

ELEONORA-MARIA POPA, *Trecuturi în dispută. Regimul comunist din România în literatura istorică din perioada 1990-2015* [Disputed Pasts. The Romanian Communist Regime in the historical literature of the 1990-2015 period] (Cluj-Napoca, Argonaut, 2020)

Three decades after the fall of communism, the endeavours that aim to inventory and to analyse the “disputing” discourses regarding the years of dictatorship are more than necessary. In any historical environment, certain works that evaluate and re-evaluate the historical writings in certain temporal segments appear regularly. The same is proposed by Eleonora-Maria Popa in her book, *Trecuturi în dispută. Regimul comunist din România în literatura istorică din perioada 1990-2015* [Disputed Pasts. The Romanian Communist Regime in the historical literature of the 1990-2015 period].

The book is divided into four chapters and an introduction in which the author aims to clarify a series of methodological aspects, as well as a separate section for conclusions, in which she presents a summarising overview of her research. The structure takes the form of a frame story. The first chapter is dedicated to the place held by the Romanian communist regime within the historiography published after the events of December 1989, with certain emphases on the methodological and conceptual aspects. The second chapter approaches the subject of the Romanian intellectual figures from communist Romania. The third chapter focuses on the historians of the communist regime, while the fourth chapter directly approaches the subject of the Romanian historical literature regarding the communist period. Therefore, chapters one and four discuss the events that took place after 1989, while chapters two and three discuss the ones that had taken place before 1989.

In the introduction, the author assumes an approach that begins with the impact inflicted by the communist policies upon historiography and relates to certain conceptualisations and periodisation proposed by authors such as Florin Muller and Gabriel Moisa (pp. 20-21). The author states that she extended the angle of approach towards the migration phenomenon, with the purpose of creating a larger context that would include the authors who published their works while in exile, and of observing the impact of their activities on the events of 1989.

We believe that the author takes a small risk in stating that an important step in her research was to establish certain selection criteria that would permit the

nomination of the relevant titles. Although it would appear that she aimed to use an axiological selection typology, she actually instrumentalises a classification of the authors based on certain objective criteria, first of all regarding the work's place of publication. She chose three important names: Ghiță Ionescu, Victor Frunză and Vladimir Tismăneanu. According to Eleonora-Maria Popa, the first two authors were included due to the fact that the true impact of their works was visible after 1989. We completely agree, which is why we believe that the books published by the two authors, which were intensively read and cited in the 90s, would have benefitted from receiving a certain amount of extra attention. The book does not overlook the foreign authors, among whom Keith Hitchins, Catherine Durandin, Katherine Verdery and Dennis Deletant are mentioned. The author states that she had taken certain precautions in order to avoid the subjectivism of value judgements, aiming to introduce variables in the analytical scheme, namely the context in which the works had been written, the narrative styles and their ground-breaking natures.

The first chapter begins with an analysis of the "terminological speculations" regarding the events of 1989. The author tries to take stock of the way in which several authors of actors directly involved in the events had truly defined them. The analysis begins with the ideas formulated by authors such as François Furet and Timothy Garton Ash, regarding the transformations that took place in Eastern Europe between 1989-1990, and, in the end, she presents the approaches of the historians that were preoccupied with the Romanian space. The writings of Siviu Brucan were analysed here in a more in-depth manner, however, in our opinion, this author cannot be placed in the same category as Catherine Durandin or Keith Hitchins.

Eleonora-Maria Popa continues by reviewing the main historiographic directions approached in post-communist Romania. She discusses several trends and schools of thought, from the traditionalist one, to the modern one of the young historians. Particular attention is given to historians Alexandru Zub, Lucian Boia and Pompiliu Teodor, as promoters of the repositioning of historiography after 1989 by reconnecting the Romanian historical research to the European traditions. Among the historians who imposed the new research directions, she mentions Andi Mihalache, Sorin Mitu and Lucian Năstăsă-Kovacs. Possibly out of the desire to offer a clear enough context of the studies regarding the communist period, the author outlines a general frame in which she inventories the main themes in the historical research conducted in the great university centres in Romania.

