
EVERYDAY LIFE DURING SOCIALISM: ASPECTS OF COMMUNICATIVE MEMORY

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Abstract

This paper explores narratives containing memories of everyday life in Rousse during socialism, and it creates an oral history profile of the town during the same period. The text discusses the most common themes in the biographical stories through which the socialist past was described, and it also presents examples of diverse life experiences and assessments of the past. The analysis is focused not so much on the historical details about the town as on the anthropological categories through which Rousse is described in the oral narratives of the residents.

Keywords: *memory, socialism, thematic cores, assessment of the past, anthropological categories*

Introduction

Research on everyday life during socialism is necessary to preserve and study the memories of the generation of Bulgarians that lived through that time. Their memory imprints only that which society manages to reconstruct within the framework of its present concepts. Thus, it is important to conduct current research on the collective memory of the socialist past, because of its vital importance for both the present and the future (Por 2011). The present paper aims to add new aspects to the everyday life of socialism in the town of Rousse through the prism of the biographic narrative. Here, I analyze the various thematic cores that were shaped during my work with the biographical field materials.¹ The choice to analyze particular narrative cores is based on their frequency in the biographic stories. I arrange the various themes offered by the respondents as if they are pieces of a puzzle, thereby seeking

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¹ The main concepts of this text are developed in Ivanova 2014.

to create a single possible portrait of Rousse and of everyday life under socialism as it is remembered by the people.

Historical portrait of Rousse

Within this specific research, the individual stories of falling in love, drinking coffee, walking around the town center, taking excursions with friends, hosting celebrations, and experiencing both happiness and disappointment took place in Rousse in a unique way. The stories are marked by socialism, but they also contain memories that belong to one particular town – the town of Rousse.

By the end of Ottoman rule in the 1860s and 1870s, Rousse was a town with working steam machine factories, railways, a shipyard, and a brewery (Бакърджијева, Ђорданов 2004: 29). After the Liberation, an elite class formed in Rousse that aimed to adopt the European ideals and way of life, and Rousse became a channel through which modernity entered the country (Ненов 2000: 18).

After September 9, 1944, radical transformations could be registered in Rousse that had been imposed by the communists throughout all of Bulgaria. After the death of Stalin in 1953, the situation in Rousse (and in the state in general) gradually returned to a state of normalcy. The opposition was crushed, and the regime's opponents were sent to political prisons or labor camps. Society became more tranquil within its new status quo. The slow and difficult process of "taming the revolution" had begun (Creed 1998). The local authorities focused on its economic and cultural prosperity, and they began constructing new factories, public and cultural buildings, and new residential neighborhoods. Of special importance to the development of the town and its economy was the construction of the Friendship Bridge over the Danube in 1952–1954. Once again, Rousse became a large economic, transportation, and cultural center, and it specialized in the areas of machinery production, ship construction, heavy machinery, metal-processing, electronics, and so on (Ненов 2005: 257). The intensive development of industry in the town led to the mass migration of people from the villages who were looking for work in the new enterprises in town.

Assessments of Rousse during Socialism

To a certain degree, the older citizens of Rousse trivialize the development of the town under socialism. For them, the socialist period was a time when Rousse, developing along the lines of increased industrialization and over-urbanization, lost its aristocratism. This made it easier for large groups of people to migrate from the villages and thereby "ruralize" the town. According to some of the narrators, after the communists seized authority, Rousse lost its aristocratic ambience. Emblematic in this regard is the comment by S. K.:

Various scum arrived ... Although I have nothing against the people from the villages who were coming to Rousse. But there was a period when they were coming to live here in large numbers. (S. K.)

However, statements such as these can be supported by objective arguments. The forced construction of heavy industry in the towns and the appearance of the Labor Collective Farms in the villages led many villagers to flee to the towns in search of a better life in the new enterprises, and the villages became depopulated (see Gruev 2009a: 283–296; see Yancheva 2012:245). Even in the larger towns, urbanization helped to preserve some of its rural characteristics up until the present day. This phenomenon can also be characterized by the term “rurbanization” (see Roth 1997:30), a process that can help to clarify the development of Rousse in the context of totalitarianism, and more specifically, the alienation of some of the newly-arrived villagers in Rousse who found it impossible to integrate:

Even when I arrived, at first I was afraid of moving around the town... It is very difficult for you to move from one place to another. Even now I feel sorry for having left my village. (Еленов (съст.) 2000: 317)

