

The Exigency of a Communist Totalitarian Pedagogy in the United States

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Decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, people outside Eastern Europe and the regions of the Second World¹ still have insufficient knowledge about their regimes. Including in the U.S. education curricula more teaching materials about the former (and current) Second World of socialist/communist regimes would help dispel misconceptions that people might still harbor about the specifics of those sociopolitical systems. Teaching about those regions and their history should be done through a rhetorical lens that allows understanding historical concepts in ways that might permit to shape a better future.

It is also understandable why people who have lived in totalitarian regimes have wanted for a long time to forget those times and the traumas they experienced. However, I agree with writer and journalist Slavenka Drakulic, who in her 2016 book *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed*, warns about rushing into forgetting about the past:

It is not that I mind the demolition of the [Berlin] Wall—I am delighted about that—but the way it was done, the obvious haste with which this tumor was removed not only from the face of the city, but from the memory of the people, too, acting as if it is really possible to unite instantly, to become one Berlin, one nation, as if the past, the division of that nation, doesn't count at all anymore and should be instantly forgotten. . . . I thought, the erasing of memory begins right here, right on this spot near the Potsdamer Platz, right

¹ The Second World is a term used to refer to the socialist and communist countries, especially during the Cold War of the second half of the twentieth century; however, such regions still exist in the present.

when Goering is reduced to a *very famous person*, and the Wall to tiny bits of painted concrete selling for 5 Deutschmarks, when the whole history of this nation is reduced to souvenirs and fame. What I feared is already here: incoherent bits and pieces of the past that don't make sense anymore. That, in fact, are not important. But the sooner we forget it, the more we'll have to fear. (p. 40)

Indeed, in the haste and efforts to change societies and to replace old regimes with new ones, we may forget to examine *what* in fact has changed and *how* times have transformed ourselves in turn. We may try to forget, leave behind, or vilify that part of lived history that hurt or made little sense at the time. Others have resorted to nostalgia about a simpler past, which in most cases is a mere longing for youth itself. It is clear now that conversations are necessary about what we, as cultures, societies, or individuals, should remember or forget in order to shape the future. This, however, can only be done by objectively analyzing the past, with detachment, inasmuch as such an endeavor is indeed possible, especially for those of us whose personal lives are forever tangled with that historical time and place. At the same time, these discussions should happen also, and especially, in higher education arenas, since it is in those places that we should teach history through a rhetorical lens while practicing critical thinking with our students. More importantly, we should be aware that concepts travel (Bal, 2002) and, therefore, change their meaning against various sociocultural contexts, and this should be made clear to our students when we prepare them for the public discourse.

Why Teach about the Communist Totalitarian Times?

The communist period deeply marked the personal, social, and political lives of the various populations that experienced it. As such, the past still informs the sociopolitical thought and the public discourse of the present. Then, in the exultant period after the fall of the Berlin

Wall in 1989, the regimes of that time have slowly made room for certain realizations about those regions' history. Some people in the region take socialist ideas for granted because they have had them in their lives for too long, while others tend to embrace the far-right extreme; however, they all make use of terminology of the past political thought to shape speech and actions in the present.

To this day, populations within the space of the former Second World continue to struggle with the changes brought about by the periods of transitions toward more democratic societies, mainly because the communist legacy has left behind highly centralized social, political, and economic systems, still profoundly marked in many ways. Moreover, efforts to decentralize the economy and to democratize the political process took various forms across Eastern Europe. In general, across the region, these efforts have resulted in the creation of oligarchies and disaffected former factories and agricultural collectives, which further added disappointment among the disenfranchised populations.

At the same time, confusions continue to exist outside of the former Second World spaces about the ways nondemocratic systems function and about their lasting effects over time. The experience of the authoritarian or totalitarian regimes has lingered in the region so that now its remnants coexist in those societies alongside new practices of everyday life. Debates and dialog surrounding this state of affairs are necessary over there, as they are necessary here in the United States, if we are to assimilate the lessons of history and shape a better future. However, while these issues inform people's lives, I am more interested in how these changes shape the public rhetoric in post-communism and, furthermore, in the ways we should study and teach them to the new generations.