The final part of the first chapter is dedicated to the issue of the reform of the Romanian historiography after 1989. From the very beginning, Eleonora-Maria Popa unequivocally states that, with the transition towards democracy, the historians set off on an extensive critique of communism (p. 61). The author states that the historians desired a depoliticised intellectual environment, but their discourses were strongly anti-communist. Exactly to what extent can politization be

assimilated with anticommunism remains a theme that is still up for debate. The reformation of historiography was a slow process, supported by arguments invoked from the writings of Andrei Pippidi, Pompiliu Teodor, Bogdan Murgescu, who, around the year 2000, pointed out that the historical writing was not in the point where it had desired to be, that there were no serious debates and that there were excessive borrowings, conceptually speaking.

The second chapter contains a chronological and thematic approach. By using the model provided by Gabriel Moisa, she segmented the communist period into five stages: the first ten years (1945-1955), the controlled de-Stalinisation (1955-1960), the thaw/liberalisation (1960-1964), the apparent liberalisation (1965-1971), the cultural mini-revolution (1970-1980). Apart from this division, she also focuses on themes such as censorship, repression, emigration, dissidence and exile. For a better understanding of the exile historiographic production regarding communism, the author deems it necessary to carry out an in-depth analysis of the condition of the intellectual in Romanian in the post-war period (pp. 77-78). In this part of her volume, the author aims to present the primary benchmarks of the institutional evolution of historiography. She thus makes note of the moment of the official history textbook established by Mihail Roller, the university purges, the transformations suffered by the Romanian Academy, the establishment of the Party history institute. It is obvious that this chapter is meant to facilitate the understanding of the primary subject of the book; however, the author tends to make a series of strong statements, from which she moves on with too much ease, as exemplified by the following: “Dej a dispus în cincinalul 1955-1960 rescrierea istoriei...” [Dej ordered, in the 1955-1960 five-year period, the rewriting of history] (p. 82).

The third chapter, dedicated to the historians from the communist period, centres on two coordinated of the historical discourse, as the author names them: the biographical motivations and the professional preoccupations (p. 118). Eleonora-Maria Popa divided the historians who had written during the aforementioned period into several categories (the dissident inside the country, the dissident in exile, the westerner who lived the repression of the regime and the westerner who was motivated by the professional environment). She admits that these categories are rather fluid and, in this sense, she offers the example of Victor Frunză, the dissident inside the country who became the dissident in exile. The author chose several historians around whose works she built her analytical arc: Victor Frunză, Ghiță Ionescu, Vladimir Tismăneanu, Dennis Deletant and Vlad Georgescu. The author contextualises their works and outlines short biographies in which she emphasises the mechanisms behind their main writings. Eleonora-Maria Popa constructs parallels between the authors who wrote history works starting from their own personal motivations, namely, first of all, those who had left Romania before 1989 and who had reached a certain level of professionalism, and the authors who had

become familiar with Romania through their professional experience and who, in the end, reached a high level of personal implication, as was the case of Dennis Deletant.

Authors like Catherine Durandin, who, according to the author, had a merely professional relationship with the Romanian communist regime, receive a more in-depth approach. The biographic side that accompanies the analysis of the works of these authors not only pinpoints their achievements, but it also draws attention to the hypotheses and ideas that, in their time, had been published as results of the researchers' intuition and that today, given the expansion of the documentation possibilities, no longer stand. The author does not hesitate to sanction the speculative hypotheses that bear no documentary bases. However, Eleonora-Maria Popa does not sufficiently explain why a philologist and an anthropologist are thrown in together with the historians. It is obvious that the scientific contributions signed by Catherine Durandin and Katherine Verdery did indeed influence the way in which we understand the Romanian communism today, which is why it would have perhaps been useful to find out, from a book such as the one under scrutiny in the present review, to what extent had the historians, philologists and anthropologists approached communism differently, whether their hypotheses had different trajectories or whether their hypotheses intersected at some point.

