simulates fidelity) is organized binomially around an overt identity and the true covert identity, a configuration that strongly resembles a Gnosticist solution[1]. In conclusion, there is a substantial similarity, especially in the first and last decade of Communism, between the mythical class-based antagonisms created by the Communist rewriting of history and their tyrannical approach to social life, liquidating 'the people's enemies', and a mirroring (subdued, but not vanquished), non-communist identity. The essence of this fight is a battle between divergent and clear clear-cut identities and cultural codes. At the same time, around 1968, there is a subtle but decisive movement of convergence between the official discourse and objectives and the private sphere. Invigorated by Ceausescu's anti-Soviet turn, it seemed that the opposition could turn into mutual contamination, that political power could be tamed and civilized. But this illusion lasted, as we know, only for three years until the July Theses.

But this is only one side of the story, a violent account of hard / strong moral choices, sometimes life-changing or, more generally, deriving from or leading to extreme circumstances, in which the identities are all built vertically, with strong axiological poles. But is this the most representative side of *our* story? I tend to believe that there is another narrative, not as fascinating and awe-inducing, that encompasses most of the average people's lives under Communism. And this is a story of amalgamation and marginality, of soft and malleable identities forced to survive in an oppressive and fundamentally inauthentic society. What follows is a series of attempts to find out why this was/is so and, therefore, to provide a possible explanation for the cultural constants that marked the threshold / transitional phase to the so-called post-Communist societies of the 1990s. Thus, this perspective envisages the vernacular culture of the average man living in Communist Romania. My main point is that there are objective reasons for considering that the background of the strong oppositions and "hard" identities discussed above cannot be understood in terms like *either/or*, but in a different logical and existential frame characterized by a simultaneous and paradoxical relation: *both/and; neither/nor*. Consequently, these cultural identities and options may be better understood as sitting in juxtaposition, instead of opposition. This can be translated as an uncritical agglutination of incongruous sets of practices, values, and cultural codes of a certain exploratory value. For instance, between applauding a propagandistic discourse, telling jokes about the regime you have just praised, believing in the false, self-aggrandizing reports on the radio about the productivity of the factory you are working for and stealing materials from the same factory the next day. I am well aware of the risk of taking this story at the face value, but presumably there is a long history of this sort of compromise solidified as a way of life in the Romanian history. I don't intend to go into specifics here[2] but it can be argued that cultural marginality was a defining condition for Romanian society long before the onset of Communism.

[1] This type of mystical adaptation to the harsh totalitarian realities is splendidly, even if belatedly, illustrated in Petru Dumitriu's novel, *Incognito*, published in exile in 1958.

[2] For further references regarding this type of adaptation by compromise see, Lazăr Vlăsceanu, Hâncean, Marian Gabriel, *Modernitatea românească* (Pitești: Paralela 45, 2014); Bogdan Murgescu, *România și Europa. Acumularea decalajelor economice (1500-2010)*, (Iași: Polirom, 2010).

It is sufficient to invoke here the much debated concept of Balkanism to support the idea of an identity permanently connected to two different, contradictory, or just parallel, cultural codes, values and behaviors; obviously, in this case, the contrast was created by the conflict between an Oriental culture and the Western European one. The issue at stake here is to imagine an individual who is permanently challenged to build her/his identity trying to harmonize or adapt to these two (or at least two) very different cultural strands. It is useful to introduce here the concept of marginality, as defined by Robert Ezra Park, for a better understanding of this intermediary, but not hybrid situation, because the concept of hybridity assumes an already set up synthesis, while this meaning of marginality refers to an ongoing process in which the synthesis is a desired but uncertain outcome. So, for the American sociologist, the marginal man is "a new type of personality, namely, a cultural hybrid, a man living and sharing intimately in the cultural life and traditions of two distinct peoples; never quite willing to break, even if he were permitted to do so, with his past and his traditions, and not quite accepted, because of racial prejudice, in the new society in which he now sought to find a place"[3] By definition, the marginal man lives in both worlds, while belonging to neither, so he is devoid of a stable configuration to call "home". This "homelessness", as Peter L. Berger called it, is a symptom that can be traced in the interwar period not only as an expression of Balkanism, but as a result of the increasing cultural and political tensions created by the modernization process, especially by the division between a new urban culture and the rural origin of most of these new urban inhabitants. Witnessing the most significant phenomenon of social mobility recorded until then, the new urban class had to face head-on the increasing pressure of industrialization and, at the same time, new norms of civility that came into collision with old traditional rural codes of behavior and values. What happened in terms of cultural identities was, as expected, an uncomfortable cohabitation and contiguity of these two very different, if not opposed, forms of social integration and, consequently, a new form of marginality that did not exhaust the previous Balkanic one, but overlapped it, seeing that the modernization process was in fact a Western-sourced phenomenon.

