

## THE QUARRELL OF WORDS

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In the analysis of anti-totalitarian culture in Central and Eastern Europe, principally the forms of anti-totalitarian culture in Romania in the first two decades after the War, it is instructive to use dictionaries. Let us consider or re-consider the notion of totalitarianism. The definitions given by dictionaries of modern languages show the present usage of the term, that of "regime established by a unique party which does not allow for any organised opposition, a regime in which political power confiscates all the activities in the society which it directs or dominates." (Petit Robert) This is a formulation which refers to the first meaning of the concept of totalitarianism linked to the ascent of Italian fascism (1930), a concept which was largely used in the context of Nazism and consecrated in connection with the communist regime in the USSR and Asia – China, North-Corea and the Cambodia of the Khmer Rouge, as well as the communist regime established in Central and East-European countries. However, according to Malraux, "Christianity was not totalitarian: totalitarian states were born of the will to find a totality without religion." (Petit Robert, p.1799.) This was also remarked by Nicolai Berdyaev<sup>1</sup> before. But how should we interpret the excerpt in DEX (Dicţionarul Explicativ al Limbii Române – The Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language, Second Edition, 1996) on page 1100 where the adjective totalitarian is followed by a paranthesis referring to states and regimes which "apply or stipulate the dictatorship of a minority while the majority

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<sup>1</sup> Nicolai Berdyaev, *Originile și sensul comunismului rus (The Origins and Meaning of Russian Communism)*, Translated by Ioan Muşlea, Introduction by Vasile Boari, Ed. Dacia, Cluj, 1994, p.43.

of the society is deprived of rights and liberties”? The word “minority” is not nuanced: is it a political party, the minority of artistic syndicates, an ethnic or religious minority – who is the oppressor, what majority is oppressed and what sort of dictatorship is applied or stipulated? I have also mapped the “hermeneutics” of totalitarianism beginning with Hannah Arendt, Berdyaev, Czeslaw Milosz, to François Furet, Paul Ricoeur and Vladimir Tismăneanu, political theorist, as well as the memorable analyses of writers such as Alexandr Soljhenitzyn, Andrei Amalrik, György Konrád, Milan Kundera, Vaclav Havel, Danilo Kiš, etc.

We are dealing here with the “ANTI paradigm”<sup>1</sup>, the way in which intellectuals expressed their reluctance to accept the order of controlled culture.

According to the writer Dumitru Țepeneag, the rejection of totalitarianism implies three types of attitude: resistance, opposition and dissidence. Consequently, we have to deal with terms of current usage which have an “aggressive” connotation because they refer to the characteristics of totalitarian action (the violence of the exclusivist norms of the state / the totalitarian regime) and the reactions of opposition against it (individual or collective opposition which, besides bearing the mark of the general cause of liberty seem to us now to have satisfied the fundamental need of equilibrium), during the last seven or eight decades of contemporary history, fascism, Nazism and communism. The tyranny or despotism of former epochs saw insubordination, mutiny and heresy. The similitude and the substratum of difference between these and the terms mentioned above (resistance, opposition and dissidence) could be the subject of another analysis and we will come back to this.

According to the DEX (Dicționarul Explicativ al Limbii Române) resistance is “The act of resisting; opposition; defence against an attack. Rejection of the repeated attacks of the enemy and the maintainance of one’s position. Anti-fascist popular movement of liberation during the Second World War.” The

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<sup>1</sup> Cornel Ungureanu, *Preface to the novel Vizitatorul (The Visitor)* by György Konrád, translated by Paul Drumaru, Ed. Univers, București, 1998.

second meaning refers to the power of facing illness, tiredness, hunger, shortages, etc. or the quality of an organism of not contracting a contagious disease; the feature of a body of bearing, without modifications in its mass, the action of another body or of an alien force. Nevertheless, the words “opposition” and “defence” acquire a more dynamic character when we add the verbs “to fight” or the syntagms “to fight against”, “to resist oppression” (Petit Robert). In the same dictionary we can decypher a moral connotation of “resistance” as an expression of the capacity of bearing / enduring (pain, danger) without giving up (similarly, the resistance of temptation and seduction) as well as in stressing the fact of rejecting to submit to others’ will.

Opposition / opposer means “to resist; resistance, opposition, an attack against certain forced acts (DEX). In Larousse we can also find the meaning “to lay an obstacle; an action taken against the government” and in Petit Robert the explanations about nouns referring to violent states dominate: “antagonism, fight, discord, conflict, contestation, contrast, difference, insubordination, disapproval, rejection, resistance of a political doctrine”. We can see the implicit moral justification of “violence” here too.