However, the perspective of the migrants is not monolithic. For some of them, Rousse is an attractive place; a center of cultural life, entertainment, and relaxation; a place that offers opportunities for development. Some of the most important factors in the migrants’ ability to adapt are their age, when they arrived in Rousse, and their place of origin. The possibility of easier adaptation was higher for migrants from smaller towns than for those from the villages. One of the respondents, who came from a small town to live in Rousse during his years in school, evaluates the town by way of its cultural institutions and events:

So, I hadn’t been aware of opera, I learned about it there. Generally, the Rousse Opera is a serious institution for me, a very serious institution. I was in touch with this art... It made an impression on me, and so did March Music Days, the cinemas, and so on. (R. S.)

Festivities during Socialism

The topic of festivities during the years of socialism is central to many of the biographic narratives. The emotional charge of the examined discourse varies from pleasant memories of joyful times to negative attitudes towards the compulsoriness, ideology, and display that characterized the official public holidays during the period of socialism. As Ivan Elenkov states, even in its final days, the communist authority – a prisoner of the culture of organized ostentation – was forced to promote an increasing number of new cultural events (Еленков 2009: 543). The socialist

macro-frame of the forms of public entertainment examined here provokes similar stories from my informants. The generation that remembers the beginning of socialism in Bulgaria (i.e. the people born between the 1920s and 1940s) recreate the tension of the early years of the socialist system, including the total stigma of the past and its traditions, the formalization of festivity, and the “domestication” of the traditional festivity calendar. Festivity is “normalized” in the biographic narratives of those born in the 1950s and 1960s, when the socialist ritual-construction processes were finished. The socialist holidays, celebrations, and forms of entertainment had been decided upon, and a number of traditional holidays and rituals had also been carefully selected. The narratives reflect the transformation from formality to informality within the frame of a single holiday event, or the celebration of a holiday with an official banquet and then again with an informal gathering at work, in the home, or at a restaurant. The narratives of duplicating the celebrations through formal and informal means are evidence of an aspiration to sufficiently experience the festivity.

The Housing Shortage

Many of my informants were living in poverty in the early years of the socialist government, which they associate with the collectivization and nationalization that was taking place in Bulgaria. Along with everything else, these were the first years following the Second World War, when the Bulgarian economy was struggling to recover from the losses it had suffered. These factors contributed greatly to the scarcity that most people faced:

When socialism started, it began with misery, with collectivization, with the urbanization of the towns. People became poorer, there was a housing shortage. (A. S.)

The materialization of the housing shortage was a result of the intensive urbanization of the towns – a process undoubtedly desired by the BCP because it was considered a necessity for the industrialization of Bulgaria. The massive amount of migration from the villages to the towns, however, brought a number of undesired consequences to the socio-economic and cultural spheres. One of the problems of intensive urbanization was namely “the shortage of housing areas, which led to somewhat unbearable conditions of living in overcrowded residential facilities and workers’ dormitories” (Брунауер 2010: 191). The existence of a housing shortage in the early years of socialism led to the development of a so-called “clientelism”, a “search for connections”, or even corruption when searching for housing. Milena Benovska-Sabkova (2001:188) defines this problem as a “real living crisis”, the handling of which was achieved through various manipulative actions. One of these was membership in the BCP, which guaranteed certain privileges:

The apartments were for inner people, members of the party, and at that time I couldn't even become a member of the Komsomol. (Y. V.)

The narratives that touch upon the “housing issue” often have an emotional side, and the acquisition of a family apartment also appears as a painful topic. The memories about this moment pulsate around its critical nature. For some of my narrators, the value of family housing is not measured in money alone, but also in the invested efforts and hopes, the experienced disappointments, and the difficulties:

And since we purchased it all ourselves, I was very emotional about everything. We gave our last money for these cupboards, and when we had to install the kitchen exhaust fan... Your uncle Nikolay had to cut them, and then I started to cry, and I went to work. I said: “Don't you even dare touch them, otherwise we'll have issues when I get back from work!” (K. N.)

