THE MAKING OF THE COMMUNIST YOUTH IDENTITY THROUGH THE DISCOURSE ABOUT "CULTURE": THE CASE OF THE COMMUNIST YOUTH OF ROMANIA IN THE COLD WAR YEARS (1950-1980)

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Abstract: The article discusses the problem of identity of the Communist youth in culture from two perspectives: synchronically (how the youth cultural world is structured) and diachronically (by following the life history of a particular group). The communist regime fought for the maintenance of conformity patterns meant to be sustained by all means, either through coercion disguised in the form of happy acceptance, or through severe punishment. The regime banned "the dangerous western influences" and acclaimed national forces only. Extreme ethnocentrism was promoted, despite the formal acknowledgement of various ethnic populations throughout the country. Along with most of the individuals who did not turn dissidents, the youth was forced to comply with the system and forbidden to delineate its own cultural forms; the national program had been already implemented.

Keywords: youth, culture, national identity, communism, cold war

The beginning of the wide development of modern 'subcultural' forms in Socialist Romania came from the years of the first `thaw' of the 1960s. On the one hand it was a time of new hopes and the awakening of people's imagination and creativity, `growing from below'. It was the period of the beginning of new forms of ideological control, which were becoming more sophisticated. From the first years of the existence of the `socialist state' it was quite clear that the new ruling social stratum was not homogeneous. However, by the 1950s the ambiguity of the bureaucracy's social position and the impracticability of the Soviet-type economy and cultural planning system began to be evident. What had been hidden under the myth of the perfection of the `socialist culture' have now become `manifestations of mass culture'. The complexity of the structures of different group values and the dynamism of group `ways of life' have become more obvious. This fact confirms

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the important proposition, that "The dominant culture of a complex society is never a homogeneous structure. It is layered, reflecting different interests within the dominant class... containing different traces from the past"[1]

Teenagers had their well–defined status in society: their mission was to carry on the goal of the party. They were the country′s pride, meant to build a golden future for Romania. Declared the result of policy lines, youth′s cultural manifestations were the political heritage of the adult generation. Any deviance from the normative party politics was not to be tolerated. Any attempt of naturalizing the difference was expunged from the state policy. Youth was interpreted as a homogenous structure and difference was not acknowledged as a real category for the Romanian communist youth. Founded in 1949, the Union of Communist Youth (*Uniunea Tineretului Comunist*-- UTC) was modeled after Komsomol (the Soviet communist youth organization). Having essentially the same organizational structure as the PCR, the UCY was both a youth political party and a mass organization. Its mission was to educate young people in the spirit of communism and mobilize them, under the guidance of the PCR, for the building of socialism. The UCY organized political and patriotic courses in schools, among peasant groups, and among workers and members of the armed forces. It also guided and supervised the activities of the Union of Communist Student Associations.[2]

A second youth movement, the Pioneers, was created for young people between the ages of nine and fourteen. The organization's responsibilities paralleled those of the UCY and involved political and patriotic training. Until 1966 the Pioneers functioned as an integral part of the UCY, but thereafter it was under the direct control of the party Central Committee.

Their songs were carefully chosen to worship the political regime and its president. The lyrics had political meanings and were meant to highlight the great accomplishments

[1] *Brake, M., Comparative Youth Culture. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985, p. 43.*
[2] In the 1980s, the UTC remained one of the most powerful mass organizations in the country, having a membership of some 3.7 million in 1984 compared with 2.5 million in early 1972. Membership was open to persons between the ages of fifteen and twenty-six; UTC members over eighteen could also become members of the PCR. The Tenth Party Congress in 1969 introduced the requirement that applicants under the age of twenty-six would be accepted into the party only if they were UTC members. The structure of the UTC underwent a number of changes in the decades following its creation. In early 1984, the organization functioned on the national level with an eight-member Secretariat, including the first secretary, who was also the UTC chairman, and a bureau of twenty-one full and ten candidate members. The first secretary of the UTC also held the position of minister of youth. In the late 1980s, Ceausescu's son, Nicu, functioned as UTC first secretary. In each of the forty *judete* and the city of Bucharest, UTC committees were patterned after the national-level organization. The UTC had its own publishing facilities and published its own propaganda organ, *Scinteia Tineretului* (The Spark of Youth).

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of the political regime. Their behavior was to be irreproachable; deviant manifestations or subversive lyrics were carefully done away with, being considered inadequate for the conformity expected on the teenagers' side. The whole ideology inside the communist regime was meant to preserve a façade, the surface of being loyal to the system. Clubs for pioneers, pupils′and students′organizations, artistic events on the 23rd of August, speeches on festive days, were usual manifestations for the Romanian youth.

