

POLITICS OF OBLIVION IN POSTCOMMUNIST ROMANIA

*Adrian Cioflâncă**

The fall of authoritarian regimes in South America, Eastern Europe and other parts of the world was not followed by open and articulated debates on the recent past, for fear they would destabilize the societies and postpone the healing of old wounds. Instead, the societies preferred the policy of oblivion - not unlike the Western Europe after World War II. A number of theories and arguments are listed in this article that may explain why in Romania lustration was never a realistic option and the uncovering of the agents of former secret police was largely blocked.

Key words: guilt, human rights, lustration, repression, revolution, secret services, social memory, transition

* Adrian Cioflâncă is a doctoral student, researcher at History Institute "AD Xenopol" from Iasi, a columnist and international section's editor with *Jurnalul de Iasi* newspaper.

Nowadays, memory is a key word in historical studies. Memory seems to be for history a useful tool for auto-investigation, replacing old favorites - nature, culture, language, image, *mentalités* - that challenged the historical traditional view and helped reworking history boundaries.¹ Once again, (traditional) history - "the official memory a society chooses to honor"² - with its essentialist, generalizing, descriptive, exclusionary perspective appears to be no longer valid, from the scientific point of view, and no longer appropriate, from the cultural point of view. In this context, memory (a set of social negotiated beliefs about the past, a system of signs, symbols and practices with cognitive, evaluative and mobilizing functions)³ provides an alternative perspective, a plural, sensitive, empathic, reflexive one.

Scholars generally agree that the rediscovery of memory by historians - part of the "cultural turn" in historiography - reflects an important epistemological change and a significant modification in the relationship between past and present. The acceleration, fragmentation, democratization and privatization of history are phenomena that, according to Pierre Nora, explain the emergence of memory as one of the most important issues in current scientific debates.⁴ The reexamination of memory in historical studies may be described as a fuller awareness of new realities, rather ignored before. First, it expresses a fuller awareness of the realities of change. Because of the higher rate of cultural change, *les milieux de mémoire* (the environments of memory) desintegrated and the contemporary world have apparently lost the presence of the past.⁵ As a result of the postmodern challenge, the collective memories bequeathed by the traditions of modern culture are fading away and tradition loses its power of appeal. The historical discourse is no longer auto-referential. Under these circumstances, the increasingly concern for memory expresses the need to reaffirm the ties to a world that was in the past. Now, it is memory - as an imaginary *topos* immune to the processes of change - which provides, therapeutically, a sentiment of continuity and identity, by reconnecting us with the past. But - this is the second point - it makes the connection between past and present in another way than history does. The so-called crisis of history at the end of the twentieth century is frequently interpreted as the end of the teleology of history and of the linear conception of time. Plural, fragmented, competing times are to be described and memory is the best instrument for that.

1 Kerwin Lee Klein, winter 2000. *On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse*, in "Representations", no. 68, p. 128.

2 Patrick H. Hutton, 1993. *History as an Art of Memory*, Hanover and London: University Press of New England, p. 9.

3 For a definition of social memory see Adrian Neculau, *Memorie colectivă și uitare, în Memoria pierdută. Eseuri de psihologia schimbării*, Iași: Polirom, 1999, p. 179-198; see also another Romanian contribution: Ticu Constantin, *Memoria socială: cadru de definire și modele de analiză*, in "Psihologia socială", no. 7/2001, p. 137-157.

4 Pierre Nora, *Memory: From Freedom to Tyranny*, paper prepared for the international conference "Memory and History: Remembering, Forgetting and Forgiving in the Life of the Nation and the Community", Cape Town, August 9-11, 2000 (www.celat.ulaval.ca/franco/CAPE2/nora.htm).

5 Idem, *Between Memory and History: Les Liens de Mémoire*, in Jacques Revel, Lynn Hunt (eds.), *Histoires. French Constructions of the Past*, New York: The New Press, 1995, p. 632; see also idem, *Les Liens de Mémoire*, vol. I, Paris, 1984, p. XVII-XLII.

The study of collective (or public, social, cultural) memory helps historians to retrieve alternative traditions, to realize that information about past is lodged in other places than they have previously imagined. Thirdly, history helped by memory rediscovers not only new times, but also new historical actors. In the second half of the twentieth century, historians had to consider plebeians and societies more than kings, presidents, politicians and diplomats. That implied a revolution of sources, the state-sponsored memory stored in official archives becoming partially irrelevant. Plural discourses about past have been gathered to enlarge our perspective on old times. An interesting hypostasis of the phenomenon of democratization - this is the last point - is that not only historians are allowed to speak publicly about past, but also particular individuals with lived experiences.