Unlike in the United States, preserving the memory of totalitarianism in Europe has been emphasized to a higher degree. Nevertheless, mixed feelings about certain topics are understandable because some people prefer to forget, while others cannot, and yet others nostalgically romanticize the past. Furthermore, institutions value both the collective and individual memory of totalitarianism, understanding the importance of keeping the new generations informed. Indeed, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), in its “Resolution on Divided Europe Reunited: Promoting Human Rights and Civil Liberties in the OSCE Region in the Twenty-first Century,” calls for a continuous “research into and [raising of] public awareness of the totalitarian legacy” and the development and improvement of “educational tools, programs and activities, most notably for younger generations, on totalitarian history, human dignity, human rights and fundamental freedoms, pluralism, democracy and tolerance;” it also “expresses deep concern at the glorification of the totalitarian regimes” (qtd. in Tismăneanu, 2012, pp. 36-37).

While Europe has lived through various forms of totalitarian regimes and world wars in the last century, the United States has never had an actual dictator in power yet, nor has it fought wars on its territory in the twentieth century. Therefore, although the OSCE extends the abovementioned call for action to its European member states to ensure these important historical events are still taught in Europe, how is this message relevant to the United States? Why is it important, in the twenty-first century, to study about Europe’s totalitarian and post-totalitarian experience? Three immediate reasons come to mind as to why increasing awareness of the legacy of totalitarianism for the U.S. youth should be at the forefront of the education efforts, and they are discussed in what follows.

We Learn from History

While some believe humanity does not learn from history, present and future generations may benefit from understanding the lessons of the past. The lack of knowledge about the realities of the Second World can lead to misunderstandings of sociopolitical events that take place within such contexts. For instance, the authors Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner of *Freakonomics* (2005) use an unfortunate example to prove a point which illustrates present misunderstandings of past contexts and different social systems.

First, to better explain a flawed argument elaborated in *Freakonomics* (2005), we need to understand the history of Decree 770 of 1966 and its consequences in the Romanian society during the 24 years Nicolae Ceaușescu was the president and even afterwards². Decree 770 banned abortions and contraceptive measures unless “the mother was over 40, had already borne four children, her life was endangered, or the pregnancy was the result of rape or incest” (Gasaway Hill, 2018, p. 171).³ Apart from many unwanted pregnancies, the mediatized orphanage crisis, and thousands of deaths that happened over time due to back-alley abortions, Decree 770 was also the cause for an increase in Romania’s natality in the first six years after it became effective, so Romania’s largest generation in history was born between 1966 and 1972. I belong to this generation, which is called the generation of “decreței” (loosely translating as *decreelings*). As with many others in this generation, my appurtenance to this population group was emphasized throughout my childhood by both the education system and the political rhetoric: we were told with triumphalism that we would build Romania’s “bright communist future” (see Gradea, 2019).

² See the books by Gail Kligman (1998) and Katherine Verdery (1995) that discuss the Ceaușescu period through this decree and nationalistic policies, respectively.

³ As drastic as this decree has proven to be, it still sounds almost reasonable compared with abortion bills that are currently considered in some U.S. states.

The “decreeling” generation, however, also played a major role during December 1989 Romanian revolution that was arguably part of the events around the fall of the Berlin Wall. Students of this baby-boomer generation, which at the time was aged between 18 and 23, took part in the revolution. The Romanian revolution was the only bloodbath in the Eastern European movements at the time (see Oțoiu, 2003) and even though some lacked the courage to openly confront the guns, all were there in spirit. People of all ages and social conditions rebelled in the streets to protest against armed police and military personnel who shot at people. The paternalistic state was ready to dispose of the decreeling generation when it did not comply with its ideology.

Freakonomics (2005): The Case of a Misunderstanding

In *Freakonomics* (2005), authors Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner discuss Nicolae Ceaușescu’s natalist policies to show connections between abortion laws and crime. The Western media had pointed out early on that it was precisely the “children of the decree” that overturned Ceaușescu, although during those times, people in Romania did not think about it that way. Then, many years after 1989, Levitt and Dubner claimed that Ceaușescu’s violent removal from power was caused by an unhappy, crime-prone generation born after the decree that limited abortion rights. First, to justify this statement, in the book’s introduction, Levitt and Dubner claim that the *Roe v. Wade* legislation in the United States (which protected women’s abortion rights) resulted in “the greatest crime drop in recorded history” (p. 6). They explain this nexus between natality and crime as follows:

