

## THE CRISIS OF CULTURE IN THE POST-COMMUNIST SOCIETY. FROM CULTURE AS FREEDOM TO CULTURE AS UTOPIA

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*Abstract: Paradoxically or not, communism was a favourable space for culture, fenced by ideological boundaries. With the existence as a prison, under the pressure of ideology, culture was a form of freedom. Culture as inner freedom and survival mode is a model outlined by totalitarianism. The fall of communism has created a "shock of freedom", that has caused confusion on social, personal, axiological and cultural levels. Instead of being a state of transition, this confusion became a permanent state. In this context, the space of culture has undergone a reassessment and revision process, in which the aesthetic criterion was undermined by other criteria. Culture fell victim to the axiological relativisation and minimisation. At the same time, the concern for culture decreased significantly on an individual level. The post-communist society faces a crisis of cultural and spiritual values. The crisis of culture, in this complex phenomenology, has serious implications for individuals and society. Starting from the totalitarian model, "culture as freedom", the "cultural" model in post-communism risks to become "culture as utopia".*

*Keywords: communism, culture as freedom, post-communism, confusion, crisis of culture, culture as utopia*

### **Culture, a form of freedom and survival in communism**

Communism, a tragic dystopia of history, was the territory of the suppression of freedom, of the annihilation of the human being in terms of the fundamental values. Under the pressure of ideology, the communist regime was a space of terror, a huge prison, a framework of treacherous alienation and dehumanization. Ironically and cynically, communism acted on behalf of "the most advanced" humanist principles and values, of human freedom and the right to happiness. In fact, it was a way of extermination of the individual, by the confiscation of his rights, freedoms and values, of his freedom itself. As a free being, the loss of freedom put the individual into the risk of losing his very spiritual identity. Essentially, all members of society have become the residents of a huge concentration camp, where some, the political elite, were the guards and executioners, and others, the vast majority, the prisoners. The negative utopias of culture, including those of Orwell's, were outdated by the communist utopia.

But, in this dark space, as a vast gulag disguised in the best of all possible worlds, the individual sought forms of freedom to help him survive. Some people found them in faith, humility and trust, others in revolt, others in the silent and tenacious resistance, in hope of the historical justice, others in culture. Most often, the freedom manifested itself in all these forms, as a way of confronting the ideological and political evil and of subsistence at the edge of an absurd history. Some of the prisoners in the communist jails lived freedom exemplarily, as free men beyond the barbed wire, the iron gates and the cell locks. There were people who freed themselves from the forced confinement by faith and culture. They became free men through the intense living, by the ardent and vibrant confession of God, by appealing to culture through the books they had read in freedom. Some of them died for their freedom and for their faith, as true martyrs. "The Saints of the Prisons" defeated the evil by faith and by living apothetically their inner freedom. Culture helped some of the prisoners transform the

prison cells in “universities” and “academies”, and thus escape from the physical walls, live freedom in thought, in the open spaces of the human spirit.

The communist society, the “free” world of a coercive and inhuman system, was itself a vast prison, under the terror of the ideology and regime. As those in prisons, the “free” people were prisoners in a large concentration camp. But people found a way to rescue themselves from the existential morass: books. As a source of knowledge and culture, books became a way of evasion from the world like a prison, a mode of the inner freedom, unrestrained by any ideology. In the first part of the communist regime in Romania, books and culture were severely controlled and censored by ideology. A great “cultural” purge removed the “dangerous” books from the public space. Books were dangerous precisely because they were stimulating the inner freedom, the freedom of thinking and living. Reading prohibited books became, therefore, a subversive and highly risky act, for which the “criminals” were thrown into prison. The political thaw of 1964 allowed a relaxation on the ideological level, which reflected upon the culture too. The banned books began to emerge again into the light from the spiritual darkness, new books appeared, unthinkable in the previous decades. The communist regime, against the background of its national ideology and claim of independence from Moscow, created an opening towards the West and the Western culture. In this time of openness, publishers began printing many good books, some of them prohibited previously, which brought a breath of freedom in Romanian culture. A freedom still controlled by the regime, limited by the servitudes of ideology.

