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The age of the lost innocence

Zoe Petre



During Christmastide, 1989, when I used to cry like a dumb head in front of the TV, watching monasteries, censors and the Madrigal Choir “fully coloured”, I had no idea that, before the end of the year, an avalanche of events would bit by bit steal this happy, naïve, childish innocence away from me.

On 5th January, I reckon, I was summoned by the Ministry of Education. Schools were about to start and, according to the syllabus, pupils in various grades- 8th, 11th, 12th- were studying the period after the Second World War.

The inspectors didn’t know which way to turn because nothing fit anything: not the glorious accomplishments of the popular democracy, not the collapse of the colonial imperialist system and not even the “golden age” apotheosis.

I can’t remember the solutions I suggested back then and it didn’t even matter because, without our knowledge, of those summoned there, somebody – I can’t tell who and to what extent was that slick – had the uninspired idea of quickly reprinting P.P Panaitescu’s manual *Romanians’ History*, not exactly the best inter-war manual and written by the great Slavic specialist moved by his own commitment – belated and all the more zealous- favouring the right.

Yet, I clearly remember the conversation I had with a former student, who became a clerk in the Ministry, and who wittily recounted what

had happened there during 22nd December and afterwards: how Minister Teoreanu managed to hide himself under his desk on 22nd in order to tail out later; how, on 23rd, the fearful comrade Apostol, chief of the Social Sciences Commission, one of the most displeasing characters of the teaching control and censoring system, also known as ‘the bulging frog eyes’ had fussily locked himself in his office and had shown up with a slavish and praising adhesion telegram, and how- that was the real revolution- not even one of the typists had accepted to type it for him.

How Teoreanu had showed up again, encouraged by the 22nd December proclamation and how he had to leave again on 4th January, enraged and threatening everybody: “Never mind, we can leave now, but you shall see that till April it will be also us who shall return!”

It was precisely this last episode that we found particularly hilarious: poor fellow, we said, he didn’t understand anything.

Also at that time, when about to leave, I bumped into a weird philosophy gathering- former students and a few colleagues who made it clear to me that, predictably abandoning the scientific socialist classes both in secondary schools and in universities, they had gathered there in order to overall convert to teach democracy classes.

I took a glimpse of comrade Clătici, the ideo-

logical senior sergeant of the University Centre, getting her notebook ready. Stunned, I tried to mumble an objection but a highly respectable colleague of mine encouragingly tapped my shoulder saying: “never mind, it goes like that as well” and entered the packed room.

Otherwise, everything was just great. It was for the first time in my life when the ministers of Education, of Culture, those that interested me – where no longer mono-lingual ogres or some mean and fearfully ignorant lady comrades with pointy buns on top of the head. As Minister of Education they had chosen Mihai Şora – back then I only knew him from hearsay, and it was only afterwards that I had the privilege to personally meet him- and as Higher Education Deputy Minister they had appointed Professor Cornea, clever, efficient and almost paternal and who was backed up by my old university friend Mihai Zamfir. A real miracle.

After years of joyfully playing upon Pleşu’s witty saying: “It is not the minister of culture but the minister’s culture that I fear” – the minister was Pleşu himself.

On the other hand, in the university nothing was as easy as it seemed while under the euphoric feeling given by the first days. On the other hand, I must confess that I only managed to discern an inner perspective of the revolution-which I used to ignore completely – when I heard my colleague Lucian Boia saying: “Maybe now we can get rid of the apotheosis teachers”.

The truth is that for 15 years history had been the main means of promoting both the cult of the national-communist regime and that of Ceauşescu’s, so that, proportionally, the concentration of political promoters was at its peak.

Boia had referred to them by the term *synecdoche* hinting at a certain important Professor of the faculty, Gh. Ioniţă, one of Ceauşescu’s proponents, a long run activist of the CC¹ Propaganda Section and till recently a dean.

He had actually preceded, *horribile dictu*, at the head of the South-east European Studies Institute, our distinguished, fine, unrivalled Professor Mihai Berza.

One couldn’t imagine a more painful and significant contrast: on the one hand the learned aristocrat, with his ‘eternity coated’ Byzantine saint-like looks, like my mom would affectionately say, charming successive generations of students to whom he used to recall the gold of the Venetian doges, the haughty Florence, the ravishing Amalfi (whose citizen of honour he actually was, after dedicating an outstanding PhD thesis to the respective city) or Prince Cantemir’s tragic destiny.