Imposing Communist propaganda

A loyal attitude towards the communist party and its ideals was required in all the spheres of public and private life. This loyalty provided an untroubled way of life, as well as certain privileges. The measurement of loyalty and the following of the party's commands reached extreme and sometimes even comic degrees. The party itself imposed and required the permanent demonstration of political consciousness and fidelity to the BCP. One of the obligatory demonstrations was the carrying of slogans during events and holidays, which stated the participants' loyalty to the BCP, its leaders, the motherland, the Soviet Union, and so on. The aim of these demonstrations was the “encouragement of socialist patriotism” and “the communist upbringing of the people and increasing of its socialist consciousness”; all of these were tasks listed in the statute of the Fatherland Front in the name of creating and forming the “new man” (see Брунбайев 2010:302):

It was nonsense before, they gave you a poster, you carried it like a fool while the wind was blowing, and at the end, when you reached the pub, you'd throw the poster aside, enter the pub, and there it goes... (Y. V.)

What has precipitated in the respondents' minds and is presented to me in their narratives is far from the sermonized high ideals and patriotic spirit imposed by the communist party. It reveals a reality in which, facing the impossibility of the required servility, those who were powerless were able to “outsmart” the authorities.

Clientelism, minor corruption and informal practices

The topic of clientelism and minor corruption refers flows from the biographic narratives examined in this text, where it covers all the social aspects of socialist everyday life. Adding to this group of narratives are others that comment on theft, embezzlement, and informal relations under socialism (especially those in the workplace). In most cases, the narratives concern smaller, everyday instances of stealing products or supplies from the workplace, or the misuse of working hours or supplies (час-пром, or “private productions”).

For example, the workers at the Meat Packinghouse in Rouse were stealing meat, and there are narratives about women wrapping their bodies with sausages in order to smuggle them out of the factory. Chicken meat and other chicken products were being stolen from the Poultry Factory; fruits, vegetables, and sugar from the cannery; socks from the Fazan Factory, and so on:

Were there people at the Shipyard gates to check the workers' bags?

They were militiamen who were checking so that we couldn't take anything out.

What could be carried out?

Only a ship couldn't be taken out [laughter]. (Y. V.)

Svetla Bogdanova (2004) explains the problem with theft as a result of the change of property that took place after the imposition of nationalization and collectivization. The cooperatives that were forcefully imposed in the villages and the destruction of private property led to a disrespect for collective property and a negligent attitude towards it. (Богданова 2004). The condition in town was similar, where the abolition of private initiatives drove people into the state sector, and property was no longer considered as belonging to any one individual. Ulf Brunnbauer provides another view on embezzlement during the years of socialism, according to which the mismatch of ideological requirements and social reality led to the spread of these informal practices and relations. People were seeking compensation for the inadequacy of the “deficit economy”. Still, these informal practices were not developing in contradiction with the communist party and the state. Even the authorities themselves explicitly or implicitly stood for them. Brunnbauer explains this connection as a profitable side effect of the regime – namely, people were dealing with non-political activities in their leisure time, and while doing so, they gained the illusion that they were tricking the authority. This process was able to take place without ever really dealing with politics (Брунбауер 2010: 37).

Everyday work life

Since the communists considered the working class to be the vanguard in the construction of socialism, workers were materially and symbolically evaluated

more highly than were the clerks and the intelligentsia, at least until the end of the 1970s (Брунбауер 2010: 234). Although the workers were evaluated highly in the public eye, as early as the 1970s the workers' families began directing their children towards education that would push them towards a career in the immaterial sphere:

You know, at that time everyone was trying to educate their children, there was an opportunity. "Study, child, so you won't have to work!" (I. S.)

In the 1980s, the "scientific-technical revolution" meant that science and research activities were highly evaluated, and this shift was reflected in the increase in salary and standard of living of the intelligentsia (Брунбауер 2010: 234). This tendency also reflects the prioritization of certain professions and the difficulty in gaining access to them. The limited number of preferred working positions cued the familiar system of connections and clientelism:

I have to tell you that under socialism it was very difficult to start working at a museum, you had to have strong connections – a party member, as a rule, [as they say, an uncle who's a bishop", etc. (I. S.)

During the period of the socialist system, the professions that involved traveling abroad (e.g., truck drivers, sailors, and some essential specialists like engineers and medical doctors) were also prioritized. According to one of my respondents, the ability to "set yourself" such a job depended upon finding a higher-up and trustworthy guarantee (which could happen only if a person had the proper relations or relatives), or to become an informer for the State Security, as illustrated in a quote above.

A great number of initiatives by the party and institutional management to unite the collective of workers brought about their desired effect, as is reflected in the manifestation of mutual help, fellow relationships in the collectives, and lifelong friendships. The memories about labor solidarity reflect one of the most positive moments during the individuals' years of employment in the socialist past. Very often they are also accompanied by memories of joyful celebrations marking the collection of public and private holidays; excursions into the country and abroad (restricted to the former communist countries in Eastern Europe); vacations in the mountains and near the sea with colleagues, etc.

