Living Communist History in the Living Room: The Communist Consumer Museum in Timisoara, Romania

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to construe the Communist Consumer Museum in Timișoara, Romania, as a realm of communist everyday life memory in the current historical context, marked by an upsurge of both nostalgia and cultural entrepreneurship. The article identifies this Museum as an alternative one, in which the remembrance of everyday consumption, ideology, popular and official culture presupposes an affective interaction of the visitor with a series of material artifacts and household objects from the communist everyday life. For the analysis of this museum I will rely on written and oral history interviews, as well as on participant observation and theoretical approaches to memory, nostalgia, and entrepreneurship studies. In construing this project, I will go beyond the received wisdom of mere nostalgia, while taking into account the entrepreneurial private project of its initiators, as well as the multitude of perspectives on the museum, which arise from the way it is conceived. Thus, by being an unofficial initiative and devoid of a state agenda, the Communist Consumer Museum produces a democratization of the approach to history. While the setting itself is not authentic, mainly because of it being housed in a villa which precedes the communist era, as well as because of the amount of material artifacts, which turn the “apartment” into a *post factum* conglomerate of objects, I argue that it is the very accumulation of such artifacts within the museum that offers its viewers the opportunity of choice.

Keywords: *entrepreneurship; post-communist memory; nostalgia; museum; oral history;*

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Introduction

The aim of this article is to construe the remembrance of everyday consumption, of popular and official culture during state socialism through an alternative type of museum, which implies an affective interaction of the visitor with a series of material artifacts from the communist everyday life. This article will rely on the case study of the Communist Consumer Museum, in Timișoara, Romania and on the means through which this museum revives personal experiences from the past into the present context. Starting with a summary explanation of a theoretical background on memory studies, based on works by authors such as Pierre Nora, Paul Thompson, and Susan A. Crane, the article will provide a presentation of the Communist Consumer Museum, its official purpose, location, source of funding, and collection of material artifacts. It will also analyze the Museum as an entrepreneurial project, devoid of any state, or official interests, as well as the means through which this type of organization has influenced the ways in which visitors can relive their personal histories, as well as histories they never actually lived, by interacting with a series of everyday artifacts from the communist era. While international scholarship on entrepreneurship studies has flourished during the past decades, under the influence of societal and economic development during the 1960s and 1970s (Landström, 2005, p. 60) and while social sciences have reappraised its multiple links with entrepreneurship as an object of study (Thornton, 1999, p. 41), the field of humanities, especially in Romania, but not only, has yet to address the meaning of *entrepreneur* from a diachronic perspective.

Memory and History

Whenever tackling the issue of memory and the communist past in Eastern Europe, most approaches focus on two different directions. The first one deals with official collective memory: memoirs published by public intellectuals depicting the authoritarian rule of the communist regime, educational state programs aiming at teaching pupils about the economic and political actions undertaken before 1989, or even state sanctioned committees and institutes, with the purpose of gathering evidence in order to condemn communism as an ideology. This was the case in 2006 with Presidential Commission for the Study of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania, formed in April 2006, by Romanian President Traian Băsescu. The findings of the Commission appeared in a report, based on which President Băsescu officially condemned communism before the Parliament Assembly,

in December 2006. The report, which has been a controversial issue since its inception, was published in 2007 and it has sparked numerous discussions in the Romanian public sphere (Mark, 2010, pp. 32-46). Such public debates also influenced private initiatives. For instance, in 2004 Romanian artist Gabriela Cristea held an exhibition, which focused on everyday life under communism. Entitled “Domestic Red”, the exhibition centered on ideological aspects, as well as on problems created by the communist legislation for ordinary citizens – for instance, an abortion kit was on display as part of the exhibition (Stan, 2014, p. 220). The second direction deals with personal memories, narratives of ordinary and less-than-ordinary people who remember their own life experiences, usually through oral history interviews. These narratives are usually more diverse than the official discourses constructed officially, incorporating both traumatic experiences and nostalgia for certain aspects of the communist way of life. The two approaches have different channels of emission and different statuses of authority, but are interrelated in various ways. Official collective memory influences what people remember and what they remember in front of other people; narratives of ordinary people can accumulate and serve as evidence of a story which might be different from the one projected from the top downward by the state.

Most historians or social scientists who deal with memory tend to compare the latter with history, to define it as being historically conditioned and constructed, or to emphasize the difference between memory and history, the former consequently appearing as a reaction to the latter. Conceptualizing what he calls *lieux de mémoire*, Pierre Nora constructs a theoretical absolute opposition between memory and history, arguing that the “acceleration of history” has led to a “conquest and eradication” of memory by the former (Nora, 1989, pp. 7-8; 1984, pp. XIV-XVII). In a very literary, and sometimes vague style, Nora considers that memory is “affective and magical”, “it nourishes recollections”, it “installs remembrance within the sacred”, it is “blind to all, but the group it binds”, “it is multiple”, “collective, plural, and yet, individual”, “it takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images and objects”, finally adding that “memory is absolute” (Nora, 1989, pp. 8-9). History, on the other hand, “belongs to everyone and to no one”; it “can only conceive the relative” (Nora, 1989, pp. 8-9). Thus, “history is perpetually suspicious of memory, and its true mission is to suppress and destroy it” (Nora, 1989, pp. 8-9).