Decades of studies have shown that a child born into an adverse family environment is far more likely than other children to become a criminal. The millions of women most likely to have an abortion in the wake of the *Roe v. Wade*—poor, unmarried, and teenage

mothers for whom illegal abortions had been too expensive or too hard to get—were often models of adversity. They were the very women whose children, if born, would have been much more likely than average to become criminal. But because of *Roe v. Wade*, these children *weren't* being born. This powerful cause would have a drastic, distant effect: years later, just as these unborn children would have entered their criminal primes, the rate of crime began to plummet. (Levitt & Dubner, 2005, p. 6)

Based on this inference, Levitt and Dubner then introduce an argument about the Romanian revolution of 1989. They state that, if solid abortion legislations help curb crime, then the reverse must be true: namely, a lack thereof will result in a surge in crime. Subsequently, they argue that the unwanted children born because of Ceaușescu's Decree 770 of 1966 had “particularly miserable lives” and that the “cohort of children born after the abortion ban . . . would also prove much more likely to become criminals” (Levitt & Dubner, 2005, p. 118). Moreover, pointing out that Ceaușescu was the only Communist leader killed violently, they stress that “it should not be overlooked that his demise was precipitated in large measure by the youth of Romania—a great number of whom, were it not for his abortion ban, would have never been born at all” (p. 119). However, I find this argumentation to be a gross neglect of consideration of larger societal, political, and economic factors, which in fact always shape complex social movements such as revolutions. The connection they establish here between violent crime and unwanted children may hold true in the U.S. society they are more familiar with—where systemic racism, segregation, and economic inequality set forth the conditions for crime—but not when discussing sociopolitical movements in Eastern Europe.

However, as interesting as Levitt and Dubner's argument may be in explaining crime rise and fall in certain societies, it is problematic to imply that violent crime and revolutions (violent

or not) are comparable, especially when at play are various power structures that manifest in many ways in highly divergent societies. Violent crime is different in the United States and Romania because of gun culture; revolutions and crime are hardly comparable even in terms of violence; and social, political, and economic conditions play different roles in crime and social movements. Neglect of circumstances of other cultures seems, however, to be prevalent, and it may be the result of a lack of educational emphasis on global issues.

First, in the U.S. society, crime and violence are significantly linked with guns. Indeed, it is well-known that the United States holds an unparalleled position in the world with respect to gun culture and laws, and that these have a strong association to crime if we consider the number of personal firearms owned per capita, public place shootings, and violent crime involving a gun, in general. Therefore, it is flawed from the start to compare the crime rates or the propensity to violence between such a society and one in which guns were practically nonexistent among the population.

Secondly, I posit that the majority of sociopolitical movements—from those in 1968 in France to the 1989 Tien An Men Square revolt in China to name a few recent ones—are initiated by people who understand the historical importance of the moment when these occur. Thus, although hard to quantify or prove statistically, it is fair to state that the engine behind the Romanian 1989 revolution may have consisted of people generally informed on the sociopolitical matters of the time. Although the communist regime responded with repressive measures and even tried to antagonize different social strata in those times when they brought factory workers to intimidate the students, as class warfare had always employed in the past, in the end people of all social classes fraternized in opposing the regime. The purpose of a revolt or revolution is not to perpetrate violence in itself, but indeed to attempt regime change.

The revolt started in Romania's western city of Timișoara, where on December 15 the Securitate (Romanian Secret Police) repressed peaceful protesters at the evacuation of reformed Romanian-Magyar priest Laszlo Tokes, whom the regime tried to silence. Undoubtedly, all generations and social classes participated in the 1989 Revolution, but I posit that most of those who took part in the 1989 Romanian Revolution were definitely not the unwanted children of poor families in crime-ridden social strata. As far as the "decreței" generation, it can be inferred that it was the educated youth who took part in the revolt as they would have been more informed about the Berlin Wall changes in Eastern Europe. We should remember that the government controlled the media and the information, and thus, most people did not know about current events outside the country.

