

# NATIONAL STALINISM: IDEOLOGY BETWEEN ASCRIBING CLASS AND RE-IMAGINING COMMUNITY (I)\*

BOGDAN CRISTIAN IACOB

## Preliminaries

The concept of “national-Stalinism” is a fundamental element in understanding the transformations of the identitarian narratives within the Romanian communist regime. As many authors already emphasized, the Romanian case provides an interesting situation of “national turn” in both the official party line and in the historiographical literature, which, I argue, resulted into a hybrid conceptualization of the national community. This transformation happened through a process of transition from historically defining society in accordance with class distinctions to a synthesis of criteria (social, historical, cultural, biological, etc.) which led to the construction of a historiographical narrative of the “socialist nation” defined by primordialism, ethnocentrism, transformism, protochronism, autarchy, and homogenization.<sup>1</sup> An important hypothesis of this interpretation is that the un-reformed Stalinist nature of the communist dictatorship in Romania is one of the fundamental sources of explanation for such a phenomenon. The characteristics of Stalinism, seen here as the complex of ideological traits and state practices during Stalin’s reign, represent a blueprint upon which further interpretative creativity, as it happened in the Romanian case, can provoke a hybridized (nation-class) state paradigm of identity. Henceforth, in this present essay, I will attempt to pursue a discussion upon the traits of what scholars in Soviet studies label as “national-Bolshevism” and of what Vladimir Tismăneanu, in the Romanian case, coined as “national-Stalinism.” This essay aims at pointing out the trajectories upon which identity discourses were built in the Soviet Union under Stalin, and their potential reflection for the case of Romania, starting with the late 1950s. I am basically trying to discuss the potential for ethnocentric collective identity in a system in full gear for social engineering that claims to be socialist in content and only national in form.

---

\* An earlier version of this article was presented under the same title at the conference “Multiplicity and competition. Concepts of identity in contemporary historiography” (University of Fribourg, Switzerland, 28–29 September, 2007).

<sup>1</sup> The earliest contributions along these interpretative lines have been provided by Vladimir Tismăneanu, *The Ambiguity of Romanian Communism*, in “Telos,” Summer 1984, no. 60, and *Ceaușescu’s Socialism*, in “Problems of Communism,” January–February 1985.

If one takes as starting point Igal Halfin's statement that "Marxist thought was eschatological [...] Marxist eschatology<sup>2</sup> was a narrative that structured historical time as the odyssey of human consciousness," the analysis of the application of identity, of the conceptual structure and its evolution during Stalinism, becomes an inquiry in the process by which classes are defined, ascribed, and transformed across time, particularly the proletariat (the subject of History), in the process of emancipation ("a secularized version of salvation"). The features of identity, at both macro and micro level (the polity vs. the individual) in Stalinism are apparent only if one signals out the transition from the proletariat to the people and from the people to the nation under conditions of building socialism in one country. The *territorialization* of the eschatological progression generates a distinct re-imagination of the community under circumstances of utopia in action. In the words of Stalin, "If you search for everything in Marx, you'll get off track .... In the USSR you have a *laboratory* ... and you think Marx should know more than you about socialism."<sup>3</sup> For Stalin, Marxism was primarily an ideological space of *creativity*; orthodoxy was there to define the "developmental tasks," but the actual practice inscribed the physiognomy<sup>4</sup> and regulated metabolism of the body politic in the Soviet Union. In an article in "Pravda" on 2<sup>nd</sup> August, 1950 he stated that "Marxism, as a science, cannot stand still; it develops and perfects itself. In the course of its development Marxism cannot help but be enriched by new experience, by new knowledge; consequently, its individual formulas and conclusions must change with the passing of time, must be replaced by new formulas and conclusions corresponding to new historical tasks. Marxism does not recognize immutable conclusions and formulas obligatory for all epochs and periods.

---

<sup>2</sup> "By *eschatology* I mean here a linear concept of time outlining a prescribed temporal motion of the proletariat from the 'darkness' of capitalism toward salvation in a classless society," in Igal Halfin, *From Darkness to Light. Class, Consciousness, and Salvation in Revolutionary Russia*, Pittsburgh, 2000, pp. 1-6.

