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The Principle of Collectivism in the Totalitarian Educational Systems

Dan Ioan DASCĂLU

Abstract: Totalitarian societies, either fascist or communist, share a number of common characteristics that include their specific modality of considering the educational systems. These systems are completely politicized, ideologized and subordinated to the Party-State and have as a main goal the shaping of the new man that the totalitarian regimes require. Collectivism is one of the common elements to any totalitarian ideology. It has the role of a basic principle in the totalitarian educational systems. Education within and through the collective is considered fundamental. The collectivist vision has to direct the content of education. The formation of collectivist spirit is an educational ideal. The new man of totalitarian societies should have been imbued with the collectivist spirit not only in his/her vision on society, but also he/she should have manifested it in daily behaviours. The aim of this paper is to uncover a few similarities between fascism and communism in the ways they both organize their educational systems and the central place these systems assign to the principle of collectivism using the comparative method. This is another argument to support the idea that totalitarianisms are two regimes of the same nature, irrespective of their underlying and legitimizing ideologies.

Keywords: educational systems, fascism, communism, collectivism.

1. Introduction. The issue of the research

The fact that totalitarian societies are similar, regardless of the ideology that underlies them and legitimizes them, has been demonstrated since the mid-twentieth century. Works devoted to studying the totalitarian phenomenon, like those of Carl J. Friedrich, Hannah Arendt or Raymond Aron, among others, are points of reference for defining totalitarianism and for emphasizing the similarities between the forms of manifestation of this political system.

The similarity between right-wing totalitarianism, such as Nazism, and the left-wing ones, such as communism, can be also traced at the level of educational systems. We mean, by educational system, a set of organizations, institutions, groups, communities which, inter-relating with
each other, conducted on the basis of principles and norms, actions aimed at shaping personality, socialization, de-socialization and re-socialization of society members. Certainly, education firstly targets the younger generation, but is not limited to it.

Our research attempts to show some striking similarities existing between the educational system of Nazism and the one of communism, the two typical totalitarianisms, left-wing and right-wing. We also try to show that the principle of collectivism is the basis of the two educational systems.

2. Characteristics of education systems in totalitarian societies

The first aspect that we must emphasize is that the education system, in the totalitarian society, is under the full control of the Party-State. This is possible if the civil society disappears. There are lots of organizations and associations, controlled more or less directly by the Party-State, which tries to include all members of society, to keep them under control, to mobilize them in the sense of supporting totalitarian power and its actions. The dismantling of the existing civil society when the regime was instituted and its replacement with this network of obedient institutions, associations and organizations, facilitate the total domination over society. Seen from outside, this network may resemble a civil society, but, in fact, has nothing to do with it. It occupies, however, the place of the former civil society. In this sense it can be said that “the State swallows the society and talks in its name” (Touraine, 1994, p. 168).

All these elements of the fake civil society, created by the Party-State and submitted to it, have also a role to educate the members of the society, along with the classic education system and other educational agents. In the totalitarian society, they attempt to gain absolute control for the Party-State, of both formal education that takes place within the education system, at school and non-formal education, achieved in education networks organized outside of school, and moreover, of informal education, given in family, work groups, through the media.

Secondly, it must be said that education had, in totalitarian regimes, a political character. The content of education is determined by the holders of political power, those involved in education are selected carefully on political criteria as well, depending on their adherence to the ideology and program of the totalitarian party.

Thirdly, as regards the political nature of totalitarian education, we must remember its totalitarian ideology. Its role is to transmit the official ideology, to turn those submitted to education in followers of this ideology.
Last but not least, the totalitarian education, be it Nazi or Communist, aims at achieving the „new man”, that is the radical change in the personality of society members... A new society, which wants to be completely different than the one it replaces „revolutionarily speaking” implies a „new man” who has to build it, building himself, at the same time. In fact, totalitarian regimes seek to build a complex architecture of obedience in order to include every member of society, to eliminate any possibility of opposition, to transform the social body into an amorphous mass, cemented by the faith in a certain ideology and in the holders of political power as the only authorized representatives of this ideology, a malleable mass ready to support unconditionally the political power and to carry out any order in the most obedient way. „All totalitarian societies wanted a „new man” to support them, a predictable man, well impregnated from an ideological point of view, and easy to lead” (Neculau, 1999, p. 132).

In addition to what was said, we think the two types of educational systems, the Nazi and Communist ones, are alike also as concerns the role that they attach to the principle of collectivism. The two ideologies that underpin these totalitarian regimes have a collectivist nature. The educational system must form the collectivist spirit. Moreover, collectivism also becomes a principle of educative action, a privileged way of totalitarian education.