The higher education students of the baby-boomer generation would have been, in fact, the most competitive and the best representatives of their generation. First, the process of entering a university program was extremely selective in Communist Romania and significantly different than the U.S. experience. The process was driven by the fact that the government decided the number of students accepted in universities each year, and this was done first based on the economic needs of the country with a planned political economy (the well-known 5-year plan) and secondly, on the fact that the government had to provide all university students with a job upon graduation. Although education was tuition-free because all institutions (including higher education ones) were government-owned, these youth came generally from solid families with education ambitions for their children and with the proper means to pay for their living expenses in big cities, at a time when holding a job while attending universities was not possible for full-time students. These circumstances accounted for a competitive selective process that

resulted in the development of successful students who had the necessary intellectual abilities and the means to succeed in that sociopolitical system.

Therefore, I posit that the Romanian 1989 Revolution was not initiated mainly by unwanted youth living in broken families, as Levitt & Dubner (2005) imply, or by those living in orphanages and in the streets, which does not mean that those segments of population did not take part in the events. Levitt & Dubner's (2005) argumentation seems to neglect these historical conditions and the specifics of the sociopolitical system in Romania at that time, which played a more important role in the social movement than a simple propensity to crime of a population segment. The revolutionaries were mostly people who were connected to the social, economic, and political situation of the country, who were cognizant of the larger Eastern European context at the time. At the very least, people who may have lacked the political knowledge of the situation outside of Romania were still discontent with the regime and its oppressive measures and wanted change, whether radical or limited.

By the December 1989 Revolution in Romania, the Berlin Wall had recently fallen (November), and other regimes in the region were reforming under the pressure of peaceful anti-communist demonstrators. Despite the Romanian communist regime's censorship efforts, the most progressive people in the country found ways to inform themselves of the changes in Eastern Europe, even though the communist media censored that information from Romanians by controlling the media. Therefore, the mostly "unwanted" children of the decree, who lived in orphanages or in the street and lacked the education necessary to comprehend the historical moment of 1989, could have not been at the forefront of this historical and politically charged movement.

Third, and most importantly, Levitt and Dubner overlook factors that explain how and why revolutions take place. They fail to differentiate between social movements and violent crime in society, especially in what regards their causes and consequences. It is significant that the violence of the Romanian revolution was not perpetrated in equal measure by the protesters as by the governmental forces of repression because the latter had guns and killed over 1,000 people across the country within a couple of weeks. Ceaușescu was indeed ruthlessly executed after a summary and flawed trial, but his executioners were not the people who revolted in the streets, nor were they part of the generation born as a result of the restrictive abortion Decree 770 of 1966. Ceaușescu's trial was staged by an older generation that made up the second echelon of the communist power, led at the time by another Communist Party member, Ion Iliescu. He thus consolidated his power and in the following years quenched the initial ideals of the revolt and hindered the needed reforms to take the country out of its situation. In fact, it has been largely argued that the ideals of the Revolution have been delayed by those who seized power in the aftermath of 1989. As such, the generation Levitt and Dubner discuss has largely felt defeated first by experiencing the violence of the regime against it, and later by the years of procrastination in implementing the changes demanded during the revolution. This is the exact opposite of what authors Levitt and Dubner are set to prove in their book.

Conversely, I trace the violence of the Romanian 1989 revolution back to the regime's overall violent practices that accompanied impoverishing policies for several decades that culminated with the rationing of most food items. These policies would have had a stronger influence on people's decisions to act for a regime change than growing up in a dysfunctional family—except of course if one wants to see the Romanian government for the dysfunctional family that it was. Had Levitt and Dubner considered the larger societal, political, and economic

factors that shape complicated social movements, such as revolutions and mass revolts, they would have not used the example of Ceaușescu's execution to illustrate their theory. Violent crime and unwanted children are not necessarily the propagating engine in sociopolitical movements.

In short, Levitt and Dubner's connection between children born in the absence of a law that legalizes abortion, on the one hand, and the sociopolitical, economic, and historical reasons why revolutions occur, on the other hand, is an example of a fallacious argument. Their analysis of violence in the context of the 1989 Romanian revolution disregards the more probable causation that exists in the larger social context, and in so doing, these authors fail to acknowledge viable alternatives in their argumentation. Most importantly, the violence associated with crime is not the same as the violence taking place in times of revolutions, when it aims at ideological and epistemological change.

