

Pre-workshop comment

ALEXANDER KIOSSEV

My perspective on the field

I came into the field of cultural memory studies, driven by my interests in everyday history of socialism, autobiographical research and narratology. The traditions of philosophical and literary autobiographical research are old, well known and complex – I will mention here only some major names of scholars who addressed in various writings the paradoxes of auto-biographical self-narration: Wilhelm Dilthey, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Viktor Frankl, Jean Starobinski, Philippe Lejeune, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Paul Ricœur, Pierre Bourdieu etc. Using this tradition reflectively and selectively, I am trying to develop specific analytical instruments as a tool for the interpretation of post-socialist memoirs and autobiographies. My intention is to gain critical distance from an already established research perspective toward socialist everyday life – the so called 'revisionist paradigm' (represented by scholars such as Sheila Fitzpatrick, Robert C. Tucker, Ronald G. Suny, Moshe Lewin, Gail Warshofsky; more recently also by Steven Kotkin, Vera S. Dunham, Ulf Brunbauer and others). Recently similar interesting trends have also appeared in historiography, sociology, anthropology and cultural studies – in research areas focused on socialist consumerism, socialist popular or life-style culture and on oral history. All these revisionist tendencies presuppose that there is certain level of 'normal' everyday life, consumerist practices, entertainment, human relationships, etc., 'hidden' beneath the surface of the totalitarian ideology or somehow 'outside' the official state and party life. Therefore, sometimes unintentionally, these trends contribute to a kind of normalization of totalitarian communism – which, in my opinion, needs political resistance and scholarly counter-arguments.

In these frames my personal efforts are focused instead on the supposed 'normality', rather on the principal distortions and pathologies of socialist everyday life. What interest me most, are the distorted structuration of life and career paths in the everyday context. In the post-socialist condition they result in hindered (if not blocked) functions of memory, reflected in the narrative anomalies of post-socialist memoirs and autobiographies.

Thus, my perspective on the field of cultural memory research is not general, but a partial and selective one: what I am interested in are the mnemonic and rhetorical forms and written genres of post-socialist 'biographizations' (on the term 'biographization,' see Marotzki, W.2004). The general question is whether the distorted collective post-socialist memory is in condition to assure useful narrative forms (narrative repertoires, collective schemes), capable of producing coherent biographical links between personal past, present and future; furthermore, whether they are capable (or not) of ensuring successful (acceptable for the individual) structuration of a meaningful and socially recognizable personal life paths.

The problem of identification, described above, leaves open the more general question about the possible relationships between 'biographization' and other forms of social memory. Biographization has important relations to official and institutionalized versions of history, yet it also has links to various other memory forms: non-voluntary, affective, performative, bodily etc. memories. This complex and relational network needs serious further study: what one can say in advance is that 'biographization' is an 'in-between' phenomenon; a kind of mediator between official and non-official memories. It is a semantic and narrative construct invested with social validity and recognition (thus, it belongs to the important collective schemes of memory: Maurice Halbwachs). At the same time it is something individual and very intimate – not only acceptable, but very much needed by individuals who always use and misuse the collective schemes to tell the stories of their own lives, diversifying and adopting them in accordance to their own multiple perspectives. Yet, 'biographization' also

functions in some contexts as a filter for certain unacceptable aspects of individuals' non-official experiences and memories. Thus, what deserve a special attention are the complex relationships between 'biographization', socialization, accepted or contested narrative repertoires, identity building, remembering, suppressing (in the Freudian sense) and forgetting.

The current post-socialist situation is especially appropriate for such an approach. The last ten years have seen a boom in publishing personal 'life stories' and 'memories' (biographies, autobiographies, memoirs and oral stories) in Eastern Europe. All of them pretend to tell the reader '*wie es eigentlich gewesen*' ('how it actually was,' to use Ranke's famous phrase) – that is, to reveal the very truth about 'real' socialism. Paradoxically enough, this claim is made in a post-socialist atmosphere of mistrust and suspicion where 'conspiracy theories' are rife. In some particular cases there are additional reasons for this atmosphere – for example, in the Bulgarian context one still lacks access to the former secret police files and to some parts of the former Communist Party archives.

In contrast to the considerable number of published self-narrations, there are many people in the post-communist countries who cannot really understand the changes that have taken place in their own lives. Having no clear conception of the past, no orientation in the present and little hope about the future (most of them are already advanced in age), they have difficulty in coping with their own life paths. They painfully experience the total loss of their previous living conditions, being incapable of working through (both in the sense of the Freudian *Trauerarbeit* or of Adorno's *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) the difficult legacies of socialism and their personal 'living a lie' (V. Havel, 1994) during socialism.

All this create a very special and contradictory regime of post-socialist memory and a special politics of writing memoirs and oral life story telling. I believe that one should interpret its contradictions as a (social) symptom. The over-production of autobiographies, which contrasts with a collective disorientation and lack of social trust, is symptomatic of one objective 'condition of impossibility': the impossibility of meaningful life narration. Hindered 'biographization' is one of the main problems of the socialist legacy both on a personal level and on a social level.

The truth of memory: fact & fiction

As far as the research of 'biographization' is concerned, I believe that the rigid dichotomy between truth and 'non-truth' is rather counterproductive here. It would be more relevant to pay attention to another problem: the social acceptance and recognition of valid life paths. To put it in other words, this is the problem of paying respect to the meaningful lives of others; of investing these life paths and life self-narrations with social trust (which is, as multiculturalism and the social philosophy of recognition would claim, crucial for their identity building (see Charles Taylor, A. Goodman, Tzvetan Todorov, Axel Honneth, Paul Ricœur)). And my specific question would be: do this public trust and respect exist in the post-socialist conditions; which life paths are recognized as 'valid' – and which not?