On the other hand, the thundering ogre who was literally patching his scientific work by pinning down quotes from the Comrade’s work, and who, on any occasion, used to throw endless fabricated phrases about The Golden Age as apotheosis of the national history (and universal, but that hardly ever mattered). All of a sudden, when I heard Boia uttering that phrase, I understood.

The students had understood a lot quicker. After the fervent revelations caused by our happy helter-skelter discussions on our outstanding professors schooled in Rome and Fontenay-aux-Roses, about the autonomy of the university and about scholarships abroad, they had withdrawn in their own assemblies and had shown up three days later with a precise demand: not to be forced to take political promoters as teachers, at the same time presenting a list of undesirable persons.

Their maturity was indubitably contrasting my silenced and euphoric innocence, all the more as they brilliantly organized a boycott, which they sacredly respected for two semesters.

The contested teachers immediately accused us of manipulating the students. Even if things were completely different, I would be a hypocrite

¹ Central Council of the Communist Party.

to pretend that, once seeing how serious and determined they were, I didn't embrace their cause.

Their list was almost identical to the one in my mind. Yet, I remember having tried to put away some of their redeeming and just anger, claiming that one or two of their targets were, beyond the undeniable propagandistic activity, more worthy and capacitated teachers than others.

Speaking of one of them, Armand Goșu got really upset and bluntly told me: "You didn't study political classes with this gentleman!". The naiveté that characterized my fervent defensive attitude regarding that cause struck me as evident only much later. It was only on 14th June 1990, while the miners' revolt was at peak, when the worthy person in question, the named Gh. Iscru, showed up at the university leading a commando group ready to take over the Dean's Office helped by the miners, and then later, when he started to ostentatiously, fanatically and unprofessionally claim various delirious theories on different TV channels.

Other cases were simpler: the apologetical boom usually had as other a shattering counterpart. The paradigm of such a characteristic alloy for the politics of the member of the Party keeps on being, for the majority of us, the only university teacher, member of the CAP¹, and who would invariably present himself as "history lecturer PhD captain Vasile Budrigă, commander-in-chief of the army in the university of Bucharest".

He managed to tempestuously begin his teaching career, yelling at the feared assignment commission that it was his sacred right to be appointed member of the Faculty, thing which actually happened; he had a less tempestuous advancement while endlessly working on a PhD thesis he himself defined as a "valorisation of the original material published by the inter-war

press."

I once tried to convince him that he shouldn't keep on using that oxymoronic expression but he immediately replied that since nobody was reading newspapers anymore, the materials published were therefore original.

When he finally attained his goal, for the first time he brought the television to immortalize him.

My younger boy, was about ten back then and who had personally met the gentleman in question during the successive union Christmas trees, when hearing that the Romanian television had come to immortalize Budrigă while defending his thesis, immediately added: «And is he going to appear on "Embarrassing but true"?»

When courses on the history of the Nation and of the Party were introduced in the syllabuses of all faculties, the cooperative history PhD captain was sent to lecture to the philologist students, and he categorically told the fourth year students that the national language was unitary, with no dialects.

The students happily contradicted him saying that they had just attended Professor Coteanu's lecture on the dialects of the Romanian language which triggered his nervous barking: "Who is this Coteanu that has no idea about the documents of the party?" Coteanu, back then a member of the CC and Dean of the Faculty of Letters, made a huge scandal in the Rector's office, while Budrigă was disciplinary moved to Măgurele to enlighten the students there, and Professor Radu Manolescu, a distinguished specialist in the Medieval period, and myself, were asked to clarify the situation to the litigant.

Manolescu tactfully asked him: "Comrade Budrigă, what language do you speak?" – "What do you mean what language, he angrily replied, I speak the Romanian national unitary language!"

1 Agricultural Production Cooperative.

– “Sir, you speak the Daco-Roman language” Manolescu replied at his turn. “Get out of here, comrade, that was in times of yore!” shouted my learned colleague.

With a naiveté quickly annihilated by facts, I thought that we would at least get rid of Budrigă. No way! He immediately found champions precisely among my colleagues who, in the past, used to pull his leg, together with the Head of Department, Professor Ioan Scurtu, who told me in a very deep philosophical tone: “he may be an idiot but he is ours.”

And he aggressively defended him. Since he didn't leave out of his own will, he didn't leave the faculty at all till 1997 or 1998 when he suddenly died. Meanwhile, our man had laid the foundations of an obscure party influenced by Lenin and Ceaușescu's doctrines, whose secretary general he was, publishing- even today I wonder on what money- a publication, called ‘the Socialist Sparkle’.