Since the 1970's, a radical critique of old institutionalized memory practice has developed, especially in Western Europe. That implied denationalization, dematerialization and deritualization of memory.⁶ As a result of globalization, memory has simultaneously become more global and more local. On the one hand, Holocaust, Gulag, Hiroshima or Chernobyl, phenomena that people rather forget about, are now themes of global debates. On the other hand, national memory arouses less interest, local, ethnic, family memory appearing instead as more important. Dematerialization of memory is the effect of so-called anti-monument movement. Critics argue that traditional memory sites actually discourage engagement with the past and induce forgetting rather than remembering. Alternatively, they want that remembering to become part of the everyday life, thus closing the gap between official and individual memory. Finally, critics dispute the communicative efficiency of traditional commemorations, which were largely made for, but not of the people. From this point of view, the solution is a general and real participation to the construction of social memory.

All these changes of paradigm have affected the politics of memory. As part of the process of denaturalization of memory, governments contribute to the construction of social representations of the past. But they have to do it in a more sophisticated and democratic manner than before, according to the new public sensibilities and apprehensions.

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Paradoxically, the issue of forgetting was rather ignored in the debates about memory, for a long period of time. Only recently, oblivion, the art of forgetting, has become topic of serious debates.⁷ Political reasons made this possible. Scholars discovered that, from the political point of view, oblivion is more advantageous than remembering. The relative stability of Western Europe since 1945 has in part due to a colossal act of collective, consensual forgetting - of the divisions between wartime partisans and collaborators, and of traumatic

6 John R. Gillis, 1994. *Memory and Identity: the History of a Relationship*, in John R. Gillis (ed.), *Commemorations. The Politics of National Identity*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 3-24.

7 Adrian Forty, Susanne Küchler (eds.), 2001. *The Art of Forgetting*, Oxford, New York,.

events such as Holocaust.⁸ The dissolution of postwar taboos in the eighties and nineties changed this attitude. Symptomatically, the fall of totalitarian and authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe, South America and other parts of the world was not followed by open and articulated debates on recent past. It is true that - as Tzvetan Todorov puts it - the tyrannies of the twentieth century tried to delete, impose monopoly on or control memory thoroughly,⁹ but it is also true that the removal of the totalitarian conditions was not equivalent to the return to "real", "genuine" memory. In fact, we can see that the "post" governments prefer politics of oblivion and forgiving to politics of remembering, restoring or disclosing the real past.

This is valid also for Romania, which has great problems - now, twelve years after the fall of the Communist regime - in coping with the recent past. The incumbents and the society seem not to be interested in disclosing and openly debating facts and controversial issues regarding the communist period. Apparently, those responsible for crimes and abuses benefit from a general tacit, *de facto*, amnesty, which is the result of a pact of silence - an authentic social contract - concluded between politicians and citizens. On the other hand, the politics of memory the postcommunist governments hardly implemented, under the pressure of the civil society - the limited access to the communist and political police archives, the partial disclosure of the collaborationists of the regime, the trials of some nomenklatura leaders, etc - proved to be inefficient in the intended "moral purification" of the population.

In Romania, the most intensive debate on recent past focused on the topic of Securitate files and the disclosure of the communist regime's collaborationists. This heated debate finally transformed in politics of memory by the so-called "Ticu Dumitrescu Law" (Law no. 187/ December 9, 1999, granting access to the files of Securitate as political police). The implementation of the law was quite difficult, and the activity of the National Council for Studying the Securitate Files (CNSAS), the institution legally designated to administrate the secret files, was highly contested. Unfortunately, CNSAS have been rather awkward publicly, defining its social function and consequently, had missed the chance to attract public support and recognition for its actions.¹⁰ But something more important is to be mentioned here. This approach - the consideration of the communist past as a problem exclusively related to Securitate - transmits, as Daniel Barbu noticed, two insidious messages: that forced adhesion to communism is problematic, not the voluntary one, and that the invisible face of communism is problematic, not the visible one.¹¹

8 *Ibidem*, Tony Judt, *A regîndi istoria postbelică a Europei*, in "Lettre Internationale", no. 35, autumn 2000, p. 91-93.

9 Tzvetan Todorov, 1999. *Abuzurile memoriei*, traducere de Doina Lică, Timișoara: Editura Amarcord, p. 9.

10 Adrian Cioflâncă, *Instituția nimănui*, in "Monitorul", October 25, 2001, p. 6A; see also a refined analysis on CNSAS: Andi Mihalache, *Mitologii spontane la sfîrșit de mileniu*, in "Sfera politicii", no. 91-92, 2001, p. 26-32.