We Learn for the Present

Only by making sense of the past can we better comprehend the present and improve upon it. The present is a time of acute polarization of thought and political divisiveness in the United States, when the extremes fight for supremacy in politics and society to the detriment of the moderate middle or the political center that has been preponderant in Western liberal democracies since the end of World War II. We should conceptualize the current political rhetorical context through the analysis of how political practices and discourses were employed in the past to justify political and economic actions. Therefore, knowing more about how the non-democratic regimes in history function becomes critical in understanding the present.

Moreover, the new debates ushered into the rhetorics of the public space in the last few years—including those in the digital sphere of the various social media—often contain highly

loaded terms such as *socialism, communism, concentration camps, fascism, authoritarianism,* and alike. These terms often mean different things for different people, and also in different countries or sociopolitical contexts. Furthermore, they come with a baggage, and they need to be unpacked if we are to make political dialog productive. As educators, we can teach students to practice critical thinking through historical and experiential lenses.

Concepts travel without boundaries through time and space, take on new meanings, leave traces behind them, and indeed change significantly. As Mieke Bal (2002) explains in her book *Traveling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*, concepts “distort, unfix, and inflect the object”; they are “flexible,” and indeed, “[i]f well thought through, they offer miniature theories, and in that guise, help the analysis of objects, situations, states, and other theories” (p. 22). Bal’s project is to show that “the travelling nature of concepts is an asset rather than a liability” (p. 25). However, I argue that, without a pedagogy that teaches history through a rhetorical lens, the unchecked import of concepts—and even slogans—can become liabilities for the present. As an example of a slogan charged with historical context, I offer the recently resurfaced slogan “America First,” which initially may sound as a simple declaration of patriotism. Those more informed, however, would have known that the United States used this slogan during World War II to justify the refusal to allow in the United States Jewish refugees who were fleeing Europe’s fascist threat and concentration camps. Historian Eric Rauchway (2017) links the slogan to the Third Reich’s fascist dictum “Deutschland über alles” (n.p.). This example shows that concepts, terms, and slogans can travel within the same national space but within different historical periods. A population educated in the history of its country can learn from the past for the benefit of the present and as such will be able to compare what is specific or transferrable in a political slogan.

Because they are fluid, when concepts travel through geopolitical spheres, they build up their own history. One can learn from world or regional history, and one can learn from the history of concepts. This helps with the understanding of, for example, propaganda used in the Soviet Union/Russia in the past and the present, such as the demonization of the “Other” (be it the immigrant, racial, sexual, or political Other) or terms newer to the U.S. public discourse, such as “enemy of the people” and “deep state.” Imported and sometimes translated from other past or present contexts, these rhetorical practices bring with them imbedded meanings that can escape the uninformed.

It is important to understand that propaganda practices changed over time. Thus, in late communism, it included self-gratulatory messages or the self-affirmation of the single party. To exemplify, in the beginning, Stalin talked about eliminating enemies and used this propaganda to justify the persecution of certain social and professional groups. Then, at the Soviet Union’s Communist Party’ Congress of 1938, Stalin declared all enemies defeated—a turning point in the use of propaganda. Stalin rewrote history, destroyed older books, and published a “new official history” of the Communist Party at the end of the “superpurge” that had annihilated a generation of Soviet intellectuals (Arendt, 1962, p. 342). This development functioned similarly in the entire communist bloc, although with different timelines, in that it followed the model of enemy-bashing before resorting to self-affirmation and declarations of enemy defeat. Furthermore, since my focus is on rhetoric, I agree with Cezar M. Ornatowski’s (2010) analysis of the communist rhetoric in Poland, where he explains the relation between rhetorics and regimes. He does it by identifying discursive features such as the use of the pronoun “we” and the “totalizing category of ‘one enemy,’” and the forced mass identification inherent in communist rhetorics (pp. 345-

348). Such a rhetorical practice in fact divides the population, despite claims at unification or a sense of belonging.