<sup>3</sup> He made this statement in his exchanges with the authors of the project "Short Course on Political Economy." See Ethan Pollock, *Stalin as the Coryphaeus of Science: Ideology and Knowledge in the Post-war Years*, p. 283, in vol. *Stalin: A New History*, ed. by Sarah Davies, James Harris, Cambridge, 2005, pp. 271-288.

<sup>4</sup> The term was used both in the Soviet Union under Stalin and in Romania under Ceaușescu to describe the socialist community. The term "metabolism" is analyzed by Erik van Ree in his article *Stalin's Organic Theory of the Party*, in "The Russian Review," vol. 52, January 1993, no. 1, pp. 43-57. He quotes from Stalin's speech at the Fifteenth Party Congress from 7<sup>th</sup> December, 1927: "our party is a living organism; as in every organism a metabolism takes place: old, obsolete stuff falls off; new growing things flourish and develop." Considering that on the one hand, in the Soviet Union the party purges many times coincided with wholesale populational purges, and that, on the other, by the end of both Stalin's and Ceaușescu's reign the Party (or the organizations affiliated to it) was relying on mass membership, I believe that one can extrapolate the terminology for the entire society.

Marxism is the enemy of all kinds of dogmatisms.”<sup>5</sup> Along similar lines, Ceaușescu, in 1971, was arguing that “in all party work and in all fields of activity, at the core of educational work the decisions of the Party Congresses, of the Central Committee, the party and state documents must have a central role. They are the essence of what it means for Romania creative Marxism-Leninism, so they ought to become the basis of the whole education undergone in all fields of activity.”<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, “the general feature of the Party’s activity was its devotion to the fundamental interests of the people, the creative application of the general principles of scientific socialism to the concrete conditions of our country, the rallying and successful organization of the working masses in building *the new social system in Romania*.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore, in Stalinism, class and nation are resultants of the interaction between the vectors of revolutionary discourse and socio-economic transformism.

### From class to status

Exhaustive knowledge of man and society is the fuel of progress in this particular form of state socialism. As Jochen Hellbeck asserts: “an individual living under the Bolshevik system could not conceivably formulate a notion of himself independently of the program promulgated by the Bolshevik state. An individual and the political system in which he lived cannot be viewed as two separate entities.”<sup>8</sup> One of the defining features of the research on Stalinism is the difficulty to draw a clear cut line between society and state.<sup>9</sup> Identity gains meaning only within the frameworks ascribed by the state, regardless if it’s about class, nation,

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 280.

<sup>6</sup> Nicolae Ceaușescu, *Propuneri de măsuri pentru îmbunătățirea activității politico-ideologice, de educare marxist-leninistă a membrilor de partid, a tuturor oamenilor muncii, 6-9 iulie 1971*, București, 1971 pp. 82-83.

<sup>7</sup> Idem, *The Romanian Communist Party Program of 1975*, Bucharest, 1976, p. 61.

<sup>8</sup> Jochen Hellbeck, *Fashioning the Stalinist Soul: the Diary of Stepan Podlubnyi, 1931–1938*, in “Janrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas,” 1997, no. 2, and idem, *Working, Struggling, Becoming: Stalin-era Autobiographical Texts*, in “The Russian Review,” vol. 60, July 2001, pp. 340-359.

<sup>9</sup> There is indeed a significant body of literature arguing for social history “with the state left out.” This revisionist trend was “officialized” by the series of articles published in the “The Russian Review” between 1986–1987 (vol. 45, October 1987, no. 4 and vol. 46, October 1987, no. 4). However, S. Fitzpatrick, arguably the most influential scholar within this group, has slightly changed her views on the relationship between state and society in the Soviet Union under Stalin. See the difference between S. Fitzpatrick’s *New Perspectives on Stalinism*, *ibidem*, vol. 45, October 1986, no. 4, pp. 357-373 and her contributions in *Stalinism – New Directions*, London/New York, 2000 and most recently *Politics as Practice. Thoughts on a New Soviet Political History*, in “Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History” (hereafter: “Kritika”), 5, Winter 2004, 1, pp. 27-54.