In most cases for this comparison, Nora makes use of a highly ambiguous style, at times unnecessarily literary. One might wonder in what ways is memory absolute and how can this absoluteness be defined. Still,

what needs to be taken into account is Nora's division between memory as life, as subjectively perceived experience, and history as a representation of the past, therefore as an intellectual construct. However, this distinction in itself raises numerous problems, as it disregards the intertwining and often interdependent relationships that bind history and memory, relations by which history is often a construction built on memory, whereas memory is frequently influenced by official histories.

Susan A. Crane states the theoretical differences between the two concepts, of collective memory and historical memory, claiming that they reside "in the decision of what to 'save'. History can save what has been personally lost, by preserving a collective representation of memory. Collective memory can preserve the memory of lived experience, in living experience, and sustain the loss of other memories. But morally speaking [...] collective memory cannot sustain the loss of historical memory" (Crane, 1997, pp. 1383). Other scholars have not taken the same approach of classifying several theoretical types of memory as opposed to history, or distinguishing between history and memory. They have rather attempted to focus on both the similarities and the differences between history and memory. For instance, Paul Thompson perceives the two concepts not as a stark dichotomy, but as aspects of the same thing (Thompson, 2000, pp. 215-216) Thompson argues for two different aspects of memory and of history: the personal and the collective, stating that each individual's history is based on their own memories, and that collective memory is based upon public history (Thompson, 2000, p. 224). Although he is right to point out the interrelationship between history and memory – an observation that makes Pierre Nora's distinction to appear biased in its strive for absoluteness – Thompson fails to define concepts such as *public history*, or to indicate the means by which a personal history is constructed on personal memories only. This is caused by the fact that Thompson does not offer any clues to the interrelation between the memory of an individual and the social context in which the respective individual exists. Nevertheless, in these cases, memory is presented as a strictly intellectual construct, something that is structured in texts and acts through them. Such texts refer only to the ideological aspect of the communist experience, creating an almost out-of-body, non-sensitive, abstract memory (Bast et al., 2018, pp. 18-20).

The Case of the Communist Consumer Museum as an Entrepreneurial Project

However, the theoretical framework presented above does not take into account the performative aspect of a realm of memory, nor does it refer to consumerist aspect that such a realm may offer. These two features lie at the foundation of the Communist Consumer Museum in the city of Timișoara, Romania, in 2015, by a cooperative of actors, artists, and entrepreneurs. The museum is housed in the basement of an old villa, which also hosts a bar and an alternative theater, all run by this cooperative of artists. Despite this, the Museum is presented as an old communist apartment, complete with a living-room, a bedroom, a bathroom, a storage closet (the so-called *debara*), and a kitchen. The rooms display a wide variety of household communist objects, ranging from Romanian beer brands, milk and yogurt bottles, to children's toys, cosmetics, pieces of furniture, TV sets, radios, lamps, factory posters, art posters, and clothing, to name just a few of them. These and many more are stacked on shelves, on top of the larger pieces of furniture, or hung on the walls. There is also a record and tape collection, mostly albums released by the state-owned Electrecord record company, which can be played on old tape and record players. While most of the artifacts are former communist Romanian brands, one also finds contraband merchandise, especially taking into the account the fact that Timișoara is located near the border with Hungary and Serbia (formerly Yugoslavia) (The Communist Consumer Museum). The location of the Museum, in a city with a multicultural richness, well-connected by means of transportation with major cities throughout Europe, is also a factor which has contributed to the success of this entrepreneurial project (Peris-Ortiz & Merigó-Lindahl, 2015, pp. 24-25). In this sense, there is an interdependence between project and location of the project, which is socially and culturally conditioned (Thornton, 1999, p. 20).