Reading became a form of existence, a mode of spiritual survival. People found in books a refuge and a way of escape from the real world, a world of gray, surrounded by walls. A contributing factor of the refuge in the world of books was also the fact that the regime had not created other means of evading from reality. Press, television were controlled by censorship and dominated by political issues under the auspices of the totalitarian regime and of the cult of personality. However, even in these circumstances, there were constantly issued culture magazines. Reading became an essential human activity, a way of dodging from the “every day prison”, of experiencing the inner freedom, a form of survival. However, a fundamental exercise of freedom and survival, reading was also a source of culture. In this context, culture turned into a form of freedom.

In communism, culture was not only a matter of consumption, but also a matter of creation, by the writing of books, by other forms of creativity in the world of arts. Romanian literature in the communist period saw a prodigious activity, through the number and quality of the literary works. Censorship produced a special type of literature, subversive, parabolic, double-faced, trying to say what could not be said officially. The other arts expressed in their fields too, theatre, film, music, fine arts etc., in a cultural emulation, within an area that could not be fully controlled, culture. Thus, culture, in all its complexity, became a parallel space of the existence, an alternative to the real world, a means of survival, through the freedom of the spirit, in a closed world. *Culture as freedom* is the existential model generated by communism and by the totalitarian regime, which turned the world into a vast prison.

### **The crisis of culture in post-communism and the limits of freedom**

The fall of communism determined a *shock of freedom* in a world that had lived half a century in a concentration camp, in an ideological gulag. Freedom came suddenly over a closed society, secluded in dark fears, and this was taken by surprise. In short, freedom was perceived and experienced individually and socially as anarchy, in a world terrorized by dogmas and fear of prisons, under the supervision of an unforgiving Big Brother, in the form of the political police. This shock produced, in the early years of democracy, confusion in the immediate existence, but also on the moral, axiological, spiritual and cultural levels. The man locked in the ideological camp awoke suddenly in a world without walls, without barbed wire, almost without rules, as a huge land left to hazard. If, until then, all the fruits were forbidden to him, from then on he could eat of all, without hindrance. Hence a terrible struggle to recover the lost years, in a kind of revenge on the stage of life and history. The shock of freedom was so powerful that its effects were distributed across the entire society and remained active in the long term. Confusion led to a complex crisis, that swept the fundamental aspects of the individual and social existence. Instead of being a transitory state, this crisis became chronic, a permanent state of a society still torn by the shock of freedom, which has not found yet the sense of its evolution and its identity. In its wide area of coverage, the crisis did also affect, in a major extent, culture. In these circumstances, we can talk, with essential arguments, about the *crisis of culture* in the post-communist society.

Historically speaking, after the fall of communism, the territory of culture began to undergo a comprehensive axiological reassessment and a large review process. Without complying with the “sine ira et studio” principle, the artisans of this approach involved in the research of the cultural area rather extra-aesthetic than aesthetic criteria, particularly ethical, historical, biographical arguments. At the same time, they set new axiological benchmarks in judging value. The process generated new hierarchies, with the passing in shadow of the authentic values, classicized by history and by the critical reception, and the exaltation of others, outside of any objective axiology. Revisions in culture determined widespread confusion, especially that some entered the school textbooks. In this context, of the relativization and minimization of values, the culture field became a framework of endless disputes, chronic antagonism, rivalry and non-cordial polemics, groups and communities of interests, more or less “cultural”. This caused an axiological fragmentation of this space, a flagrant diversity of approaches, on the background of a permanent tension, unable to build anything, able only to maintain a state of conflict. The crisis of culture has had a major cause in this situation.