The socialist system attempted to annihilate the cultural achievements and instruments elaborated by the preceding system. Important elements were substituted from their previous position in accordance with political criteria only. "Bourgeois" university professors were made superfluous, important cultural productions disappeared from the libraries; elitist individuals were dismissed if they refused to collaborate with the system. Both the press and the pedagogical system were severely controlled. School textbooks were rewritten, literary associations were turned into propagandistic sources, meant to spread and support the ideology of the system.[3]

These are just powerful reasons for the nonexistence of a true subcultural layer in the socialist Romania. Just like the economic aspect, the cultural production was considered an insignificant category in the socialist discourse. Conserved in a minor position, culture is turned into a simple instrument, meant to spread information coming from above and straight people′s expectancies into definite directions. The socialist regime changed the cultural politics into a genuine politicized culture by considering culture an auxiliary element meant to be subject to the state apparatus.

However, subculture may decline and affirm similar values, thus undermining the unique authority claimed by the communist party. This potential dissident role is in outstanding conflict with the socialist doctrinaire creed, which acknowledges that any form of deviance from the norm shall be abolished. Hence the rejection of alternative forms of manifestations, of dissenting cultural events that did not follow closely the model dictated by policy lines.

One of the most striking features of Romanian youth is the distinction they make between themselves and what they see as 'official society'.

One radical difference between the Romanian youth and its American counterpart of the late 1960s and early 1970s is that the former do not seek to change the system.

[3]*See Claude Karnooh, Dusmanii nostri cei iubiti , Iasi, Polirom, 1997, p.54.*

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Freedom is perceived as a spiritual phenomenon that can be achieved by living as far as possible, beyond the realm of official life. As long as the people in charge do not know how to react to the spiritual feeling, they are missing the whole point. They cannot control what they do not believe it exists.

After the launch of the PCR's 1974 program, the regime devised the "Cîntarea României" national festival, which was initiated in 1976 and took place annually until 1989. A national sports competition, "Daciada," whose name clearly referred to the Dacian origins of the Romanians, was also launched. The "Daciada," however, was less influential in forging ethnic bonds than "Cîntarea României".[4] The latter festival was highly important in forging the national identity of contemporary Romanians because it was devised as a sort of huge cultural-ideological umbrella for the totality of cultural activities that took place in the country after 1976. In other words, everything that could be identified as a cultural event had to be part of the national festival and praise, one way or another, the nation and its supreme leader. Furthermore, the festival gathered not only professional artists, but also large numbers of amateur artists from all over the country. For the amateurs, the festival was first and foremost an opportunity to escape from their boring workplaces and spend days outside the factory (and sometimes out of town). The price to be paid was that they had to praise "Partidul, Ceausescu, Romania," but many felt that it was worth the bother. Insidiously, however, a set of values and attitudes was slowly inculcated through the poetry that people recited and the songs they sang. As a result, many acquired a subjective version of national history and came to believe that the PCR's achievements were indeed little else but a continuation of the heroic deeds of the medieval rulers. Let us not forget that the magic of the 1968 "balcony speech" was still powerful. Also, one should bear in mind that it was only after 1981 that the economic crisis began to undermine the regime's efforts to indoctrinate the population. Furthermore, both "Cîntarea României" and "Daciada" were organized as national competitions, which contributed to a reinforcement of ethnic ties and allegiance.

This mixture of professionalism and amateurishness harmed not just the quality of the cultural products, but also made more room for those products that served best the communist propaganda machine. Initially, it was only the amateur artists who would exaggerate in their glorification of the PCR and its supreme leader, hoping thereby to

[4] *Petrescu, C., 1998, "Vizitele de lucru, un ritual al 'epocii de aur'" [A Ritual of the ' "Golden Epoch": Ceausescu's Domestic Visits] in Boia, L. (ed.), Miturile comunismului romanesc [Myths of Romanian Communism] (Bucharest: Editura Nemira), pp. 229-238.*

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achieve official recognition. Not long afterward, nonetheless, professional artists followed suit, perceiving the festival as a means for upward mobility and an opportunity to make easy money. Consequently, until the demise of the regime, many professional artists continuously produced artifacts of pretentious bad taste depicting the supreme leader and his wife. The 1980s proved to be an especially fertile period for the production of this kind of kitsch. What is important for the purpose of this analysis, however, is that the festival was instrumental in praising "Romanianism" and the unity of the Party-State at a grassroots level. By means of cultural reproduction, then, the regime succeeded in enforcing upon ethnic Romanians a stronger sense of belonging to the organized solidarity of the Romanian nation.