There was no actual curatorial or political idea behind the project, as one of the Museum's founders, actor Ovidiu Mihăiță, recalls: "Don't ask me how I got the idea, because I don't know what to answer. [...] We just collected all these objects for five years, myself, my friends, and people who come to our bar and theater. [...] I started collecting these, because of my obsession with records, I used to collect them. When I was a kid, I used to listen to them, music records, story records, and this is what that period means to me. For others it might be the glass fish on the TV set, or trinkets" (Mihăiță, 2015). When asked about any support for creating the Museum, Mihăiță mentioned that the creation of the Communist Consumer Museum

took five years, and that the founders (the “cooperative”, as he calls it) did not apply for any funding (“Ovidiu Mihăiță Personal Interview”, 2019). The museum was only the latest project of the “cooperative” in a string which included a theater (*Auăleu*, set up în 2005), and a bar (*Scârț Loc Lejer*, set up in 2009). As it was independently funded, the Museum has no ideological or political aim. According to its founder, access is free, but visitors can make donations and receive material artifacts from the era, as souvenirs. The museum was modeled after American theaters which, according to Mihăiță, would house their own museums inside bathrooms (“Ovidiu Mihăiță Personal Interview”, 2019). The Communist Consumer Museum functions as a socializing place, together with the theater and the bar. Furthermore, the purpose of the Museum is also to recover the lost memory of socialist era artifacts, to constitute a new tourist attraction for Timișoara, and to stage a part of life as it used to be (Mihăiță, 2015). In this sense, the Museum is already starting to attract new tourists and even beginning to have its own life in the blogs and travelogues of foreign tourists, drawn by its exotic nature, as well as by its claim to be the only such museum in Eastern Europe. Such a project is not entirely new, even in Romania, but what sets it apart from other previous endeavors is the fact that it has no open ideological or political agenda. This becomes even more important when taking into account the fact that the issue of a museum dedicated to the communist experience has been a recurrent topic of discussion in the Romanian public sphere (Blandiana, 2014).

When looking at the amount of items housed by the Museum, it becomes clear that such an enterprise could only be collective, and not an individual project, thus making an exception to the rule put forth by Simon Bridge, Ken O'Neill, and Stan Cromie, according to whom geopolitical context and economic development are mainly responsible for family versus individual projects (Bridge et al., 1998, pp. 64-65). It should be mentioned that such ideas have been further investigated within the realm of developed countries in the Western hemisphere (Lee & Kelly, 2019, pp. 108-128), while other studies have also adopted a local approach on entrepreneurship studies, taking into account the regional and local cultures, as well as the educational and societal aspects which influence the formation of a project (Peris-Ortiz & Merigó-Lindahl, 2015). Notwithstanding such theoretical and case-study approaches, one also has to take into account the nature of the project involved and the amount of investment which is necessary, in order to determine whether a certain business endeavour is feasible as an individual or as a collective project. However, while such a variable is

seldom present in approaches on factors that influence entrepreneurial activity, it is itself nonetheless influenced by a multitude of economic, cultural, and social factors (Monge, 2018, pp. 185-186). Yet, as the Communist Consumer Museum shows, in certain cases finances are not the most important aspect of an entrepreneurial project. This confirms Paul Burns and Jim Dewhurst, according to whom the idea of a successful business is the first and most important step in the development of a business project (Burns & Dewhurst, 1989, p. 9).

Notwithstanding the organization of this basement collection as an apartment with its basic rooms, the sheer quantity of items on display and the lack of any curatorial classification of these items leave the visitor under the impression that this is more of a warehouse, than an actual apartment, meant to represent everyday life under communist times. Furthermore, the items on display originate from different time periods of the communist regime; one finds household items from the 1950s stacked upon pieces of furniture from the late 1970s, or vice-versa. There seem to have been two apparent rules for any curatorial order inside the Museum: first, the organization of items according to the basic rooms of any apartment (kitchen items in the kitchen, etc.); second, items seem to be grouped according to the categories they belong to (thus, one observes groups of football club flags from the communist period, or groups of records, cassettes, radios, TV sets). This second observation is an indicator that this group of objects is the sum of several collections of items from the communist period. From this point of view, the Communist Consumer Museum in Timișoara stays true to its name. It does not follow the model of “communist apartments”, which function either as museums, or “bed&breakfast” type private hostels. Its name brings together two concepts which are seldom found together in Romanian academic secondary literature or in public debates: those of “communist” and “consumer”. While the concept of consumerism during the communist period has been the focus of several in-depth studies in secondary literature published abroad, it has yet to be properly addressed in studies pertaining to Romania’s experience of communism - for the first part of the observation, see Horváth (2015, pp. 101-116) and Zhuk (2011, p. 527). There was a culture of consumption in Romanian during communism, which was dependent on economic growth and crisis, as well as on top-down political decisions and bottom-up local agency. During the periods of economic decline and food shortages, hoarding as an economic and social activity became a common practice, and the amassed collections of various household items in the Museum resonate with it, albeit in a postmodern context (Kideckel, 2008, pp. 229-230).