At the same time, the shift to a new paradigm of existence, the shock that this produced have generated a significant change in the individual, in the order of his existential priorities. If, during the totalitarian era, cultural values played an important role in existence, by the opening and spiritual freedom created by culture, after the fall of communism, in the freedom conditions, the focus began to fall on material values. Man has become the victim of a new ideal, that of accumulation, of the existential progress in the material dimension, leaving aside the ideal of cultural emancipation, as a permanent need of the human being. In these circumstances, the interest for culture of the individual of the post-communist society began to enter into a sharp decline, which, in many cases, turned into a cultural neutrality or indifference. It is a process which occurred over the decades of transition and has not stopped

yet. A very vulnerable area, which it affected significantly, is education. Very serious is the fact that this new approach has generated a mentality regarding culture and, within it, reading. It must be emphasized that reading is the major route to culture, the gateway to the noetic universe of knowledge. This mindset tends not to fully recognize the value of culture in the spiritual development and becoming of the individual, favouring instead the pragmatic values and approaches in the process. It is an uncultured pragmatism, based on utilitarianism, measurable results and benefits, of immediate order. It is obvious that such a mentality leads inevitably to the cultural and spiritual loss of the individual, to an involutive process on the level of the society. The effects are clear and dramatic: the man of today, the average man, but not only him, who was previously attached to books and reading, today reads increasingly less or not at all, and therefore knows lesser and lesser substantially. Progressively and alarmingly, the phenomenon affects the younger generations, especially children, who grow up in this mentality.

Technology plays, in this involution, an extremely important role. Based on the new technologies, mass-media and the new media promote an offer hard to refuse to the man of today. It is a fabulous digital and media offer, practically endless, which covers almost his entire existential and spiritual horizon. In this world dominated by the digital technology and mass-media, books can hardly find their place, and, together with them, the concern for intellectual accumulation, knowledge and culture. The book as a source of culture is under the risk to move towards its twilight, under the pressure of the relentless competition of the digital technology. And, with it, culture, as we know it now, in the formula developed over centuries and millennia. Thus we arrive at an infallible formula: to the increasing disinterest in reading and culture, the today's world proposes or, almost, imposes an alternative in computer technology. So the place of culture in the ontological horizon is covered by the illusions and phantasms offered by the new technologies, limited, most of them, to the ludic universe, without intellectual or cultural benefits. A growing mentality, that promotes the separation of culture, is supported by a growing technology, that covers the entire horizon of human existence.

It is a step back, in the order of culture and spirit, made by the individual and society in the post-communist era. Undoubtedly, we are dealing with a *paradoxical effect of freedom*, the *effect of the allowed fruit*. In the conditions of the ideological constraint, in the world as a gulag, man was desperately seeking his freedom and found it in culture, namely in books. After he won his freedom, the individual departed from the noetic space of books, because it had nothing to “offer” him any longer on the level of the existential urgency. More and more, man lost his interest and curiosity for culture, captured by other priorities. Having all the freedoms, he does not know what to do with his freedom. Such a mentality is harmful to the spiritual being and cultural identity of man. We must look at this regression in the context of today's time, of the evolution of technology, of the spectacular, unprecedented developments and transformations, which generate a paradigm shift of human existence and knowledge on the history level. The most serious risk refers to the despiritualisation of the human being by deculturalisation, alienation and dehumanisation. It is a risk that should not be ignored either individually or in the social field. In this vast and complex existential framework, modelled by complicated processes and phenomena, under the empire of time, pragmatism and technological progress, the post-communist society is facing a major *cultural crisis*. This

crisis regards the cultural and spiritual values, models, landmarks and ideals in the personal existence and in the society as a whole. The implications of the cultural crisis, which manifests itself in a complex phenomenology, are severe for the individual and society. Its inexorable sense is the general decline, at least in the classical representation of this notion. But the notion expresses a reality, difficult to refute with any arguments, even technological, because the evaluation of the process is made with the criteria of culture and knowledge.

### **Culture as Utopia and the risk of a Cultural Wasteland**

Freedom is the sense of Creation and the essence of being. But the freedom which is not given a sense and a meaning leads to confusion, alienation and, ultimately, to waste.