In addition to the "Cîntarea României" national festival, another cultural "show" served the regime's identity politics via rather simple means: the "Flacara (Flame) Cenacle of Revolutionary Youth" led by the poet Adrian Paunescu. From 1973 until its demise in June 1985, the "Flacara Cenacle" succeeded in confiscating the natural rebelliousness of the young generation and in transforming or directing it toward patriotic stances. By channeling the energy of a generation that did not yet perceive the system as utterly bad, the "Flacara Cenacle" obstructed the development of a genuine counterculture and thus contributed to hampering the appearance and the structuring of a dissident movement in Romania. By mixing rock music with poetry praising the nation, as well as the PCR and its supreme leader, Paunescu's cenacle reached an audience that "Cîntarea României" could not reach: the young and potentially rebellious. The message of the "Flacara Cenacle" was that communism and a sort of alternative culture could coexist. Young people were allowed to remain until the small hours in the morning on stadiums throughout the country where they could sing, dance, smoke, consume some alcohol, and make love. In many respects, the atmosphere on the stadiums where the "Flacara Cenacle" performed was more pleasant than what the system could offer in terms of leisure opportunities, especially in the early 1980s. On 15 June 1985, however, the "Flacara Cenacle" performed in a stadium in the city of Ploiesti, some 50 kilometers north of Bucharest, when a torrential rain prompted a melee. Five people died and many others were injured. As a result, the regime banned the "Flacara Cenacle"[5]. Nevertheless, the harm was done. Politicized rock did not appear in Romania -- as it did, for instance, in

[5] *Giurescu, D. C., (ed.), Istoria Romaniei in date [Romania's History in Data] (Bucharest: Editura Enciclopedica), 2003, p.719.*

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Czechoslovakia -- and this was largely due to Paunescu's "cenacle." True, the rock-and-roll counterculture was also undermined by the economic crisis and the rationing of power consumption; as a Westerner ironically observed: "How could you expect rock and roll to survive in a country where there is barely enough electricity to power a light bulb, let alone drive an electric guitar?"[6]. However, the role of the "Flacara Cenacle" in "confiscating" a major segment of the alternative culture to which "Cîntarea României" was unable to get and in channeling it into patriotic performances in accordance with the tenets of Ceausescu's July 1971. Theses must not be neglected.

The beginning of the post-Stalinist period in Romania was characterized by the growth of the mass media and of general access to TV and radio programmes. In this situation the influence of cultural information from the West, with which the growth of the popularity of rock was connected, became inevitable. The first `cultural struggle' in those times occurred in connection with the emerging popularity of jazz, and it became the first objective of `counter-propaganda' during the 1960s.

Music and films have been the first cultural productions to be acquired by Romanians. Cheap and largely available by means of radio and television broadcasting, they spread innovatory ideas for the evolvement of a cultural style.

During the socialist regime, Romania encouraged national music and banned foreign types, so as to dismiss "decadent social trends", unwilling to promote the communist ideology or adhere to the socialist precepts. This state of facts evolved in a cultural territory in which theatres close and intellectuals are paid very little and art survives through donation and people show an increasing interest in material life and economic advantages, to the detriment of cultural responsibilities and spiritual fulfillment.

The popularity of western rock (The Beatles, Deep Purple, Rolling Stones) became an important feature of the way of life of Romanian youth at the end of the 1960s. The beginning of the 1970s was characterized by ideological attacks on the music of the Beatles, which was connected with disgust at the use of beat as a specific means of rock-expression. Nevertheless, beat has become accepted by the musical and cultural officialdom due to its functioning as a new artistic language, as mentioned above: it was often employed in order to give attractiveness to songs about the Party.

[6] *Ramet, S. P., Social Currents in Eastern Europe: The Sources and Meaning of the Great Transformation, Durham: Duke University Press, 1991, p.234.*

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Students used to perform in artistic brigades on the stages of the famous institution called the House of Students which could be met with in each academic centre. These productions were sometimes artificially presenting the Romanian communist student's life. But this was only the façade, as beyond it, great talents were being fostered. These were the years when the most important Romanian rock and pop bands were born (Phoenix, Rosu si Negru, Sfinx, Holograf, etc). Underground nuclei were also certain student clubs like the well-known Club A (of the faculty of Architecture) opened in 1968 or the Club of the Politechnics.[7]

On the other hand, at the beginning of the 1980s, when the highest point of the struggle with rock was reached, Romanian underground-rock became mature. It gave rise to new musical trends: rock-'n-roll, art-rock, rock-ballads.The variations in attitudes to rock are a significant indicator of the pattern of differentiation among Romanian youth. But despite the necessity of typological description, this task is very difficult. We can distinguish three main groups of Romanian youth: peasant youth, working class youth, and children of the Romanian `upper class' (the `bureaucracy' or *nomenclature*).