Apart from the radical solutions appealing to the not so many vocal supporters of one or the other, all the cultural solutions proposed in the interwar period first appeared as intellectual endeavors with no firm popular basis. As such, the strong leanings towards anti-Western and Fascism nonetheless inspired by the strong traditional (rural) vision of a significant part of the Romanian *intelligentsia* were opposed by a pro-Western camp even more secluded from popular beliefs but with a consistently moderate outlook on cultural life. These types of response did not crystallize in strong valid identities before the totalitarian regime of Carol II and it is easy to assume that, in the real life of the ordinary man and woman, such discontinuous visions and the discrepant stimuli created by modern life implied not a decisive turn towards an attitude or the other, but an unstable fusion of disparate elements and cultural codes. To complicate matters even further, in this already unstable climate, a new marginality-inducing situation occurred. The Communist regime not only changed the political and social structure of the interwar Romania, but tried, and successfully managed, to erase a (substantial) part of Romanian history and institutions, creating and imposing a new superstructure that they called 'the Communist man' and 'the Communist way of life'. The contrast between the signifiers/signifieds of "life-as-it-was-really-lived" and the same signifiers translated into the ideological 'signifieds' of the regime created again the type of polar situation that requested again and again means and tools able to

[3] See Robert Ezra Park „Human Migration and the Marginal Man", *American Journal of Sociology*, 1928, p. 892.

transform this disjuncture into a livable situation. For the most part of the population, the easiest way to cope with this sort of pressure was to tinker with a subsistence identity, incorporating contradictory and incongruous elements into a (seen from the outside) incoherent and self-debilitating construction, but nonetheless the sort of identity that was most probable to succeed in defusing the overwhelming tension of living in two (or more) separate worlds at once.

This long tradition of bifocal, ambivalent identities explains what today appears to be profoundly wrong in terms of moral choices and virtues. This continuum between incompatible identities turned into the major form of approaching and understanding life. Mixing together obedience, criticism, alternative ways of life, and scattered official references, adapting and continuously applying and modifying identities to match an ever-shifting ideological pressure, supporting humorously all kinds of vicissitudes, and boasting exactly about this kind of resistance may indeed prove a lack of imaginative reach. Or, one may argue, it strongly denotes the incapacity to articulate a decisive and defining identity able to shape a different kind of society. Irrespective whether we apply this critical approach or not, it must be said that while open insubordination, subversion and, on the other hand, living a piecemeal existence, under the radar, trying to make sense of a complex and dangerous world, have all existential validity, they do not have an equal moral standing. This is the kind of argument that maybe is not stressed or developed enough. If it is important not to transform the history of Communism into another set of dichotomies between heroes and demons or between singular personalities and the ignorant masses and we should strive to understand both options, or as a matter of fact, all the options, it's equally important to keep them in check with each other and to become engaged in an effort of moral scaling. Furthermore, it's essential (and maybe more difficult) to continue to discern and discriminate between these various options, avoiding the risk to transform everything into a grey thick paste of confused and confusing relativism.