3. Collectivism in Nazi education

The purpose of the Nazi education is twofold. On the one hand, it aims to transform most Germans into supporters and instruments of the “new order” instituted by the National Socialism, men into devoted and disciplined soldiers of the Three Reich, women in “German mothers”, and secondly, to create a Nazi elite. In order to achieve this dual purpose has been created an educational system totally controlled by the party, in which school, party organizations or organizations dominated by the party and the propaganda machine run by Goebbels, which subordinates its media and cultural production, combine, complement and support one another.

In this system, the principle of selection according to ideological criteria is vital. It is a triple selection: of the subjects of education, of educators and of contents of education. The principles of race and consistency with National Socialist ideas govern this selection.

On the same criteria of race and adherence to Nazism are selected those conducting education. From the education system were eliminated
people who could not prove their racial purity or who had an inadequate political past.

As an important feature of the Nazi educational system should be highlighted the importance given to political education carried out by organizations of the party or controlled by the party. They actually have the leading role in forming the “new Nazi man”. The most attention is given by the regime to the Nazi youth organizations. The four organizations of this type, two for boys and two for girls, get to cover most young people between 10 and 18 years old. If in 1934 they have 3,577,600 members, that is 46.5% of the youngsters between 10 and 18 years old, in 1938 they reach 7,301,200 members, that is 80% of the youngsters of that age (Layton, 1997, p. 100). Their purpose is primarily educational, they must train youngsters to become devoted to the regime, who think between the frames of National Socialist ideology and, above all, who are disciplined, accustomed to obey orders. Within organizations, they must be ready to be good soldiers or good German mothers.

The Nazi citizen is, first, the soldier aware of his „German nature”.

And this kind of totalitarianism wants a militant, indoctrinated, integrated, dedicated, disciplined citizen, capable of performing by all means the orders given by his leaders. The model of this „new man” is the SS man. From the point of view of training the SS man as a „new man”, two principles were considered basic: the racial selection and the blind obedience to the leader and to the rules of the group.

Admission among SS members was made based on a racial selection, which was much more rigorous than the one for granting German citizenship.

After admission, followed an education program, which included ideological indoctrination, internalization of a military-type strict discipline, based on the principles of hierarchy and absolute obedience to the leader, nurturing a sense of total devotion to the Führer. All this education program is conducted within the group.

4. Collectivist pedagogy of Communist educators

In the context of the other kind of totalitarianism, namely the communism, the principles of the new pedagogy were formulated by Makarenko, during the Stalinist period.

The schoolmaster A.S. Makarenko leads, since 1920, a colony of rehabilitation of young law breakers near Poltava, Ukraine. It is called „Maxim Gorky” and it is subordinated to the People’s Commissariat for
Internal Affairs. Between 1927 and 1935, after being forced to abandon this first project, he will lead near Kharkov, the village work „F. A. Dzerzhinsky”, which is also a re-education institution for under ages, offenders or tramps, subordinated to N.K.V.D. The experience of this activity will be recorded in the form of stories published during 1933-1935, on the Gorky Colony (The Educational Poem) and in 1938, the one referring to the Dzerzhinsky village (Flags on Towers). To these two works is added a third one, Parents’s Book, dedicated to issues of family education.

Tackling the task very seriously, as he will confess later, occupying „this modest sector of the revolutionary front” and understanding clearly that his task was, „to educate a new man” (Makarenko, 1952, p. 133), the Soviet institute will do experiences on young law breakers, under the special conditions of the respective labour colonies, methods of forming the „new man”. Certain about the effectiveness of these methods, he presents the two fictionalized stories of his experiments, as an alternative to traditional pedagogy, as elements of a new approach to education.

The central principle of educational system proposed by Macarenko is education by and through collectivity. The collectivity is one that can change the individual, it may impose certain desirable behaviours, it can change the way one thinks and acts. The individual must totally integrate into the collectivity, and the latter shapes him. „You must love your collectivity, know it, know its interests, observe them” (Makarenko, 1952, p. 125).

Not every type of collectivity can fulfil this educational role, but only the Soviet-type collectivity, which is essentially a labour collectivity. A central idea of the communist ideology reappears, that of the pedagogical role of work. Work, as a fundamentally social activity, creates the collectivity, establishes common goals, creates specific links between its members, integrates the citizen. The Soviet-style collectivity is formed primarily in the labour process, out of people for whom work is the supreme value, people who dedicate themselves enthusiastically to work. „The collectivity – says Makarenko talking about the village of Dzerjinski – lived a life of intense work, but in his veins was flowing a new socialist blood, able to kill the pathogenic bacteria of the past from the first moment of their birth” (Makarenko, 1952, p. 136).