In the final chapter, the author aims to "make a historiographic analysis", but she does not focus on a discourse analysis, as stated in the first few lines of this final part of the book. Eleonora-Maria Popa mentions that she focuses on the communist historiography as the sum of all the historical contributions from the communist regime, which can be approached from an empirical, thematic and/or linguistic perspective (p. 191). The author makes a considerable effort to keep the text as clear as possible, periodically trying to redefine her objectives. However, she does not always manage to renounce the confusing use of certain terms, which she constantly seems to place in all the wrong places, as is the case, for instance of the alternation of the expressions "historiographic literature/production in communism" and "historiographic literature/production about communism."

In an attempt to present the variety of approaches regarding communism, the author makes parallels between several historians, such as Lucian Boia, Alexandru Zub, Katherine Verdery. Each of these historians has their own chronology and their own nuances regarding the periodisation of the period. The historians who had systematic preoccupations for the subject of communist historiography are not overlooked either. However, in this case, a particular focus is placed on Andi Mihalache. The author presents, at-length, his methodology in dismantling the discursive practices used in communism and she outlines the new concepts introduced in the scholarly literature by the historian from Jassy, as was that of the "historical cultures". Nonetheless, the author seems more drawn to the theories and periodisation instrumentalised by Gabieli Mosa, which, as she stated in the

introduction, she used as a model in her analysis. Moreover, the author also captures Moisa's attempts to exploit a certain regional historiography regarding communism in Transylvania (p. 209).

Eleonora-Maria Popa mentions, in chapter four, that she created her own methodology for analysing the historical works dedicated to the Romanian communism. One element on which she focuses is the percentage in which certain authors and works can be found in the so-called "Tismăneanu Report". The author notes that the president of the Commission and Ghiță Ionescu were the most cited authors in the pages of the report assumed by the Presidential Administration. If she had dwelled a little more on this aspect, Eleonora Popa would have seen that Vladimir Tismăneanu was not the only one cited excessively, with entire passages, pages even, from his book *Stalinism pentru eternitate* [*Stalinism for All Seasons*], copied in the Report, sometimes with small interventions in the style of the sentences, other times with no interventions at all. These passages had been copied together with their related critical apparatus.

The conclusions readdress the discussion around the conceptual dilemmas regarding the events of 1989. The author begins and ends her book by emphasising the concurrent discourses on the Revolution of December 1989, apparently in an attempt to transmit the idea that this multitude of interpretive scenarios reflects on the entire historiography of that time. Moreover, this is also supported by the episode that best defines the title of the book, *Disputed Pasts*. The book ends with a short presentation of the authors that represented the core of the volume, Ghiță Ionescu, Victor Frunză, Vladimir Tismăneanu, Catherine Durandin and Katherine Verdery, and an attempt to emphasise the concurrent discourses promoted by them.

The volume authored by Eleonora-Maria Popa is provocative. Although it assumes clear chronological bounds, the author sets upon a journey throughout the 20th century, taking stock of historians who had no preoccupations for the history of communism, but who, through the subjects and methodologies they approached, influenced the historical discourse of the years after 1989. She places a particular emphasis on the biographies of the authors, placing their works within the context of their professional and personal lives. The book under scrutiny is not one to provide edification, nor does it offer the reader many well-defined ideas, but it is a book that surely compels the reader to further investigate the subject. It sends the reader to the library, since, by the end, it raises many questions, which is, after all, the essence of any scholarly discourse.

Translated from Romanian by Anca Chiorean

ALEXANDRU AIOANEI

aioaneial@gmail.com

DOI: 10.26424/philobib.2021.26.1.09

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