11 Daniel Barbu, 1999. *Republica absentă. Politică și societate în România postcomunistă*, București: Nemira, p. 99, 228; Adrian Cioflâncă, *Memoria ca simulacru*, in "Monitorul", April 4, 2002, p. 6A.

Because of deep political intrusion, politics of memory as such transformed, in fact, in politics of oblivion. The same is applicable for other laws - The Law of Archives and the Law of State Secrets - which are conceived in a constricting manner and are actually impeding access to information about recent past.¹²

Consequently, the actual distortion of social memory is the result of the communist socialization, but also of the politics of oblivion used after the fall of the totalitarian regime.

Further on, I will focus on the latter, which implies, on the one hand, a social functional amnesia and, on the other, publicly performed strategies of forgetting. For the first case, the most important question is why the oblivion is generally preferred, and, for the second, which are the publicly established instruments for repressing or diverting inconvenient, embarrassing memory.

Five general explanations may be indicated as sources of the social preference for oblivion:

- 1) **The sentiment of nostalgia.** The polls indicate a strong sentiment of nostalgia for the communist period¹³ ("an era of stability and order, with relatively good leadership"), especially for the seventies.¹⁴ In contradiction with what Michel Foucault called the "repressive hypothesis", a hypothesis largely credited in Romania, the communist regime displayed not only a negative power, but also a positive one. The totalitarian regime was not only a repressive mechanism, which interdicted or repressed, but also a positive power, which urged to action and mobilized energies. A correct history of communism is conjointly one of repression and mobilization. Regarding the positive face of the communist power, it is the fact that many Romanians benefited from the communist opportunities. At least half of the Romanian population took direct advantage from the communist modernizing facilities - the generalization of the modern working methods, the village-to-town massive migration, the constitution of a dominant technical elite, the enforcement of the protective state roles, etc.¹⁵ Psychologically, it is hard to remember a successful youth in catastrophic terms; nostalgia is more convenient and therapeutic.
- 2) **The sentiment of shame.** In 1989, the Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu was pretending that the entire population belonged to the communist organizational structures, one way or another.¹⁶ Even if the Romanian dictator exaggerated, it's a fact that the inclusion of the

12 See "Sfera Politicii", no. 93-94, 2001, with the theme "Politics and secret".

13 See, for example, *Barometrul de opinie publică*, CURS, November 1999, p. 46, 69; Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, Denisa Măndruță, *Was Huntington Right? The Foundations of Democracy and Democratic Institutions in the Public Opinion of Eastern and Central Europe*, in "Romanian Journal of Political Science", vol.1, n.1, January 2001, p. 59-92.

14 Alina Mungiu, 1995. *Românii după '89. Istoria unei neînțelegeri*, București: Humanitas, p. 125-129.

15 Daniel Barbu, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

16 "Scinteia", 3.06.1989, p.3.

Romanian society in the communist organizations was broader than in any other eastern communist country.¹⁷ Because of the specificity of the neo-patrimonial Romanian communist regime,¹⁸ the sentiment of shame touched not only the party members, but also everyone who participated in the rituals of power and cultic pageants.¹⁹

- 3) **The sentiment of guilt.** Privately, Romanians admit they weren't too courageous in the past regime, allowing, by their cowardliness, abuses against other Romanians. But, publicly, they do not assume such responsibility because they perceive blame as connected to punishment.²⁰
- 4) **The absence of decommunization and the continuity of elite.** The Romanian postcommunist governments haven't implemented politics of decommunization such as lustration politics in former Czechoslovakia. Thus, the informal communist networks survived after revolution and granted a retrospective legitimacy for communism.²¹ 63 percents of the current leaders were also leaders before 1989.²² This elite is uninterested in (likely compromising) revelations about the recent past.
- 5) **The Leninist legacy.** Recent studies prove the deep impact of the communist socialization process.²³ One of the most important consequence is the persistence in reading the past through communist paradigms.

The politics of oblivion are publicly supported by an impressive display of arguments, expressed by politicians from both sides of the political scene. I made an inventory of such arguments:

- 1) **The perversity thesis:** the adversaries of remembering use this argument to assert that disclosure of the recent past won't lead to reconciliation, but to social turbulence; that it will lead not to the moral health of the community, but to paranoia and anxiety.
- 2) **The futility thesis** points out the lack of pragmatic effects of revealing the past.

17 Ken Jowitt, 1992. *New World Disorder. The Leninist Extinction*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, p. 88-120; Mihnea Berindei, *România lui Ceaușescu - un naufragiu planificat*, I, în "22", no. 46, November 17-23 1998, p.10.