In its first year of existence, PRO TV channel ensured this party a national fame, dedicating it a brief documentary, displaying the residence adorned with Lenin's portrait and with Ceaușescu's fiery red complete works, with a political staff which gathered another three rightful members, apart from the secretary general- two of Budrigă's four daughters and somebody else- an acting member who, during the sessions, used to take a seat on a smaller and more shaky chair.

Looking towards Dâmbovița, Vasile Budrigă pathetically exclaimed: „There is no point in cursing Ceaușescu now, look at this clear water, which, during the bourgeois period, used to be a *pestilential* water (sic!)”

With regretful ingenuity, I vaguely imagined that, touched by Liiceanu's Appeal, Ceaușescu's proponents in the Faculty would leave tiptoeing, overwhelmed by their own culpability. It is more than obvious that this cohort decided to rather die than surrender and we were all of a sudden faced with a civil war.

The students caught me completely unaware when they fervently asked me to become the

dean (which, obviously, offered unexpected ammunition to the opposite group, which had all the time sustained the fact that the stability and the undisturbed continuity of our marvellous faculty had been exclusively staggered by the despicable manoeuvres of some profiteers of the Revolution. Ioan Scurtu, our colleague, subsequently published some indignities of the kind).

I really tried to convince my proponents that a man's muscles were requested to move „history's front” from the area of party propaganda into that of the honest research of the past, till a young and ardent colleague of mine looked me straight in the eyes and strenuously said: „Please forgive me for not having the time to be polite, but you have to play Gorgona's part there!” And he convinced me.

When I went to break the news of this unexpected promotion to my venerated teacher D.M. Pippidi- persecuted and humiliated for years in the faculty precisely for being the embodiment of the superiorly clever erudition and of the flawless intellectual elegance- he told me while sensing the thrill in his tone: „I have never thought to live the time of such a retaliation.” Even only for this and it was worth it.

This is how I became a dean- dignity which, in the year of grace of 1990- cured me of many naiveties.

In the University, the atmosphere was feverish and quite affable, only that I found it difficult to understand why the rector, a well-known mathematician, was apparently bemused by the stubbornness which characterised the refusal of the students in the History section to work with some teachers and he kept on repeating me *ad nauseam* that even Călinescu or Barbilian had been previously boycotted by students, shutting his ear to me when hearing me telling him dozens of times that, compared to Ion Barbu and Călinescu, those contested then didn't know the multiplication table and they used to place a comma between subject and predication.

Yet, I kept on progressively learning everyday

that, beyond the narrow limits of a privileged minority – to which those who became my university colleagues by the Party’s grace and by that of the socialist nation also belonged – many common people had perceived the Revolution not as a miracle but rather like a punch in the nose: like an assault against their own identity.

On 29th January, while passing by the residence of the Peasant party in Rosetti Square, I saw some things which astonished me. Even if at dawn, the booze shop on the other side of the street was as opened as it could have been and also assailed by miners- what the hell are the authorities doing, I said to myself, full of a monumental and stupid naiveté- and the crowd buying gape seed at the residence of the party was receiving some mysterious white parcels. When I came closer, I saw that the parcels were actually photocopier reams. Not even today can I figure out why they needed them, but that pleased and slick attitude they had while marching down the boulevard, holding their pray, cleared my mind.

It became all the more obvious to me when, entering a neighbouring tobacco shop, I saw the shop assistant emphatically crossing herself up

to her navel while saying: „Praised be the Lord for finally getting rid of these, I was so afraid of living next to their bloody residence that you can’t imagine, it’s so good we’ve got rid of them!” So that in June, when I saw the people in Bucharest, both men and women, fervently applauding the miner cohorts, I was able to save my perplexities.

It may be that all these bits and pieces of unexpected and vexing experiences have concentrated somewhere, without me knowing it. On 11th March, in the morning- it was Sunday- I woke up as if from a nightmare, all in a very cold and extremely political sweat.

All of a sudden and on a national scale I realized my stupid naiveté while mocking – sometimes, a long time ago, in January- minister Teoreanu’s good-bye speech. In the same evening, I was gathering the pieces of the Proclamation from Timișoara, despite the drunk TV announcer’s aggressively criticizing it. The age of innocence was over, and the age of confrontations about to begin.

Translated by Raluca Vîjăiac

