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A Museal Turn: Negotiating Memory in Romanian History Museums before and after the Fall of the Wall²

Abstract: *In his *Imagined Communities* (1983), Benedict Anderson describes the creation of narratives of the past, necessary for the formation of the national state, as dependent on acts of both memorializing 'origins' and forgetting moments that could be labeled as traumatic for the community. However, it is in the joints of history that forgetting and memorializing are strongly negotiated. The aim of this article is to discuss ways in which memory is negotiated in Romanian contemporary history museums with a view to creating specific narratives, such as the communist one before 1990 and the anti-communist ones after the fall of the wall Iron Curtain. Through apparent amnesia, in the past, museums memorialized only those moments that supported the communist politics of creating an imagined unitary communist nation. The traumatic moments of the anti-communist revolt of 1989 were expected to cause, besides the formation of new narratives, the 'recovery' of past collective and individual memories, which should have led to the re-writing of the past and the reorganization of the museum. However, there was seems to be not only a slow and partial recovery of past memories, but also, and more importantly, an unexpected hiatus in the re-organization of the history museum in which the recent history of the last fifty years is, paradoxically, left suspended.*

Key words: *memory, history discourses, false memory syndrome, reconfigurations of identity, embellishing and grafting technique, historical trauma, replacements of history representations.*

History, according to Paul Ricoeur, starts not from the archives, but from testimony, in the absence of which there is no certainty that "something did happen in the past."³ History (the archives) and memory (testimony) have always concurred in the creation of the historical discourse of a community. Yet, no analysis of the relationship between memory and history in the recent past should be done without the inclusion of the question of 'nationalism' in the memory-history equation and, therefore, without the reference to

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³ Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2004:147.

Benedict Anderson's seminal study on the birth of the nations: *Imagined Communities*.⁴ According to Anderson, nations are constructs dependent on common territory, common language, history and culture brought to the fore by "collective memory". Therefore, national communities had to remember or invent their origins to cater for the ideological and political discourses in the 19th and early 20th century rearrangement of frontiers in Europe and fall of colonialism in the world.

In analyzing the rise of nationalism and of nation states, Anderson sees both the birth of "a genuine, popular enthusiasm" and "a systematic, even Machiavellian, instilling of nationalist ideology through the mass-media, the educational system, administrative regulations."⁵ Thus, nationalism can be seen as the effect of the communities' genuine desire to self-government and use of the vernacular language in schools and administration, on the one hand, and as pushed forth by ideology and shifting political interests, on the other. Late eighteenth and early nineteenth century European colonialism and imperialism coincided with, and were supported by, the invention of the history museum, in which the imagined communities were (and still are) represented by, what Anderson calls, a profoundly political and ideological "museumized imagination."⁶

In the process of creating a national discourse, memory and history become the basic ingredients, because not only remembrance, but also amnesia and false memory are component parts of a meta-historical narrative which is supposed to connect the present to the past in a coherent way. With the rise of new the nations, there appeared the necessity of officially representing memory in an institution with a view to legitimizing it and to instilling the national spirit into the general public. The history museums, opened as a consequence, were a major museal turn in the nineteenth century, adding to the art and artifact collections that had existed for centuries, a new type of museum that celebrated the nation and its history. It was in the history museum that the past of a community could be re-created or "imagined" through more or less partial representations of collective memory, such as historic documents, maps, artifacts.

Two famous museums in Europe compete for priority in adding to the already existing art and world history collections, the national history component. The first museum which allowed the general public to see its collections, on a ticket-booking basis, was the British Museum, opened as early as 1753 to all curious and studious people. Yet, the first history museum in Europe seems to have been the Louvre which, opened in 1793 to the public by Napoleon, added to the existing collections of art various war spoils in an attempt to turn the museum into a living proof of the making of an empire. The spoils were reclaimed by their owners after the fall of the empire in 1815.