18 Juan J. Linz, Alfred Stepan, 1996. *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation. Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press,

19 Vladimir Tismăneanu, 1999. *Fantasmele salvării. Democrație, naționalism și mit în Europa post-comunistă*, Iași: Polirom,, p.145; Adrian Cioflâncă, *The Festive Display of Power. Cultic Pageants vs. Change in the Last Year of Ceaușescu's Regime*, paper lectured at a regular workshop organized by Europa Institut Budapest, June 20, 2000.

20 Daniel Barbu, op. cit., p. 98.

21 Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, *Politica după comunism. Structură, cultură și psihologie politică*, București: Humanitas, 2002, p. 60.

22 Dan Chiribucă, Mircea Comșa, *Elite vechi, elite noi, în Fețele schimbării. Români și provocările tranziției*, București: Nemira, 1999, p. 252.

23 Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, *Politica după comunism...*, passim.

- 3) **The jeopardy thesis:**²⁴ revealing the past, the opponents of memory say, would be a very dangerous action for the unity and solidarity of the community.
- 4) **The distance thesis:** "we are too close to the events, so we cannot be objective" - this is the essence of this argument; because the actors of recent past are still alive, because the archives are not completely open, because the facts could be politically instrumentalized and so, the advocates of forgetting urge for temporary ignorance.
- 5) **The priorities thesis:** this argument disqualifies the necessity of exploring the past by stressing upon the pressing priorities of the present.
- 6) **The progressive thesis** describes the interest for the past as obsolete and capitalizes on the importance of the future.
- 7) **The criteria thesis:** "which are the criteria for establishing who was responsible for the communist troubles?" - this is the main question of this thesis, which asserts, following an old suggestion of Vaclav Havel, that it's impossible to find out the truth because the line of responsibility pervades each of us, rather than separates between "us" and "them".
- 8) **The collective responsibility thesis:** the advocates of oblivion allege that there is no reason to look for specific responsible individuals, because everybody was guilty for the communist past, one way or another.
- 9) **The witch haunting thesis:** according to this argument, imported by Romanians from Adam Michnik, the archeology of the past won't clear up the social life, but, on the contrary, it would provoke social hysteria.
- 10) **The humanist thesis:** that is, everybody deserves a second chance.
- 11) **The Christian thesis:** in this view, we would have to forget because forgetting is equivalent to forgiving.
- 12) **The context thesis:** a context, which is always "complex" and "dominated by tough rules", provides an excuse; and communism is the most excusable context.

It is not worthy to discuss upon the validity of these arguments because this is not the point. It is their social impact that counts. The extraordinary recurrence of the thesises I mentioned in the public debates is, in my view, a strong indicator of their success. On the other hand, I counted only few elaborate and well-known arguments on support of the politics of memory.²⁵

24 These first three theses are topics of the rhetoric of reaction; see Albert O. Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction. Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1991.

25 Adrian Cioflăncă, 2001. *Trebuie oare să uităm de trecutul comunist?*, in "Monitorul", March 19, , p. 4A.

The arguments in favor of oblivion are frequently integrated in more sophisticated **techniques of de-responsibilization**. These techniques have been part of a populist policy of legitimization conducted by the postcommunist governments looking for larger popular support. We could say that, besides the tacit amnesty I mentioned before, the de-responsibilization of the population for supporting or admitting the communist rule was a constituent of the social contract concluded between the Romanian society and the postcommunist governments.

I mention below nine techniques:

- 1) **The focus on the responsibility of Ceausescu:** this neo-Khrushchevite method have been used mainly by president Ion Iliescu and his group to excuse the Party elite, the members of the Party and the rest of the population for endorsing the regime.
- 2) **The extra-territorialisation of guilt:** this technique helped for looking for culprits in other places - in the Soviet Union, in the cynical West, among Russians, Jews, "terrorists", etc.
- 3) **The preference for the foucauldian "repressive hypothesis":** in Romania, there is a strong tendency to describe the communist period as an era of uninterrupted terror; in this view, the Romanians were only victims, but never collaborationists.
- 4) **The description of communism as accident:** in this version, communism was an unhappy interlude in the otherwise heroic and triumphal Romanian history.
- 5) **The anonimization of communism:** describing the former regime in abstract, impersonal, anonymous terms as "totalitarianism", "dictatorship", "communism", this technique avoids a differentiated discussion about victims and perpetrators, about different degrees of guiltiness.²⁶
- 6) **The depoliticization of communism:** this strategy describes the communist regime as a depoliticized environment or even paradise, with people happily and freely looking for private business.
- 7) **The historicization of past:** this is a technique of reducing tragedies and lived memories at the scale of History, of domesticating, sublimating them as events among others in the national metanarrative.²⁷
- 8) **The teleologization of communism:** this kind of memory attributes

26 Daniel Barbu, op. cit., p. 99; Jörn Rüsen, *Secondary Traumatization - How History May Come to Terms with Senselessness*, paper for CEU Summer University: "History and Memory: The Twentieth Century in Retrospect", Budapest, July 9-20, 2001.