To an observer of how nostalgia and entrepreneurship intermingle, of particular interest was the Museum's Book of Impressions, where visitors can leave their comments about their experience, while taking a tour among the crowded, dusty items of yesterday. The book contains brief written bursts of enthusiasm, as well as detailed impressions. These come from local tourists, as well as from foreigners. While foreign tourists are amazed by the sheer size of the Museum's collection, local ones remember the stories told by their grandparents about everyday life during communism. These impressions highlight the many paradoxes that the Museum's collection has hidden underneath its dusty items, for people who have never experienced life under communism and have been taught to disdain it, yet are fascinated by the material culture of communist life, either as an aspect of their own national past, or as an encounter of an exotic culture, which was once beyond a so-called Iron Curtain. To paraphrase the title of a book which deals with the anthropology of late socialism, the remnants of a life that was supposed to be forever until it was no more, captivate, enchant, and sometimes beguile those who see such a museum as a curiosity in itself, or as a temporary halt in tourist itinerary (Yurchak, 2005). From this point, of view, Zhuk's observation that cultural consumption and visual culture were of paramount importance in Soviet and post-Soviet times finds new meanings in the post-communist context, as one can extend this observation to contemporary cultures, regardless of their economic, and political systems (Zhuk, 2011, p. 527). The fact that the sheer majority of the comments in the Museums' book of impressions are highly positive regarding its collection is an indicator that the Communist Consumer Museum achieves its role of cultural value provider, and enhancer of Timișoara's tourist capital (Mavragani, 2018, pp. 44-45). The fact that the comments in the book of impressions do not contain any general evaluations of communism as an ideology, or any comparisons between past and present regimes confirms Ovidiu Mihăiță's claim regarding the Museum's lack of ideological bias and reinforces the Museum's social trust in its relation with its visitors (Murphy, 2016, p. 20), while evading the dichotomy between social versus economic prevalence in an entrepreneurial project (Newey, 2018, p. 26). From this point of view, the Museum is a successful story in creating what is known as "shared value", even though its creators have not pursued any openly accepted strategy in this sense (Sinthupundaja et al., 2020, pp. 18-19).

Concluding Remarks: The Museum as a Postmodern Entrepreneurial Endeavour and Beyond

As Ana-Maria Grigore points out, cultural heritage needs to be managed as an essential strategic resource in order to maximize its benefits (Grigore, 2017). The case of the Communist Consumer Museum in Timișoara has shown that the most profitable means to maximize the economic value of a cultural artifact is to correctly appraise its value in the cultural realm, before turning it into a resource for the entrepreneurial ecosystem. This does not mean that cultural and economic value need to be treated as separate entities. As Bonita M. Kolb has pointed out, arts and culture have always been priced, distributed, and promoted (Kolb, 2015, p. 7). Nonetheless, cultural value and heritage develop and function according to rules which are not always subordinate to economic formulas, even though they are influenced by the latter. The project of the Communist Consumer Museum has also been, perhaps unobservantly, influenced by political and institutional changes which have swept across the former socialist states of East and Central Europe (Smallbone & Welter, 2009, p. 225). As it is a hybrid model, based on voluntary and business systems, the Museum, together with the other two projects, that of the theater and that of the bar, manages to transfer ideas from one activity sector to the other, which gives it a competitive advantage (Sparviero, 2019, p. 248).

However, by being an unofficial initiative and devoid of a state agenda, the Communist Consumer Museum produces a democratization of the approach to history. While the setting itself is not authentic, mainly because of it being housed in a villa which precedes the communist era, as well as because of the amount of material artifacts which turn the “apartment” into a *post factum* conglomerate of objects, it is the very accumulation of such artifacts within the museum that offers its viewers the opportunity of choice. The reaction of the latter is open ended and it can range from nostalgia of familiar household items to amazement caused by never before seen objects (Bridge et al., 1998, pp. 61-65). More importantly, however, in a context still marked by ideologization of the communist past, the very existence of such a museum can supplant historical and anthropological research by unearthing realms of memory that had lain forgotten. At the same time, the Communist Consumer Museum represents further proof that innovative entrepreneurial projects can go beyond the boundaries set by dominant public discourses and unearth a collective memory, which has mainly remained ignored by mainstream mass-media and official institutions.

Last, but not least, one observation should be made regarding the Museum's housing inside the villa. As Ovidiu Mihăiță notices, there was no symbolic pre-planning of how or where the Communist Consumer Museum would be set up inside a house, which already functioned as a theater and a bar. It was more of an administrative and business-minded issue of how to use an extra space and turn it into something profitable. Notwithstanding this, the space which the Museum uses gains a symbolic value, when one takes into account the observation made by David Crowley and Susan E. Reid, that the *underground* is often identified with dissent in Soviet-type societies (Crowley & Reid, 2002, p. 16). According to the two authors, the *underground* thus functions as a spatial metaphor, which expresses an ideological and social position. In the post-socialist (and capitalist) context of Timișoara, the *underground* of the Communist Consumer Museum does not express any open political ideology. It is simply the underground of a larger cultural *underground*, which has brought the entire "cooperative" of its creators closer to *mainstream* tourist attractions, through the means of what one might call a postmodern opening.

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