Returning to the topic at hand, as it had already happened in the interwar period, literature was once again called to reflect upon these ever shifting dimensions of cultural identities. But selecting those literary works, especially novels that were able to capture, express and explore this murky side of the story is not an easy task. Usually, maybe reproducing a Romantic view, extremely influential in the Romanian literature since the end of the 19th century (and presumably still effective today) the 'average' man was not the focus of the novelistic perspective, being generally used as a contrasting background for the 'true' characters who were almost always endowed with superior intellectual attributes, being problematic natures, revolutionary or visionary heroes. When the simple, average guy was the main character, he was instantly demonized, transformed, for instance, into a metonymy of the oppressive mediocrity of the modern world, as was the case with the famous Grobei from Breban's novel *Bunavestire*. So, when trying to find novels in which this apparent all-encompassing mediocrity becomes the sole focus of the writer's novelistic enterprise, the results are scarce. I am referring especially to novels in which the narrative perspective is an immersive one, even when the free indirect speech is used, novels in which we are forced to see the world through the eyes of a character without the corrective perspective of the outside authorial voice and also without the shaping 'sense of the ending' that classifies one course action or the other. One proto-example of this type of novel, it could be argued, is Marin Preda's almost unknown novel, *Intrusul (The Intruder)* where an existentialist topic is connected to the genuine confidence of the main character that he participates in the building of a new world. This serves only as a proto-example; however, Preda's character, Călin Surupăceanu, is not a cliché, but a fleshed-out human being. His identity is built and then deconstructed along with the new world of Communist incessant building of

industrial cities. His options are limited by his perspective and the author does not try to force him into our or hisq way of understanding the past.

A much clearer account of these bifocal, fluid identities is to be found in Ioan Groșan short stories published in the last years of the Communist regime. Using all the methodological insights described above, Groșan reconstructs a familiar world shrouded in a tender irony that never surpasses the characters' cognitive and perceptive horizon or, so to speak, their *Weltanschauung*. I have only selected two of these short stories, probably the most rewarding ones in the volume *Caravana cinematografică* (*Kino caravan)*, namely the eponymous story, and another one named *Marea amărăciune (The Great Bitterness)*. The first story describes the windy road of a propagandistic movie caravan, one of the many circulating in the Fifties in the Romanian villages at first with the sole mission to indoctrinate into submission the peasants who were resisting collectivization, and then to coerce the "masses" into the belief that Communism was nothing short of the promised secular redemption. In this particular case, the activist is a young worker who lacks experience and, moreover, is sent to an isolated village. Tavi, the young activist, is so convinced of the truth of his ideological propaganda that this discourse invades all of his inner desires and spills, for instance, into a very awkward love declaration. The other main character, Corina, the village librarian, refuses Tavi's invitation to build a better world alongside the party not because she entertains other secret anti-Communist values but because she dreams about the castles in the Loire Valley. Our main interest in this short story consists, on the one hand, of the Communist activists who are honest in their beliefs and, at the same time, ridiculous in their overselling of the new world, and, on the other hand, of the villagers' attitude towards these efforts. They emulate interest, they know how to respond in dithyrambs without any sort of personal involvement, but, contrary to the *ketman* theory, they do not have any strong beliefs to oppose this official discourse. The final scene in which all the characters who participated in the process of indoctrination are gathered together around a card game emphasizes the weak and unstable condition of the Communist propaganda which, for these people, is just another obstacle in the everlasting course of a life based on the idea of "making do". The deep change in the Romanian society is illustrated in a metonymical way by one of those characters who discards a trump card and, with dry humor, announces its color: "red". No more and no less.

The Great Bitterness, a short story taking place in the Bucharest of the Eighties, describes the failed love story of two married high-school teachers who try to prescribe their relationship by writing premade stories on small pieces of papers. The main theme of Groșan's novel is that a love story which follows a script or some literary patterns is doomed to fail in a lackadaisical and even more stereotypical manner than the scripts it has followed. More interesting for our topic, Sebastian is not only a useless demiurge who tries to remold a disappointing reality using a weak and unproductive form of imagination, but also a highly-skilled opportunist who knows all the tricks in order to advance in the school system. Praising the principal, being modest with his superiors and arrogant with his peers, Sebastian is prepared to join the ranks of the Communist officials, being simultaneously a subtle and "embittered intellectual" who reads Virginia Wolf and is exasperated with the clichés of the didactic literature. Of course, what is striking here is the total lack of any type of moral problematic. The identity of the high school teacher flows freely between the two positions as if they were complementary, not mutually exclusive. There is no kind of internalization of a conflict between his social behavior and his personal values. Everything is flattened in a single continuum without any sense of discrimination whatsoever.

For Sebastian, this type of coexistence has become normal, or, to put it differently, it has become the norm[4].