With the advent of the post-Soviet Russian propaganda, which is presently at play in political discourse world-wide, new slogans have been ushered into the public and political sphere within the last few decades, particularly with the help of social media and its unprecedented reach in various groups. As an example, the so-called “deep state” is a phrase employed in the U.S. political discourse that rings the same as the term “the parallel state” used in some Eastern European states and which is often invoked in order to disrupt the status quo. Politicians use it to stir sentiments of distrust of institutions, authority, and government, which may fit better with the countries going through a transition from communism. However, it seems out of place in the consolidated democracies of the West. While we think of Soviet propaganda as having been created and disseminated in communist regimes (historically considered of the far-left on the political spectrum), post-Soviet Russian propaganda is mostly disseminated in the present by far-right groups in the West and by Russia-sympathizers in Eastern Europe. Employing a pedagogy that teaches history through a rhetorical lens instructs students on how to discern the historical meaning of concepts used to persuade in political discourses. Therefore, teaching with a curriculum that includes issues of totalitarian regimes would be beneficial in educating the youth for the present and the future.

We Learn for the Future

Next, when we teach the past, we may be able to help our students identify, unpack, and combat misconceptions in the present discursive environment. This becomes even more significant particularly in relation with issues that pertain to ideology-informed political terms that we consider as being specific to the left and the right in today’s U.S. sociopolitical public

space. Ideas that belong to the realm of the political thought may in fact be historically different when applied to non-democratic societies. Terms such as *minority rights*, *personal freedoms*, inclusion versus exclusion, *government control* versus *liberalism*, and *economic development* are terms that ring differently against various social, economic, and political backdrops because of specific local circumstances that imbue them with different meanings.

Moreover, various concepts have recently entered ordinary language through the means of the increasingly ubiquitous social media. Here, people of various ages and backgrounds interact with each other, in large numbers, even when they lack the necessary expertise in discussing theoretical terms they claim to understand. Consequently, concepts change or are appropriated by certain groups that perpetuate them in order to affect the political discourse. A consequence of the proliferation of discursive engagement in social media is that, despite the appearance of conversation, most people tend to converse largely with people who agree with them and thus exclude those who disagree.

One of the first stages of totalitarian propaganda is represented by exclusion and monolog—characteristics that increase over time in the absence of an authentic dialog; see, for instance, Haskins & Zappen's (2010) interpretation of Soviet posters through "totalitarian visual monologue" that uses a Bakhtian dialogic method of understanding the "pervasive totalitarian rhetoric of the Soviet state" (p. 326). After exclusion, during the next stage of an authoritarian discourse, the rhetoric of power creates a fake dialog with imagined opposing views; because opposition cannot exist, the power speaks for it by exaggerating and manipulating terms to fit the extreme ideology. An example is the slippery slope argument: when a political candidate proposes gun regulation and is misrepresented by the opponent as being in favor of the repeal of the Second Amendment; or when another candidate talks about curbing illegal immigration and

is misrepresented as being anti-immigration in general. This slippery slope argumentation is common to totalitarianisms of any kind, and it has lately become more evident in the public space, especially in social media, where small extremist groups engage in such practices that lead to a weaponization of concepts.

Consequently, in today's U.S. public discourse, which now prominently includes social media, ordinary language proliferates and becomes preponderant in comparison to theoretical language. However, as Bal (2002) shows, these discourses overlap (p. 27), and that is why we, as educators, must encourage students to be cognizant of this aspect. Furthermore, Ball explains the confusion that can result from the proximity of these types of discourses as follows:

[A] variety of concepts are used to frame, articulate, and specify different analyses. The most confusing ones are over-arching concepts we tend to use as if their meanings were as clear-cut and common as those of any word in any given language. Depending on the background in which the analyst was initially trained and the cultural genre to which the object belongs, each analysis tends to take for granted a certain use of concepts. Others may not agree with that use, or may even perceive it as not being specific enough to merit arguing about. Such confusion tends to increase with those concepts that are close to ordinary language. (pp. 25-26)

This excerpt explains why, as educators, we need to ensure that the reoccurrence of such terms as "concentration camps," "socialism," "communism," "ideology," "communism," "totalitarianism," or "political correctness" is taught and that they should be understood in their historical evolution, especially when they are borrowed from the contexts where they were originally created. Since concepts travel, such terms often get lost in translation and thus allow for their exploitation for political purposes in the political rhetorical sphere. More importantly, these

terms need to be contextualized to what they mean in relation to their apparent opposites, such as versions of “(late-)capitalism,” “imperialism,” “consumerism,” and “political pluralism,” which all in turn come with various degrees and nuances. By putting into conversation terms, notions, and concepts of apparent binarism, we grasp the unsuspecting nuances of their meanings.