religion or gender<sup>10</sup>. Official discourse not only imposes what the citizen is to say, whom to be, and what to do, but it also quantifies and warrants what s/he is to desire. The criterion of loyalty, integration and reward (or their opposites) is that of revolutionary purity, measured in accordance with the official interpretation and innovation upon Marxism-Leninism. Subsequently, socialization becomes political practice, that is, a means of bridging “what one does with what s/he thinks and says about what s/he does.” (Fitzpatrick) The political practice is the area where the citizen comes to terms with the “deliberatively ideological” environment s/he lives in. In contrast to Sarah Davies’ approach to public opinion and Fitzpatrick’s view of the “everyday” under Stalin, Hellbeck points to “a strange concordance between the prescriptive and the experiential sphere,” when “turning from the official prescripts of public self-disclosure and self-integration into the revolutionary movement to their effects on the individuals’ sense of self and particularly their articulation of dissent [...] Soviet subjects owed their authority to speak out to their self-alignment with the revolutionary master-narrative. Just as the Revolution was a source of subjectivity and enormous power, a subjective stance against the Revolution threatened to engender the loss of self and total powerlessness.”<sup>11</sup> Stalinism was a project of transforming human nature, marked by keywords such as “remaking,” “re-forging,” or “remolding,” which indicator of authenticity was a system of socialist ethics and aesthetics founded upon a permanent accomplishment of one’s work in a society regulated by the state. It was concerned with “sculpting and ‘gardening’ (to use Zygmunt Bauman’s evocative term) a better, purer society while simultaneously molding society’s human material into a more emancipated, conscious, and superior individual – ‘the new man’.”<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> I have in mind here both the Soviet Union and Romanian case of reproductive politics. Both under Stalin and Ceaușescu abortion was banned leading to multiple effects upon societal dynamics and implicitly upon gender categories and the role of the family. Gail Kligman (*Politica duplicității. Controlul reproducerii în România lui Ceaușescu*, București, 2000, pp. 135-136) describes, for the Romanian case, the nature of the “socialization of reproductive behavior: economic socialization by means of encouragement or inhibition, through social or fiscal measures regulating the couples reproduction; political socialization, through the responsabilization of the couples in relation to the whole social body; and, medical socialization, by stressing the pathogenic value of birth-control for both the individual and the species.” The family lost its previous institutional integrity, becoming a social space of *policing* and the basic productive (with a view to both *work* and *education*) unit of the national-Communist regime.

<sup>11</sup> Jochen Hellbeck, *Speaking Out. Languages of Affirmation and Dissent*, pp. 129-136, in Michael David-Fox, Peter Holquist, and Marshall Poe, *The Resistance Debate in Russian and Soviet History*, Bloomington, 2003, pp. 103-138.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Holquist, “Information is the Alpha and Omega of Our Work”: Bolshevik Surveillance in Its Pan-European Context, in “The Journal of Modern History,” vol. 69, September 1997, no. 3, pp. 415-450.

The individual experience under Stalinism is both mobilizational and pedagogical. All activities were to become a performing act (work) and a learning process (education). It was part of the construction of “a structure of veridicality, the social basis for a very precise suspension of doubt, without which the respective definition of reality cannot be maintained in the individuals’ consciousness.”<sup>13</sup> These fundamental criteria of human action under communism were used together for purposes of accelerating a *reformed* homogenization of the national community. This transformation implied killing off the rudiments of the dying classes, meaning both their numbers (i.e., members) and their principles (i.e., mentality). In their turn, classes were to be based upon the existence of individuals across time in society: “the three indicators of class were generally considered to be current social position, former (prewar or pre-revolutionary) social position, and parents’ social status.” Moreover, one’s class behavior was to be determined not only by its social position (or the history of it), but also by its activity in accordance with the ideological line of the Soviet polity. Many times, within “purge poetics,” oppositionism or what Stalin coined “opportunism” could be traits of either impurity of belief among the eschatological chosen (“proletariat”) or of hidden past dereliction among the community of the fallen (“petit-bourgeois habits”). Class as a category of identity was mainly defined in accordance with potential, actual or proven loyalty to the goals and practice of the socialist revolution.<sup>14</sup> This is, in my opinion, what Stephen Kotkin calls “playing the identity game”: the rules of social identification enforced by the state could be appropriated and actively used by the individual with conditions of a permanent struggle to prove one’s productive and faithful belonging to the Marxist-Leninist enterprise (not an easy job considering the conditions of cyclical purgatory and cleansing practices). One’s identity in society is therefore qualified less by its occupational position/mode of production, but rather by one’s *status*, which is determined by the person’s perceived faith and proximity to a power structure. The