Dissidence means “schism, a group of people who have a different opinion than the majority; dissident”; “Person who has different views or opinion than the collectivity he belongs to” (DEX). We can find out from Petit Robert that the term was rarely used before the 18<sup>th</sup> century; it comes from the Latin *dissidentia* and refers to the action or state of those who separate themselves from a religious, political or social community or a philosophical school. It can also be substituted by the terms division, rebellion, revolt, schism, scission, secession, separation.

Of course, dictionaries offer orientative explanations, often revealing through the synonyms, in other cases by the lack of synonyms, not to mention cases when usual terms are missing altogether, such as the noun normality from the DEX while all the other dictionaries of modern languages contain the noun-derivative of the adjective “normal” as an integral part of the current vocabulary.

When we discuss anew the meaning of the words resistance, opposition, dissidence based on dictionaries, references to civil and military opposition and resistance to an occupant of a country or resistance to the violation of a democratic regime in a country by a totalitarian ideology come first. In France occupied by the Nazi Germany, for example, resistance was first of all an organised action against the foreign military administration as well as an action against the collaborationist regime in Vichy<sup>1</sup>. Another example is the Polish government in exile in London during the War, as well as the famous rebellion of the Jews in the Warsaw ghetto, which resulted in its burning down and complete destruction. Up to the present day, the meaning of resistance looms out of this vast clandestine organisation of society defending its organism, its identity as well as its traditions against the domination of the artificial and the negative utopia. Neither its organisation, nor its efficiency are produced outside action, political to cultural. There are lots of examples in the cultural and literary life of countries which were under Nazi occupation and the beginning of the Soviet occupation in Eastern Europe, once considered Central Europe. Dissidence manifested itself earlier, in the literary meaning of the word “separation”, delimiting oneself from a creed. Let us select three striking personalities from the context of communist and Nazi totalitarianism: Panait Istrati, Arthur Koestler and Ernst Jünger. After sixteen months spent in the USSR Panait Istrati became disillusioned with communism and published *Spovedanie pentru învinși*<sup>2</sup> as soon as 1929; this is a unique confession about the concentration camp system in the USSR which triggered the contempt of his French comrades, the estrangement of his Maecenas, Romain Rolland, and the separation from his friend Kazantzakis; in a word, this Romanian-

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<sup>1</sup> Dominique Veillon, Olivier Wiewiorka, *La Resistance*, in: *La France des années noires*, ed. by Jean-Pierre Azema and Francois Bedarida, p.65.

<sup>2</sup> Panait Istrati, *Vers l'autre flamme. Confession pour vaincus. Apres 16 mois dans l'URSS*, Edition Rieder, Paris, 1929; Panait Istrati, *Spovedanie pentru învinși. După șaisprezece luni în URSS*, Foreword and translation by Alexandru Talex, Ed. Dacia, Cluj, 1991

French writer met with the adversity of all the people around him until his death.

Arthur Koestler, “comrade” in the German Communist Party ruthlessly criticised the flaws of real communism and renounced his party activity as soon as 1938! A recently discovered document in the archives of the KGB<sup>1</sup> proves the lucidity of the writer: “He who thinks shoots himself!” Without de-solidarising with the “Soviet Union, a categorically positive factor in the political equilibrium of our times” (we repeat: this was in the year 1938), Koestler expressed strong doubts about the functioning of communism. The publication of his book *Le zero et l’infini* in 1956 marked his breaking with the Communist Party.

Ernst Jünger was an officer in the Wehrmacht, a writer much appreciated by Hitler for the exaltation of military heroism in his memoir about the First World War, *In Stahlgewittern* (În furtuni de Oțel, 1920). In 1939 he published the novel *Auf den Marmorklippen*, a fastidious bill of indictment addressed to the Führer and German national-socialist criminality<sup>2</sup> in which we can read: “The Word, Liberty and the Spirit forms an inseparable trinity”. (p.103) The book brought him the distrust of the Nazi administration and it cost him his son’s life when he was sent to the Italian front.

Speaking about forms of the Romanian anti-totalitarian culture we must take into account the rigour of the terms in order to understand the extent to which we can speak about a “cultural resistance” during the communist totalitarianism. But before that, we must see if there was a resistance on the part of men of culture during the Antonescu dictatorship, what was the concept of culture in Romanian society between 1945-1989, what is our position regarding former “beliefs” and “disbeliefs” and, finally, what was the role of anti-totalitarian culture in the successive stages of the establishment of a power regime which could be foreseen after the

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Koestler, *De ce nu mai pot rămîne alături de voi* (*Why I Cannot Remain with You*), document published in *Lettre Internationale*, Romanian edition, Fall, 1999, p.49-52.