Later, in 1852, Louis-Napoleon added to the existing collections the "Musée des Souverains," which displayed treasures from France's royal dynasties, showing, if it was still necessary, the existence and continuity of the French as a nation in Europe. In England, the first collections of autochthonous history (British and Medieval material) had been added to the British Museum a year before, in 1851. Yet, the Louvre seems to have been more public friendly than the British Museum, because the visitors did not need a

⁴ Benedict Anderson, (1983) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London and New York: Verso, 1991: 163.

⁵ *Ibid.* 178.

⁶ *Id.*

reservation letter two weeks before the intended visit, as was still the case of the British Museum.

On the territory of present Romania (meaning, Transylvania, Moldavia and Wallachia), the first museum including collections of art and natural history was opened in Cluj in 1859. Yet, the first museum including historical artifacts, found mainly in the local area, was opened at Timișoara in 1872. Interestingly, the Cluj Museum did not add a national history component until as late as 1937, nineteen years after Transylvania united with Romania. The representation of territorial history as part of the national one as well as the representation of the national history as a meta-discourse were characteristics of the history museums in Romania between 1950 and 1990. Thus, the national component of the history museum in Timișoara opened in 1950, the Union Museum of Iași in 1954, the History Museum at Roman (a small locality in Moldavia) in 1957, the Museum of National History in Bucharest in 1970. The Museum of Archeology and History in Constanta, opened the same year, 1970.

It becomes obvious that the history museums in Romania after WW II (Iași, Timișoara, Bucharest, Constanta, Cluj) were meant, on the one hand, to legitimize the continuity of the national spirit in the country.⁷ On the other hand, the history museums were meant to legitimize the post-war new directions in the history course of Romania, to support communist ideology and find reasons for the exclusion of the traditional political parties and the legitimization of the communist one. That is why the national discourse in Romanian history museums after the Second World War was loud and strong with undertones of acute nationalism, built, at times, not only on memory recovery (common history and language in the former principalities), but also, and more importantly, on memory fakes and losses (e.g. Bessarabia's history was faked to account for its inclusion by Russia in the Soviet Union in June 1941; the people who stubbornly remembered the facts were sent to prison to help them forget more quickly).

As a consequence, all history museums, between 1950 and 1990, created a meta-discourse concerning the birth and formation of the Romanian nation within the frontiers that had been established after WW II. One example to this effect is the historical moment, present in any history museum, and school textbooks for that matter, known as Michael the Brave and the Union of the Principalities. Michael the Brave was a Transylvanian Prince who, in 1600, conquered for one year Wallachia and Moldavia in a private and adventurous attempt to crown himself the Reigning Prince of the three Principalities. His scheme failed in less than a year and he was betrayed and beheaded. His exploits were very much idealized during the communist regime and represented in the museums as a precocious existence of the national spirit among the Romanians speaking with the Romanians who were speaking the same language and were sharing the same ideal to become one country and one nation as early as 1600. The exaggeration is obvious as 1600 is too early for any discourse of national history or spirit. Further examples of memory embellishments to support the meta-teleological narrative of Romanian national history are the 1848

⁷ Historically speaking, the national spirit awoke in the 1840s and grew very loud in 1859 when two Romanian Principalities (Moldavia and Wallachia) united. The rebirth of the nationalism occurred after World War I, when the already united Principalities were joined by Transylvania (a former part of Austria-Hungary) and Bessarabia (snatched by Russia half a century before and lost again in 1944).

revolutions, the 1859 Union of Moldavia and Wallachia (two of the three Principalities), and the 1918 Great Union of the Romanian Principalities with Transylvania and Bessarabia. While the union with Transylvania was over-represented in the history museums before 1990 (through documents, pictures, lists of unionists, newspaper articles), Bessarabia was barely mentioned as if historians suffered from instant memory loss. After 1990, the Great Union is still a central point of focus in the history museums, especially as it is yearly celebrated as the national holiday. The memory of Bessarabia's history, however, is very timidly recovering and still underrepresented in the museums. This is obviously due to the political circumstances of Romania's relations with Russia in the past and Ukraine and Russia in the present. During the communist regime, little was mentioned about the common national spirit in both Romania and Bessarabia (the present Republic of Moldavia). Since the fall of communism, there have been momentous memory recoveries, however timid, on both sides of the frontier with frequent backslashes to former official history discourses. In the communist discourse of the 1918 Great Union moment, however, the interest and participation of the popular masses in the event were highly exaggerated, while the implication and definite role of the ruling Hohenzolern-Sigmaringen monarchy was drastically diminished. The closer historical discourse came to World War II, the more the monarchy was vilified and the role of a practically non-existent working class was emphasized.