Memory, space and trauma

The traditional official monuments, museums and *lieux de mémoire* of communism and post-communism have little relevance in respect to personal biographizations. In each individual case of biographies or autobiographies the researcher has to investigate instead the 'personal geography' of the concrete memory, investing hermeneutical efforts in the specific, sometimes even idiosyncratic '*lieux de mémoire*' of the concrete autobiography. Nevertheless, the post-socialist condition privileges one particular – and to a certain extent perverse – *lieu de mémoire*. This is the reading-hall of the archives of the former secret police. According to the new Bulgarian law (similar laws exist in all post-socialist countries), each individual can read in this special and institutionalized site their own secret

file – another type of 'biography' or 'life story'. The archive reading of the 'secret self' – ie the confrontation with this hidden and alienated (official or alternative?) version of one's own life story – may produce devastating and traumatic effects. When the personality clashes with a totally different, ideologized and deformed narrative of their own life, this *deprives them of life authorship, making their own narrative efforts also very problematic.*

This could be instrumental in gaining a general insight into the relationship between memory and trauma – it may help us to see that the trauma is not an unmediated legacy from the past but rather a combination between past fragment and post-effect. According to J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis trauma is a fragment from the past experience which cannot be meaningfully integrated into this experience: it is produced in the efforts of the memory to integrate this fragment in the 'whole Self' – and in consequence this reintegration and failure of socially valid representations produces the traumatic effect. The memory and the narrative are not capable of producing 'normal' meaning out of these 'empty' moments, which retroactively transforms them into painful unbearable points of fixation.

Memory and the body One of the important and poorly elaborated problems is the relationship between biographization and bodily memory. Affective and bodily memory is hardly translatable into verbal and narrative forms – yet, these kind of memories by no means remain socially unmediated: more research is needed about the forms and channels of this extra-verbal mediation. There is a further political problem, too: left outside verbal and narrative reflection, bodily and affective memories can easily undergo political or commercial manipulation. The latter can be illustrated by the phenomenon of 'soc-nostalgia' in the area of post socialist consumerism in the former Eastern bloc countries (best exemplified by the movie *Good bye, Lenin*). The complex relationship between various types of memories, as well as between remembering, forgetting, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* and identity building open the space for debates on the 'ethics of memory' as well.

Position paper

My topic refers to a special, in a way liminal aspect of cultural memory.

1. The first case: Veselin Branev, a Bulgarian memoir writer, who in 2007 published *The Man under Observation: Memories provoked by documents*. This book was based on a first reading of his secret files – he had been the object of secret observation for many years, by different departments of the Secret Police – consisting of four volumes of 800 pages each. The first effect was the alienation and de-semantization of the life path: the meaning of your life path is not in your own possession, you have no command of your life project, you cannot tell even the story of your life, because you don't know it – some secret documents 'know' it, your memories are provoked by this secret biography. This memory is provoked by material remnants but very different ones from Proust's *madeleine*.
2. The second case: once again Branev went to the archives to check some details for the second corrected edition of his book. When he asked for the files – he received not four but eighteen volumes of 700-800 pages each. The result was total frustration: do I know my life? what new memories could be provoked? what is the exact and the ultimate number of the secret files?
3. The situation of hindered biographisation. Biographisation = the narrative creation of coherent biographical links between the personal past, present and future. It is a special liminal case of personal memory which goes beyond the phenomenon of memory; it combines in a coherent narrative form non-voluntary, voluntary memory with a life project for the future and not only self remembering but also the hermeneutical auto-processes of self-understanding, self-interpreting, sometimes self-ideologizing, creating a coherent self-image in biographical time.

4. Branev's case demonstrates that socialism has led to a distortion and pathologies of this biographisation process. Two competing narratives: 1) the secret files in which the meaning of your life is narrated from the point of view of power, by means of the 'wooden language' of communist bureaucracy; 2) your own attempt to counter-narrate – but sometimes your counter-narration falls in the void because you don't know the 'official' narrative, you have no access to your secret biography. The panoptical effect deprives the biographical self-narration of authorship – this is the first condition of impossibility of biographical self-narration.
5. The second condition of impossibility of biographical self-narration: in the post-socialist period there is no shared and mutually recognized narrative repertoire for biographical narration. The main unjust institution of socialism – the dominant totalitarian public language, and the empty automatized ideological code penetrating all spheres of life – has collapsed and lost its meaning-producing function. What is left is a Babel of various idiosyncratic idiolects, private languages with no mutual recognition. What is lacking is the shared repertoire of biographical narrative forms.
6. This post-communist legacy – the chaotic, uncontrolled multiplication of unofficial private languages, codes and models – attacks the very condition of biographical narration: shared categorizations and evaluations of acts, actors and plot events. Narration as social act, including the narration of a life story – becomes impossible.
 - No clear semantics of social actions – non-existent lexicon of shared meaning and motives. No shared ethical codes of behaviour.
 - No shared semantic of models of agency and of keeping the temporal identity of agency (who is who in the biographical plot, who remains faithful to themselves).
 - No shared semantic of plots: the problematic 'anagnorisis' – the point of 'revealing the truth' in the plot structure.
 - Mistrust in the act of narration: what are the motives behind it? Centrifugal models of understanding and interpretation.

The post-socialist condition entails a struggle for the dominant code of narration of socialism and the life paths in socialism. History is written from the point of view of victors – but who they are is not clear.