<sup>2</sup> Ernst Jünger, *Pe falezele de marmoră*, translated by Ion Roman, Editura Univers, Colecția Meridiane, București, 1971

War. How did it transform the mentality of contemporary Romanian society which was already disjunct between the archaic and the modern, the echoes of which can be still heard today? Does Romanian language really differentiate between resistance, dissidence and opposition? What is the difference and what are the similarities between these concepts? When are they mixed up? As we have already seen, resistance does not necessarily have an active connotation: it presupposes therefore the maintaining of one's own position and not contracting an "illness or contagious disease" thanks to the robustness of the organism; it implies the feature of the body of not modifying itself in function of external influences. Opposition refers to the factor of action, risk, fight "against" and attack... In a conversation with Eugen Simion, Dumitru Țepeneag<sup>1</sup> adds opposition to the categories of resistance and dissidence, the category of the opposer differing from that of dissident in that it does not try to improve the system from within, entering the party, for example, with the aim or pretext of influencing it in the best direction. I considered myself an opposer: I never harboured the illusion that the system could be improved. The 'Prague Spring' which I supported, was a stage towards passing to something different. The resistant - which was the most frequent positive character in the communist dictatorship - does not actively oppose the system but also does not essentially participate in the system and its effects. Resistant was the writer who tried to write pure quality literature, or the critic who refused to falsify or inverse values (...) Some were resisters from the beginning to the end, others became resisters later on, or, on the contrary, failed miserably (...) And there was the category of resisters with "permission from the police" who, in a system of direct or indirect complicity could publish what was forbidden to others."

In order to present the selected cases more clearly – since we cannot survey the whole spectrum of literature – we will revert to examining the terms suggested by an American anthropologist

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<sup>1</sup> D.Țepeneag, *Reîntoarcerea fiului la sânul mamei răătăcite* (*The Return of the Son to the Lost Mother*), Institutul European, Iași, 1993, p.103.

who studied the phenomenon of resistance in Romania for a long time. Katherine Verdery's book *Compromis și rezistență în cultura română sub Ceaușescu*<sup>1</sup> () is already a classical work. The word 'culture' is used by the author in its popular meaning, the same meaning that we are interested in, namely, in the sense of "high culture which is produced by artists, writers, musicians and scientists either for an extremely specialised audience or for a larger audience." Katherine Verdery says that cultural policy "begins, in its most general form, in the way described by Milan Kundera's famous remark in *Le livre du rire et de l'oubli*: "Man's whole life is but a fight for others' ears."<sup>2</sup> This assertion raises two questions about the transmitter-receiver relationship: first, what "ears" does one consider worthy of being receivers and, consequently, in what "party" does one try to build his public image? Secondly, in function of his choice and, eventually, the increased proportion of a less "official" audience, to what extent is the author ready to sacrifice himself as a physical and public person in a totalitarian system? Before elucidating this aspect, we must make it clear that we refer exclusively to an epoch in which cultural policy was done in function of an ideological "canon", and cultural (literary, historical, philosophical, sociological) production had to subdue itself in order to be publicly validated.

The period between 1945-1971, the period that we are dealing with, consisted of slightly different stages, each with its own specificity (1945-48, 1948-53, 1953-59, 1960-64, 1965-71), and was mostly the period of the "unique model" (it certainly was until 1964). The "unique model" was the Soviet one in 1945-1963/64. The consequences of obeying this model on the level of cultural production meant:

- the destruction of institutions, Justice and the Church; the abolition of the Constitutional State, above all

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<sup>1</sup> Editura Humanitas, București, 1994, translated by Mona Antohi and Sorin Antohi

<sup>2</sup> *Idem*, p.32.

- annulling all former values – in the field of culture this entailed the deformation of history and ethnic-cultural identity
- the overthrow of moral values in society and the family in the name of “class struggle”, or, more perversely, encouraging denouncement within the family
- annihilating the aesthetic in favour of propaganda
- replacing language with the “wooden language” with zero significance but magical incantational value (obsessional; iconoclast regarding the past; adulatory towards the Soviet present and Stalin, leader of all peoples), modifying orthography
- the unique model of the “new man” who has no past, no present, but is a faithful soldier of the future
- the deformation of folklore in melody, text and clothing (at the beginning)
- censoring topics in press, school textbooks, scientific research, artistic-philosophical exegesis and artistic creation
- the creation of Secret Fonds in state libraries, as part of censorship
- censoring classical authors or authors of classical , even eliminating them (Lovinescu, Blaga, Ion Barbu, Arghezi, in the first years, etc.)
- the modification of the repertory of theatres, the elimination of undesirable or disobedient artists (cases of disobedience were less frequent among actors but still existed)
- aggression in the field of the visual: the abolishing of polychromy in public spaces, and the appearance of gigantic posters – inhibitory and imperative fetishes
- suspending the production of paper, practically its confiscation after 1944 with the aim of annihilating independent publications (press, publishing houses, etc.)