Under a totalitarian regime, in this case a communist one, governed by a doctrine of coercion and terror, freedom is a utopia. It is still a tangible utopia: if the physical, apparent freedom is prohibited, there are still chances to achieve and experience a different kind of freedom, the spiritual freedom, the inner freedom. Living this form of freedom, man becomes free, even within the walls surrounded by barbed wire of the totalitarian ideology. The path to this freedom is culture. Because freedom is the essence of human existence, and its absence is equivalent to a form of non-existence, achieving freedom is a matter of survival. Culture thus becomes a way to achieve and live freedom, a way to survive in a hostile world to the free existence and to the human founding values. So freedom ceases to be a mere utopian projection, but becomes possible, a subjective reality, tangible only with the instruments of the spirit.

In post-communism, when the walls fall and freedom is a state of being, the state of human normality, freedom itself is no longer a challenge. But, is it real or more an illusion? This is a question to be reflected upon. Culture as a way to freedom loses its stake too. The forbidden fruit becomes the permitted fruit that everyone can pick and spare, so that is why it comes to interest fewer and fewer. The inner dimension of culture, its subversive side disappear. Freedom lived as anarchy gives birth to a mentality and generates a new paradigm of existence. This mentality exalts the material values of the existence overshadowing the spiritual ones. But culture does not exist only in terms of the access it opens to the inner freedom. It would mean that culture should disappear in the eras of freedom and social flourishing. The stake of culture is more complex, however, since it pleads for the spiritual becoming of man, for his fulfilment as a rational being. The aspiration to culture should therefore be a fundamental dimension of the human being, outside of which this is not complete. Culture, in its fabulous diversity, is the specific difference of man in the vast realm of living, the one that gives his identity and defines him before the Creation. However, there are times when the fascination of freedom, lived as anarchy in an anomic society, still in a long and complicated process of genesis and redefinition, not controlled by rules and ideals, covers other basic human aspirations, which open the limits of the being to higher horizons. This explains the decline of culture in the post-communist society. A contributing factor is represented by the process of re-evaluation and revision of the cultural field in the idea of axiological reordering, of achieving a new scale of values. Developed with exterior instruments to the axiological and aesthetic domains, with preconceived judgments, directed in a teleological sense, such a process can only create confusion, generate a relative and minimalist perspective and representation of the culture territory. To these an important

element should be added: technology, that proposes an alternative to reading and culture. Its offer is spectacular and fabulous, endless varieties of nothing in seductive forms, a procession of digital and hologramatic chimeras, which nourish the illusion and make the spirit poorer. The alienation from culture, under the irresistible temptation of the anarchic freedom and of the living in its unlimited space, the process of relativisation and minimisation of the cultural values, the rise and supremacy of technology on human existence, all these generate a phenomenology of the decline of culture in the post-communist society.

In these circumstances, culture becomes itself a utopia, a projection increasingly difficult to achieve among so many temptations and siren songs. *Culture as utopia* is the model created by the chaotic freedom in the post-totalitarian society, under the pressure of the existential and axiological confusion. It is a paradoxical model of freedom, generated by freedom lived without sense and direction. The ultimate risk is that the post-communist society, that lives freedom chaotically and is dominated by the values of an immediate pragmatism, by consumerism and utilitarianism, become a space where the values of culture and spirit disappear from the horizon of existence. A territory governed by axiological emptiness, a cultural wasteland, without boundaries and without limits, but limited by a dominant mindset that privileges the matter to the spirit.

Finally, there are more questions, serious questions awaiting answers. Is this risk confined only to the post-communist society? Only the post-totalitarian societies are threatened by the danger of deculturalisation and despiritualisation? Isn't this risk threatening all societies, regardless of the ideology that governs them, and the whole world today? Answers already exist and they are obvious. We only have to look at the nowadays world, at the processes and phenomena which are remodelling it within the vast and challenging framework of globalisation. Utopias and dystopias do not stop with communism and totalitarian experiences. They threaten from the shadow the territory seemingly invulnerable of freedom.

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