In fact, the village of Dzerzhinsky is the miniature projection of our future Soviet society, populated with enthusiastic people trained for working with a conscious discipline. Any act of indiscipline is considered an act against the collectivity and since this collectivity is a part of society, therefore against society itself. That is why the collectivity „takes a firm stand” against indiscipline, denounces and punishes any such act.
Makarenko’s theory became the official theory of education under the Stalinist regime, and his method became the universal method of Soviet pedagogy. It was assumed that this pedagogical system, issued from a correctional facility, can be generalized in all the fields of education.

The shaping of personality, which communist regimes intend to institute, must be also regarded in the context of the total domination over the individual that they wish to achieve and the process of massification of society.

The massification process, the attempt to erase differences between individuals, is accompanied by the process of organization of masses, of integration of each individual in groups controlled by power. Equalized, brought to the same condition of „working people”, the members of the society are, in their majority, involved in „collectivities of working people”, within which they receive orders, are mobilized, are supervised. Within the propagandistic speech of power, they are groups of people, who, ranked on the positions of the working class, fully adhere to the Communist cause and have as ultimate aim the achievement of objectives set by the party. Relations between the members of the collectivity should be socialist relations, based on a new morality and new interests. This new morality, a new attitude towards work, a new discipline should be imposed by the group to each one of its members. The group has, therefore, a primordial educational role in forming the “new man”, provided that it is a collectivity of working people. In fact, these groups, organized, manipulated, monitored continuously by power, have goals that were imposed to them, and a discipline that has been imposed to them as well and merely constitute the resonance box of orders given by the leaders. In every company or institution, employees also constitute a collectivity of working people. This one must coagulate around the organization or the „cell” of the political party. The other existing organizations, youth, trade unions, etc, are „guided”, that is controlled by the party organization.

The crucial moment in the collectivity life including working people is the assembly. It unfolds according to a veritable ritual and involves, from the ordinary member of the collectivity, three behaviors: the adherence, the report, the criticism and the self-criticism. All three express the subordination of the individual to the collectivity, and through it, to power. The collectivity adheres usually unanimously and enthusiastically, to the policy of the party, to the decisions of various courts that make it up. The adhesion is presented as if it springs spontaneously from the consciousness of every member of the collectivity, although it is imposed by government representatives. The one who either objects or did not fully understand the
leaders’ message, is either an enemy sneaked in the collectivity, and in this case, he must be punished by the repressive organs of the state, or he was not educated effectively and correctly. The collectivity of working people appears as a means of legitimizing political power, to make it appear that its decisions are based on the aspirations of the majority of the society members. Within the collectivity, the individual must learn to adhere to any decision or appreciation that comes from the leaders. Each member has specific tasks and how he fulfils them must be judged by the collectivity. The report is, in this respect, obedience to the collective judgment. Through reporting, the individual recognizes the subordination to the collectivity and, through it, to power and to the conformity to requirements. The member of the collectivity should refer not only to his professional and political work, but also to his personal life, to his relatives and friends. The report is accompanied and complemented by criticism and self-criticism. Criticism means to condemn facts or persons specified by the leaders of the collectivity as unconformably to discipline and to requirements imposed by political leaders. Why, who and what can be criticized is determined accurately in advance. „Proletarian anger”, „combative attitudes of working people” are directed beforehand and unfold according to a scenario established by representatives of political power. Self-criticism means to recognize and to condemn their own behaviours and thoughts. Each and every member must present his life in all its aspects to the collectivity, deny his own actions and thoughts, if they are not considered in compliance with the official requirements, disown people who he appreciated or he still appreciates, if they are considered „enemies”. At the same time, he accepts the criticism of his colleagues, which is an imposed criticism, sometimes streaming out of conformism, and some other times out of the pettiest reasons.

In order to use the shaping force of the collectivity managed and controlled by the political leaders ever since a very young age of the individuals and in order to get them used to continuous observation, such collectivities are also created in schools, through organizations or young Communist or pioneers. They overlap the normal organization of classes and apply the same methods, even if adapted, of education through collectivity.

5. Conclusions

Totalitarian ideologies, whether they are rightist or leftist, give to collectivism a central place. Totalitarian educational systems which are highly
politicized, ideological, strictly controlled by the party-state, think they must consider collectivism both as a central value in the content they transmit, as well as a privileged way of education. In other words, collectivism is taught primarily within the collectivity. Even if the theoretical foundations of Nazi collectivism and of communist collectivism are different, even if the collectivities that educate in a collectivist spirit are also different, in both totalitarian political systems, collectivism remains a privileged value and educational method.

References