What could be done against this model? For first sight the only answer is that one could die being against the system, and this



situation was not at all “original” but characteristic to the punitive system introduced by the regime in all “colonised” countries. A counter-example would be the decimation of anti-communist resistance in the mountains which lasted for more than a decade. In Romania – for reasons that we are going to discuss in greater detail – no other coherent-collective form of resistance or opposition organised on the level of the majority of population (as was the case in Poland and Hungary) and no form of dissidence (inexistent in Romania at the beginning of the communist regime, unlike in the USSR) proved to be efficient. However, individual gestures and the action of restrained groups kept faith alive in alternative solutions. They appeared gradually, following an oscillating-evolutionary curve: they began by open opposition in the independent press from 1944 to the end of 1947, then they reverted to more “subversive” methods after 1964, until the new “freezing” brought about by the “July theses” in 1971.

As we have seen from the attempts to delimit the terms at the beginning of this paper, essential was the field of culture as an instrument of social action and not the function of culture as meaning, for what does it mean to perform a play instead of another, to conjure up a personality when another is imposed by the order of time. (cf. K. Verdery)

I am afraid that Dumitru Țepeneag is the only Romanian author who speaks about “opposition”. All the other artists, critics, men of culture from different fields use the concept of “resistance”. Statistically speaking, they are not wrong as they are not wrong about the second meaning of the word “resistance” (see “resistance of materials”), that is, bearing, enduring, being near without becoming contaminated. The whole of Romanian literature seems to have been resistant; the question is whether this has a significance - and it seems that it does - and how did this manifest itself in action. Confessions about this latter refer to a vaguer reality.

In order to clear this up, I will revert to a classification made by Adrian Marino<sup>1</sup> in a recent work the first chapter of which is entitled “Resistance and Culture”. The great scholar mentions “passive resistance” first: refraining from something, refusing to collaborate, eluding certain “obligations”, even duplicity which he calls “honest dissimulation”. In other words, a person who practices this type of resistance, remains strictly within the field of his cultural speciality without an ideological commitment. This could be done until 1956, but not at the end of the fifth and the beginning of the sixth decade, because one was not accepted by the system without enrolling in it. One was either excluded or imprisoned. Exclusion from the “Parnassus” meant the interdiction of practising any job, be it the most modest, gate-keeper, for example. (See V. Streinu, Chihaiia, Chimet, etc.) Marino mentions an “inferior level” of the same category, that is, tacit, spontaneous and innocent resistance, the rejection of being implied in any “official” formula; this was something unostentatious and unheroic. This is how the literary world under Ceaușescu manifested itself, one example being the periodical *România literară*. The conscious rejection of signing articles of homage meant a higher level of resistance, but Adrian Marino states that we must not accuse anybody because there were innumerable reasons which could determine someone to write such articles (the best example being perhaps the composer Mihail Jora who wrote a musical homage to free his wife from prison).

Adrian Marino considers culture an attitude and not a state which is made explicit in the second category of resistance that he writes about in his book. The explicit rejection of signing, collaborating or becoming an informer is on the first place. The breaking of legal dispositions is in second place: communist order was defied, being punishable by criminal law. This was the case with collaborators to Radio Free Europe, for example. In those times it was enough to spread undesirable texts among friends, although we must admit that the degree of unconsciousness of

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<sup>1</sup> Adrian Marino, *Politică și cultură. Pentru o nouă cultură română (Politics and Culture. Towards a New Romanian Culture)*, Polirom, Iași, 1996, p.21-51.

those implied was much higher than after the amnesty in 1965. Foreign correspondance, relationship with the Vatican, relatives in high position abroad and famous Romanian exiles also meant the breaking of legal dispositions. Then there was the illegal publication of texts with predominantly political character. This was not very frequent in the epoch we are dealing with; the few cases that existed were punished by the imprisonment of the authors.

Some of these procedures were “mixed” in time; there were people who succeeded in transmitting messages without dramatic consequences; others were imprisoned until the end of the nineties (the case of Gheorghe Ursu) – but this will be the subject of another paper. It is important for us is to bear in mind that opposition at the beginning manifested itself predominantly in the press (in fine arts and poetry to a lesser extent); this was followed by the tacit resistance of some representatives of Romanian culture during the first two decades after the War, until the pseudo-relaxation in 1965.