The narratives about everyday work life offer a variety of perspectives. Working with the field materials leaves an impression of the prettifying nostalgia, which is predominant in a majority of the narratives as a sense of emotionality. For the narrators, everyday work life in the past is a part of their youth, and the memories about this period of their lives often allure the narrators to present them in a romanticized light.

Leisure time and rest

During the years of socialism, the widespread organization of leisure time for the population was a demonstration of the care of the communist state for the working people. This was implemented through the organization of cheap vacations, which were assured by the labor unions. In addition, almost every state enterprise, factory, school, and public organization had vacation facilities of their own on the Black Sea, in mountain resorts, or in the outskirts of the settlement:

My husband was working at Gavril Genov for some time, and they had a very luxurious vacation site at the Golden Sands, and we've been there three or four times, very beautiful, like a hotel, a splendid place. (S. I.)

While many people used their leisure time during the socialist period for excursions, vacations, and amateur art, many also used their leisure time for activities that were simultaneously forms of self-exploitation. This was especially true of the first- and second-generation migrants from the villages, who used their leisure days for agriculture work not only in their native village, but also on the land given to them by the state for private use (namely, to grow fruit and vegetables for personal consumption; see Дичев 2005:118–119). Other forms of voluntary self-exploitation by the socialist citizens included vehicle repair shops (Moskvich, Lada, Trabant, Warszawa, and Zaporozhets), which, like all of the products of forced industrialization, required additional labor. Through this additional labor, the citizens tried to prolong the lives of poor quality products (Дичев 2003:49).

However, everyday life during socialism was full of contradictions. While ordinary citizens often devoted their leisure time to additional work, they also had access to vacations, excursions, and summers spent in nature. After the beginning of democracy and the financial crisis of Bulgarian society, the resort vacation became only a memory of the socialist period for many families, which helps to explain the nostalgia in the biographic narratives that comment on the topic.

Childhood, school, and student's life

Communist education was directed towards all groups of society, but children appeared to be the most important targets of propaganda (Попова 2010: 9). Until its downfall, the “shaping” of every member of society from earliest childhood remains one of the main characteristics of the communist regime, and according to some authors, this was the most authentic evidence of its totalitarian nature (Груев 2009b:159).

The memories of my respondents about their childhood and youth are marked by membership in the Chavdarche, Pioneer, and Komsomol; participation in the school and students' brigades; military training; proms; and other aspects of student life.

The topic provokes mixed emotions from the narrators. For some authors, these emotions come from a lack of clarity within the narrators' own feelings about their socialist childhood but my own impressions do not concur with this statement. Some of my respondents are absolutely certain about which aspects of their childhood they liked and which they did not. I offer two examples from the same narrative that, rather than make it contradictory, present the different faces of socialist reality as it has been preserved in memory.

A positive memory:

... every morning, except for in the winter period, the Baba Tonka High School has a very large yard, and when the weather was warm, everyone from the 8th to 11th grades ... we learned to play all of the hora there, and it was great.
(E. B.)

A negative memory:

You could only be exempted from brigade if you had a serious illness, and this was the only way. I was allergic to the sun, and even today I have a high temperature... and no one acknowledged this, you simply had to work and that was it.

Yet, if I must return to the insecurity present in the memories regarding childhood, this insecurity should be transferred to the field of the overall remembrance of the period of socialism. This statement is true for all who do not remember the previous period because they have spent their entire conscious life within the borders of the socialist system, which was their natural environment from the start. The arrival of democracy displaced the previous values, and evaluations of the past were predefined by their political and economical contexts and by the social climate. Every new discussion of the past assists in the reconstruction of the past reality and in its rationalization through different perspectives.

Conclusions

The study of the socialist everyday lifestyle in Rousse in the biographic narratives demonstrates the post-modernistic disintegration, decentralization, and pluralization of the "grand history" (according to P. Nora) of today's Bulgarian post-socialist society. It unites various life experiences and evaluations of the past and reaches a peculiar synthesis of the era, having overcome the poles of accepting and rejecting the socialist past. The research on Rousse is not so much focused on the historical reality of the town, but rather it reveals the ways in which Rousse (or any larger town in the country) actualized itself under socialism by describing itself through anthropological categories in the time of modernity (i.e., the Industrial Age) in the oral narratives of its residents.

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