The closer the historical discourse was to the events pertaining to the Second World War, the more vilified the part played by the monarchy became as opposed to the so-called "increasing role of the working class," not exactly very large at the time, when Romania was mostly an agrarian country.

I would venture to describe the phenomenon of embellishing or exaggerating history as well as that of leveling or adjusting memory to the requirements of ideological and political discourse, to the conscious use, by communist ideology in our case, of the False Memory Syndrome. False Memory Syndrome is a phenomenon that originated in America in the early 1990s as a reaction of parents against their children's false accusations of sexual abuse. Later, it was used in Holocaust studies to distinguish between real and false testimony in published autobiographies by former victims, when some of them were discovered to have lied about having been falsely claimed to be in a concentration camp.⁸

I argue that the highly ideologized and politicized discourse of national history during the communist regime is a manifestation of False Memory Syndrome. Applied to the relationship between history and memory, the syndrome may also support Pierre Nora's view according to which there are traumatic times in history when memory and history become divergent and instead of supporting each other or being synonymous, they become oppositional.⁹ This creates, what I would venture to call, the dissociation of truth into memory and history.¹⁰ The False Memory Syndrome and the dissociation of memory and

⁸ See Benjamin Wilkomirski's autobiography, *Fragments: Memories of a Childhood. 1939-1948*, published in 1996, which was revealed to be a fake. The author was never in a concentration camp.

⁹ Pierre Nora, (1989) "From *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire*", eds. Michael Rossington and Anne Whitehead. *Theories of Memory: A Reader*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007: 144-149.

¹⁰ The term is inspired from T.S. Eliot's theory of the "dissociation of sensibilities" in eighteenth-century poetry.

history usually occur as the effect of traumatic moments in the history of a community and may become acute during totalitarian regimes.

There are many glazing examples several examples to support the False Memory Syndrome and the fabrication of history in the Romanian museums of the communist period. I will mention just a few: the “official” death toll of the major Peasants’ Uprising in 1907 was 11,000.¹¹ The number was mentioned in the history museums and “documented” by several sketches showing angry peasants fighting against their oppressors (see Octav Bancila’s painting, “1907”). The reality was completely different; it seemed that the 11.000 death toll represented the total number of deaths in the whole country in 1907, though even this explanation is still in dispute. A similar exaggerated death toll was advertised in January 1990, when the number of the victims of the revolution who lost their lives during the December events was officially claimed to be 60,000 when in reality it was 1,800. Other memory distortions and false testimonies during the communist dictatorship referred to the “crucial role” played by the Communist Party in Romania between the two world wars (the Party barely existed at the time), and the role played by the same party in causing to cause the shift from the capitalist to the communist regime in the country. In reality, the communist regime was imposed by the then Soviet Union, whose army occupied Romania until 1958. Similar exaggerations were the vilifying of the traditional political parties, the false testimonies against the Romanian intellectuals, labeled as traitors and sent to prisons, the denigration of the monarchy, described, and apparently documented, as highly incompetent and corrupt.