---

<sup>13</sup> Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *Construirea socială a realității*, București, 1999, p. 180.

<sup>14</sup> This logic of subjective and objective “enemy of the people” served as basis for Stalin’s theory of a withering proletarian state going through a phase of maximum strengthening for reasons of intensification of class struggle upon the approach of communism and of capitalist encirclement. A similar awareness about the *alien* within the socialist man/woman, among them and from outside can be seen at Nicolae Ceaușescu (*Report to the Central Committee on the Activity of the Romanian Communist Party Between the Twelfth Congress and the Thirteenth Congress*, București, 1984, p. 73): “We must not forget for a single moment that there still are various alien outlooks, mentalities of the old bourgeois-landlord society, that not all citizens have definitely broken off from mentalities and practices of the past and that unfortunately these still influence even young people. Besides, we should not forget that all kind of influence, alien to our revolutionary outlook on world and life are still coming from the outside.”

area of autonomy one has in determining its identity within Stalinist society, if s/he escapes initial class profiling (and possible purge), is what Mark Edele calls the “internalization of Soviet discourse as a method of thinking.” The individual does have the choice of a “personal working through” (*prorabotka*) or of working on oneself (*rabota nad soboi*) in order to bypass the determinism of an ascribed class identity.<sup>15</sup> Edele continues by stressing “the distinction between the sphere of production and the sphere of distribution and consumption,” which becomes useful in understanding the “‘everyday’, where the society is strongly structured around differential access to goods, services, and information. This social stratification engendered practices designed to get scarce information and scarce goods, and to survive in the desert of commodities and information created by totalitarian social engineering.” His reinterpretation of the Harvard school (Inkeles, Bauer, Kluckhohn, Fainsod, Gerschenkron, etc.) leaves the door open for an analysis of identity in Stalinism as a result of both conflict and consensus across social groups and in relation to different institutions.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> For this argument I consider fundamental two articles: Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Ascribing Class*, in *Stalinism – New Directions*, pp. 20-47 and Jean-Paul Depretto, *Stratification Without Class*, in “Kritika,” 8, Spring 2007, 2, pp. 375-388. In her article, S. Fitzpatrick argues that “the ‘classes’ of the Stalinist society should have been defined, like *sosloviia*, in terms of their relationship to the state rather than, like Marxist classes, in terms of their relationship to each other. This gives us a new perspective on the much-remarked ‘primacy of the state’ in the Soviet state-and-society relationship.” At the same time, if one is to follow Ken Jowitt’s analysis of the nature of Leninist organizations, it can be stated that the intrinsic status-like features of the “party of the new type” (which is *the* locus of decision-making and leadership, i. e. domination) became a model of societal hierarchies. Kenneth Jowitt (*New World Disorder. The Leninist Extinction*, Los Angeles, 1992) pinpoints three such features: “a marked tendency to distinguish between insiders and outsiders; an emphasis on the security and protection of belonging to a closed, well-bounded group; and, a placement of power in the hands of cadres whose central role is emphasized.” In both cases, Romania and the Soviet Union, the preeminence of status over class in determining one’s position in the system was reinforced by the practice of the personality cult of the leader (Stalin or Ceaușescu).

<sup>16</sup> Mark Edele, *Soviet Society, Social Structure, and Everyday Life. Major Frameworks Reconsidered*, in “Kritika,” 8, Spring 2007, 2, pp. 349-73.