27 All the postcommunist societies of Eastern Europe use, in different degrees, this post-traumatic technique, see Christoph Reinprecht, *Social Memory in the Transformational Process of East-Central Europe*, in "Anthropology of East Europe Review", autumn 1994, volume 12, no. 2, (http://condor.depaul.edu/~rrotenbe/aecer/aecer12_2/reinph1.html).

to communism high and tough goals (especially, of modernizing or eudaemonic nature or referring to foreign policy) which excuse abuses and other "minor" sacrifices.²⁸

- 9) **The mythologizing of reality:** this constitutes, in fact, a large category of other techniques that distort, cosmeticize facts and endow them with mythological functions.²⁹

All these are about politics, but not only. Unfortunately, historiography tends to reproduce these techniques in dealing with the history of communism. The revolution of memory I described at the beginning is not a present phenomenon in Romania. History is still strongly nationalized, state-focused, official, highly selective, immobile, essentialist. For the time being, historians generally tend to prefer official sources and to ignore memory as vivid source.

In Jörn Rüsen's view, the boom of memory in humanities is a chance for the historical studies to consider all its three dimensions - cognition, politics and aesthetics. A limitation of the historical interest is a limitation of the social impact of the historical writing.³⁰ Rüsen also points out that "historical studies is by their logic a cultural practice of detraumatization".³¹ Romania has just lived a trauma, the communist totalitarianism, and this is a chance for historians to assume a role of cultural therapy, teaching people to come to terms with the past.

28 Jörn Rüsen, 1997. op. cit.; Leslie Holmes, *Post-Communism. An Introduction*, Cambridge: Polity Press, , p. 44 sqq..

29 We attended a "parade" of these arguments and techniques in June 2001, when the incumbents proposed - unofficially, in order to test the reaction of the public opinion - a legislative project meant to offer amnesty to those involved in the '89 revolution, in inter-ethnic conflicts and in events of social turbulence (riots, violent strikes or the famous "mineriade" - the riots of the Romanian miners). President Ion Iliescu, who seemed to be the initiator of that legislative project, saluted the idea of amnesty, saying the Romanians have to get into normality by erasing the residuals of the past and all the obstacles which are staying against "national reconciliation". The initiative was not well received by the Romanian press and the Prime Minister Adrian Năstase hesitated to endorse the idea. That is why the project was withdrawn until more favorable times (Mediafax News Agency, June 4, 2001). As designed by the government, the amnesty was supposed to have the following features: 1) Amnesty without truth: In order de forget, the Romanians have to know what to forget. According to the theory, the amnesty requires a rational forgetting - that is, to know the truths and to store them in an orderly manner. The amnesty is a classified memory. In the Romanian case, the events which are supposed to be the subject of the amnesty - the '89 revolution, the "mineriade", the inter-ethnic conflicts - are embarrassing mysteries. And it is difficult to store mysteries or phantoms. The initiators of the amnesty law invoke the South African precedent. But in the South African case, the amnesty was theoretically granted instead of full confession. In the Romanian case, amnesty would mean the incineration of the past truths - not putting them in the middle ground. 2) Amnesty without perpetrators: In order de forget, the Romanians have to know whom to forget. The supporters of the politics of oblivion also invoke the precedent of the Latin American amnesties. But a very important difference between the two cases - which is rather hushed up in the public debate - is that in the Latin American case the perpetrators and the victims were two well-known distinct groups. In Romania, nobody established the culprits (with few marginal exceptions). 3) Amnesty without request: The amnesty doesn't imply gratuitous forgetting. As Alain Besançon put it, amnesty should succeed to a symbolical request and to a declaration of mea culpa. Otherwise, a groundlessly oblivion is risky because it would be the stimulus for irresponsibility. In Romania, we have no perpetrators, so we have no requests. 4) Amnesty without reconciliation: For being socially effective, amnesty should be the result of a real public pressure. In Romania, the pressure was simulated by parliamentary means.

30 Jörn Rüsen, *Lo(osing) the Order of History. Some Aspects of Historical Studies in the Intersection of Modernity, Postmodernity and the Discussion on Memory*, paper for CEU Summer University (cited before).

31 Idem, *Secondary Traumatization*