The Moment of Kairos Is Today

In rhetoric, the notion of kairos refers to the opportune moment, the right time, or best circumstance to make a successful and persuasive argument. In other words, it is the opening to act with efficiency by simultaneously taking advantage of factors outside of the rhetorical situation in the process of persuasion, such as social and political circumstances that define the public space to which we are subjected. I now see a moment of kairos both in the way we engage in public rhetoric and in the necessity to focus on educating the younger generation in the history of terms specific to political extremes as they are increasingly more present in the public and political discourse. When the population is not informed about history, political demagogues exploit their moment in the spotlight for expediency.

Specific totalitarian rhetoric and practices may already seem remote to generations that have been sheltered from such historical experiences. This holds true for people who live in countries where it remains an exercise in imagination, but also for those who live in the very countries where their parents went through such times. Pedagogical curricula should teach more about how totalitarian regimes rise to power and develop over time, about how populations react to slowly losing their civil rights, and about what people do to resist non-democratic political practices. The lessons we recuperate, present, and teach to people who are more or less familiar with issues of the Second World function in excess of a simple exercise in memory; indeed, they keep the vagaries of memories in line, put order in the apparent chaos, and demystify

terminology, so that we can make better sense of this historical legacy. We need to resist the erasure of memory we would otherwise be condemned to undergo.

More precisely, our pedagogies can include issues pertaining to the former and present communist systems in various courses we create for any level, and I would say that we could become more involved even at the secondary education level⁴. The areas of the Second World and their sociopolitical systems are already studied in certain disciplines. However, in the humanities, including lower level writing or literature courses, we can incorporate lessons that would be useful in demystifying how certain realities of the past have shaped the present. More importantly, the nuances between various kinds of leftist and rightist ideologies should be examined, which is why it is important for students to understand the positionalities of different actors within power structures.

For instance, starting from the example above, where Levitt and Dubner talk about the 1989 revolt against Ceaușescu, we can invite students to generate and answer questions that may help them make sense of topics general or specific to certain sociopolitical areas. Can the 1989 Revolution in Romania be qualified as a self-empowering action on the part of the population? In that case, would it be considered of leftist ideology? Or, conversely, was it a right-wing inspired movement because it wanted a change from socialism to capitalism? Should we see the movement as a reclaiming of democratic (and advocating for actual) equality that the regime parted with over time which resulted in a privileged class? Knowing that the population revolted against the regime's impoverishing policies and political oppression, do the tenets of the left and the right hold? Furthermore, while we think of the unions in the United States as being a

⁴ I personally go to middle schools in the places I find myself living (and I have moved a lot since my arrival to the United States in 1997) and talk about my experience growing up in Communist Romania. The interest is there, and students are always grateful for the lecture.

symptom of the left, do students know that communism was brought down by the Solidarity Union in Poland? Is it possible to discern between left and right within the same event? Our pedagogies and curricula could incorporate readings about these controversial issues in order to problematize the apparent misconceptions held by the population at large.

A pedagogy that is inclusive of totalitarian topics, both communist and fascist, can only benefit the U.S. higher education in that it would help dispel misunderstandings about the left and right political orientations as they manifest in other parts of the world. This is an effort in which we have to engage if we want to prepare students for present and future political debates, and for being informed voting citizens participating in the ever-changing society we live in. The present moment is even more charged with significance in relation to such issues because of the generational and political divisiveness we have been experiencing in the United States and the global political arena that is in continuous flux.

Conclusion

This article is, therefore, an invitation to educators in higher education to engage in interdisciplinary ways with post/communist methodologies and pedagogy, whether in rhetorical, historical, literary, or other ways. This can be done in the various fields they teach in, and with the tools at their disposal. Many scholars and instructors already use such curricula and methods, and there is an increasing interest in academia to welcome such scholarship, now that some time distances us from the historical period of Eastern European communism. The implications of not knowing about the Second World and the Cold War for higher education curricula cannot be emphasized enough, especially in light of the continuous divisive political rhetoric inundating the public space in the United States lately. As educators, we hope our work will bear fruit in the short and the long term, for the betterment of the public discourse we are all subjects to.

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