The rehabilitation of the monarchy and its crucial importance in the modernization of Romania before and between the two world wars has actually been the subject of a number of temporary exhibitions organized after 1990 by the history museums. Thus, the National History Museum of Bucharest composed, in 2009, a heavily documented exhibition on the Romanian monarchs of German origin and managed to recover a large number of documents and photos in an attempt to erase false memory and reveal the historical truth. Similar exhibitions were organized after 1990 in the memory of the leader of the former Peasants’ Party, Corneliu Coposu, who had spent over 20 years in jail, and to commemorate the anticommunist attitude in Eastern Europe between 1968 and 1989, an attitude that had sent to prison many supporters during that period. Besides these temporary exhibitions, which were a brave attempt to re-associate memory and history, Romanian history museums after 1990 complete, I would say “engraft,” the old museal displays in the permanent exhibitions with “recently recovered” documents and artifacts. Thus, for instance, in the History Museum of Constanța, the panel containing a few photocopied documents and a collage of pictures concerning the monarchy became enriched after 1990 with more documents and photos (such as the picture showing King Ferdinand, Prince Carol and King Nicholas II of Russia on the Romanian Black Sea shore in 1916). Engrafted is also a crystal fruit-bowl with the two-headed eagle, the symbol of the crown, engraved on it. There is no knowledge of its having ever been used or even touched by the royal family, but, through its mere display, it is invested with a metonymic dimension of monarchy representation.

¹¹ Romania was a large agrarian country at the time and Moldavian peasants rose against the land tenants who were against land tenants who were exploiting them far worse than the landowners.

Returning to Pierre Nora's description of the relationship between memory and history, in his analysis of both, he describes them as follows:

Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer.¹²

While memory is described as a dynamic force, "susceptible" to deformations and "vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation," history is static and problematic to faithful representation. The relation between memory and history is, therefore, tense. If during certain historical periods memory and history coalesce for a more faithful representation of events, during historical moments caused by traumas (wars, revolutions), history and memory diverge, undermine each other to become, at times, oppositional. This happens mainly when ideology interferes in the memory – history equation, as is the case of the totalitarian regimes. Then, memory suffers apparent "losses," repressions, deformations, appropriations, partial or total amnesia for as long as the particular ideology lasts.

The history museum, a public institution with a significant ideological dimension, serves the official version of history, accepting the compromise with memory. The history museum during the communist regime became the public institution in which the False Memory Syndrome worked to fabricate a national history with strong nationalistic undertones and a contemporary history in striking opposition to the real reality. The False Memory Syndrome became even more pregnant in the 1980-1989 decade when the personality cult reached unimaginable dimensions. Here are a few examples to this effect: on the one hand, there are the museal representation of history in the 1970s – 1980s, on the other, the real, street history of the people in the 1980s. Thus, the visits of the President to check the economic production, his adulation by the communists during the party congresses were illustrated in the past by the collages that decorated the panels in the History Museums all over Romania. After 1989 the panels were removed and replaced by various exhibitions of larger or limited interest, including sets of by photos illustrating the demolition of the churches in the 1980s and the long queues for the purchase of the ever more scarce food.

After the traumatic events of December 1989 through June 1990, there have been several attempts to re-associate memory and history, to make them converge and coalesce. Yet, the arousal of memory does not seem to be easy as the ideological and political dimensions of the former memory-history discourse are still at play in the sense that the few memory recoveries are not sufficient to create a renewed history discourse. In his article "On the Emergence of Memory and Historical Discourse" (2000), Kerwin Lee Klein draws attention not to the memory that is to be recovered, but to the people or the institutions that are doing the remembering and the forgetting in a community in which ideology played (or still plays) an essential part.¹³ Wulf Kansteiner, on the other hand, draws attention to the

¹² Ibid., 145-146.

¹³ Kerwin Lee Klein, "On the Emergence of Memory and Historical Discourse," *Representations*, 2000, 69:136.

relationship between identity and memory arguing that, historically, collective crises of memory have tended to coincide with crises of identity. Commenting on the post-Cold War conflicts, he notices that “memory is valorized where identity is problematized.”¹⁴ Although Kansteiner actually refers to ethnic conflicts, I would argue that his claim is also illustrative of the difficult process of remembering and the constant repression of memory which seem to occur in post-Cold War Romania. The individual and collective identity crisis following the events of 1989-1990 may have led to a national identity crisis which requires for a “re-imagination,” a re-invention or a re-configuration of Romanianness.