It is true that after the so-called Revolution of 1989, there appeared a justifiable critical and vindictive discourse towards the compromises made by the authors living in Communism. The intention was not only to despise the lack of moral values but at the same time to announce a new world that required to be represented in a literary form. But if we ignore Ovidiu Verdes and Mircea Cărtărescu's novels, whose topics do not tackle directly the theme of (adult) social identity, the best literature about the transition to the tentative post-Communism of the 90s is to be found in Petre Cimpoesu's novels, especially in *Simion liftnicul. Roman cu îngeri și moldoveni (Simion, the Saint from the Elevator)*. His novel apparently seems to ironically depict an epiphany extracted from the vast urban folklore of the Nineties: the transfiguration of a simple shoemaker (the reference to Ceausescu's professional background is transparent) into a saint that blocks himself in the elevator of a 4-floor block of flats. This kind of event does not produce a "rupture" in the social texture of the small Romanian town Bacău, as we might have expected in a different setting. The people living in the grey urban environment act as if sedated; they drift between old models of apprehending reality and new phenomena (like the thrilling discovery of multilevel marketing to which two gullible characters fall prey, only to console themselves with the idea that their lost money contributed to the consolidation of the Romanian market economy), they mix and jumble several cultural codes without being able or willing to articulate them into a meaningful syntax. In this context, Simion, the saintly apparition, who speaks in parables through the elevator door, is the only way (a highly implausible and retrograde way) in which their dispersed and fragmented existence seems to coalesce in a stable form. However, this identification with a "hard", vertical form of understanding reality does not last. Simion's neighbors see it as a curiosity that they will then try to exploit in their day-to-day interests. It is not an apology of Christian values as it may appear, but a form of underlining two types of inadequacy: the incapacity of the post-Communist individual to understand a "hard" message and, consequently, the sad uselessness of such a message in transforming identities and horizons of understanding.

It is this kind of horizontal and fluid existence, without any external moral compass, juxtaposing experiences and contradictory values with the single goal to "make do" and to live just another day that, I think, should be investigated more closely when we analyze what defined the larger part of the Romanian society. Seen from the point of view of the social actors, a project for which the novel continues to be a special conduit, the amalgamations, fusions and distortions of cultural values and behaviors prove to be one of the main forms of living and building a tolerable life under the Communist regime. This existential, vernacular level (*id est*, how to create a meaningful life from different bits and patterns of several discourses lived simultaneously) is often ignored in the ideological and theoretical analyses of the Communist regime, and yet, this one level is the root of apprehending and creating social reality, a root that, presumably, is still active today.

[4] It should be noted here that this uncanny (for us) coexistence is perfectly illustrated by Ioan Groșan himself who was one of the most gifted of the Eighties Generation, an alternative, for some, even countercultural literary movement *and* an informant for Securitate, without discussing publicly this radical incongruence. Another well-known example is Mircea Horia Simionescu, one of the most gifted experimental Romanian writers who was simultaneously and , without any manifest asperity, a highly ranked Communist official.

REFERENCES

Bauman, Zygmunt, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

Berger, Peter L.; Berger, Brigitte; Kellner, Hansfried, *The Homeless Mind. Modernization and Consciousness*, (New York: Vintage, 1974).

Cimpoeșu, Petru, *Simion liftnicul. Roman cu îngeri și moldoveni*, (Polirom: Iași, 2001).

Chirot, Daniel (ed.), *The Origins of Backwardness in Eastern Europe : Economics and Politics From the Middle Ages Until the Early Twentieth Century*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

Dobrescu, Caius, *Plăcerea de a gândi*. *Moştenirea intelectuală a criticii literare româneşti. (1960-1989), ca expresie identitară într-un tablou global al culturilor*, (București: Editura Muzeului Literar al Literaturii Române, 2014)

Groșan, Ioan, *Caravana cinematografică și alte povestiri,* (București: Corint, 2005).

Janos, Andrew C., *East Central Europe in the Modern World. The Politics of the Borderlands from Pre- to Postcommunism* (Standord: Stanford University Press, 2000).

Murgescu, Bogdan, *România și Europa. Acumularea decalajelor economice (1500-2010)* (Iași: Polirom, 2010)

Vlăsceanu, Lazăr ; Hâncean, Marian Gabriel, *Modernitatea românească* (Pitești: Paralela 45, 2014)