Talking about the status of language, the communist regime modifies the language to a certain extent, so as it does not reflect or represent the reality; the metaphor is considered more important than a fluent discourse, while the magic words tend to replace the purely descriptive, logical ones. Moreover, one may notice the transformation of the discourse into an authoritative one, meant to reduce the meaning of the words and endow them with singular intentions only.

This statement is a proof for the changes taking place in Romanian culture after the relative liberalization of the 60s, following two distinct repertoires: on the one hand there is an official canon, strongly ideologized, sustained by means of the institutions controlled by the party (school, media: television, radio, written press), spreading a permanent confusion of the real values; and on the other hand there is a counter-canon, unofficial, mainly cultural, which is promoted through magazines, especially the student ones (*Echinox, Dialog*) and literary clubs (*cenaclu)* (*Cenaclul de luni – The Monday Reading Group, Junimea and Universitas*). This counter-canon offers a more coherent image of the Romanian literature during the communist regime which does not empower the idea of a

[7] The Club functioned as follows: Monday – theatre; Tuesday – political discussions; Wednesday – architecture; Thursday – jazz; Friday – cinema; Saturday and Sunday – the founders' evening. Its longevity was due to its restrictive character concerning the admission of its members. Cf. Daniela Caraman Fotea, *Dictionar Rock Pop Folk*, Ed. Humanitas, Bucuresti, 1999, p.110.

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"cultural Siberia" in that period. This canon represents a payback of the esthetic and of the inner liberty against the emptiness of some pseudo values consecrated through propaganda.[8]

As the official power of the time did not allow the existence of a free world, of democratic convictions, we may not speak of a proper youth (sub)culture as it was manifested in America. C. Musat states that, being ideologically enslaved to the "high" politically accepted culture, the majority of the young people had nothing else to do but to subdue and 'follow the line of the unique party'. Unlike America, where youth culture covered a large area of other marginalized subcultures – and we refer here at different social strata (ghettos, prisons, streets but also student campuses), in Romania such representations of youth culture were not possible. That is why, the so called "resistance through culture" adopted by the young Romanian men of culture in the 70s and 80s was the only way out. Student clubs were among the very few "underground nuclei of civil society" in Romania at that time. In fact, the 80s Generation as they were called, were so closely and aggressively connected to each other that they were also referred to as "platoon", "commando", "desant" or "the generation in blue jeans".[9]

The group of poets belonging to this generation was strongly influenced by the postwar American poetry especially by the Beat Generation. Both had as a general claim "the getting of poetry back into the street where it once was, out of the classroom […] and, in fact, out of the printed page (…), poetry conceived as oral message".[10]

The 80s seems to be the belated '68 of the Romanians, the moment when a whole generation declared its difference from the previous ones. The precipice that splits essentially the 80s from the previous ones is the precipice between two worlds: the French loving world of suits and ties, of classic music and of the respect for the grand values, on

[8] *Carmen Musat, Strategiile subversiunii, Descriere si naratiune in proza postmoderna romaneasca, Ed. Paralela 45, Pitesti, 2002, p.62.*

[9] They relied on a more thorough cultural background than that of previous generations, were socially marginalized, came across obstructions when attempting to get published, were formed in reading groups, were (in the first stages) under the guidance of several eminent critics (Crohmalniceanu, Manolescu, Simion, Zaciu) and chose elusive and allusive themes, not frontally devised to defy censorship intolerance. Mouthpieces of neo-liberal ideology (in some cases even libertarian or anarchist), different from the leftist one, with neo-Marxian inflexions, of most postmodernists in America, they were a ferment subversive of official culture. One may distinguish between textualists (Nedelciu, Iova, Craciun, Flora) and micro-realists or biographists, issued by the Monday Reading Group (Iaru, Cosovei, Stratan, Stoiciu). See Mircea Cartarescu, *Postmodernismul romanesc*, Ed. Humanitas, Bucuresti, 1999, pp.402-403).

[10] *Quoted by Barry Sileski in one of the most representative histories of the American poetic movements of the 50s and the 60s, Ferlinghetti, the Artist in His Time, Warner Books, 1990, p.93.*

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the one hand, and on the other hand, the world of the American spirit, the world of street clothes, of rock music, of long hair, of "popular" culture, and of all kinds of emancipations.

If in America the young generation's hate and rebellion was manifested against administration, against its rigid authoritative establishment (the reason for which their idealism frequently caught ultra leftist accents), symmetrically, in the countries from "the communist camp" these movements had as their targets another establishment, that of the communist regimes, officially "leftist" but practicing in fact a totally opposed politics, that of the extreme right.

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