This may be the reason why memory and history concerning the communist decades are still at odds. In the history museums of the country, whatever representation may belong to contemporary history has been amputated. No history museum in the country goes further than 1940, which means that even the museal representation of World War II has been erased. The old panels have either been removed to the basement of the museum building or are still displayed in locked halls. Some history museums have re-organized the ancient and medieval periods of “national” history (Constanta, Bucharest). The History Museum in Constanta still displays the exhibits of modern history up to 1940; the National Museum of Bucharest has closed all the permanent collections with the exception of those representing the Paleolithic age and ancient Dacian-Roman history. Some other museums closed in 1990 to re-open later in order to display other themes (e.g. “The Communist Party Museum” in Bucharest has been turned into “The Museum of the Romanian Peasant”). Most “history” museums have survived by organizing temporary exhibitions in which they use existing displays engrafted with new artifacts and documents. A few examples to this effect are the temporary collections dealing with the communist regime and Ceausescu’s Romania, the Royal family, and December 1989, which have survived in the albums published after the exhibition closed. The History Museum in Constanta may be considered as a special case because the pictorial representation of the communist past on the wall of the museum Council Hall has been literally covered with a new fresco representing the 1989 revolution. The museum people managed to create, more or less consciously, a palimpsest in which a semi-fabricated past is veiled, as if by shame, with the memory of a more recent present. In spite of all this, technically speaking, the organization style of the museums still observes the 1950-1960 fashion.

A few questions may arise in concluding the analysis of the scarce representation of Romania’s contemporary historical discourse in the history museum. Are we living a time when we need to re-invent ourselves as a nation or is it the time for us to tune ourselves to the construction of our new identity as part and parcel of the European Community? In other words, is there an identity crisis at national level that we are witnessing at the moment? Is this the time when, after undermining the meta-discourse of national history, the historians are preparing the micro discourses of Romanian histories? Or is it merely a transition time when memory is decanted and sieved in the ongoing process of remembering, forgetting and forgiving?

It may be the question of forgiving (how, how much, to what effect) that is hindering memory and history and causing it to become synonymous with Romanian history. In his study *The Ethics of Memory* (2002), Avishai Margalit (referring to the Holocaust)

¹⁴ Wulf Kansteiner, “Finding Meaning in Memory: A methodological Critique of Memory Studies,” *History and Theory*, 2002, 41:184.

distinguishes between two types of forgiveness: forgiveness as blotting out the sin, and forgiveness as covering it up. In most cases, however, forgiveness, he argues, is based on disregarding the sin rather than forgetting it.¹⁵ Could this be the case with Romanian historical discourse of the post-communist period regarding the communist times? Would the covering up of past events (as the history museums literally do, including covering them with new frescoes) lead to forgiveness and, eventually, to forgetting? Or is it necessary for a generation to die in order for the next generation to re-create the historical past in a 'post-memory' recovery experience. This would support the theory according to which recent historical traumas may be 'transferred' from parents to children at a collective or cultural level and be remembered as a consequence?¹⁶ Or does the 'structural trauma,' as LaCapra would put it,¹⁷ following the historical traumatic events still need time to heal in order to be able to bring memory back? Is this the museal turn that the Romanian history museum is waiting for? And does it mean hiding or a different kind of representation that has not yet found its stable coordinates and fixed points in a more objective analysis of the recent past?

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¹⁵ Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory*, Cambridge MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2002: 197.

¹⁶ See Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1997, in which she coins the term 'postmemory' by referring to unconscious memory transfers from parents to children after traumatic moments of history (such as the Holocaust).

¹⁷ See Dominick LaCapra, *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Cultural Theory*, Ithaca NY, London: Cornell University Press, 2004:112-117, in which he distinguishes between "historical trauma" (human-made historical occurrences, such as wars, revolutions, slavery, apartheid) and "structural trauma" (transhistorical losses, such as entry into language, separation from the mother, the inability to partake fully in a community).