

GUIDO FRANZINETTI

ROUND TABLE: **REMEMBERING COMMUNISM**

The papers presented by Alexander Etkind and Karol Sauerland would require an extensive discussion. In this context I will limit myself to a few footnotes to their discussion.

1. In a Russian-oriented discussion, it is surely appropriate to start with an *anekdot* (which I owe to the late Wojciech Jekiel, a colleague of professor Sauerland at Warsaw University).

In 1967, in Paris, a French journalist goes to interview a Russian princess, who has lived in exile since the Bolshevik revolution. He asks her at one point: “Which was the best year of your life?”. She answers: “1917”. The journalist is bewildered. He says: But how is that possible? Your family was destroyed, you had to go into exile...”. She answers: “You fool! In 1917 I was twenty years old!”.

What does this *anekdot* prove? It proves that all memory, even the most traumatic, reflects first and foremost one’s subjectivity. In the case of Communism, this means that the life experience of Communists (and, even more, of ex-Communists) conditions one’s reading of Communism.

Etkind refers to Friedländer’s intimation to resist the temptation of domesticating disbelief (Friedländer 2007, xxvi). Etkind points out that “Making sense of the memory of the past does not require sharing its weird presumptions”. On this point I would like to simply refer to a remark by Trevor Blackwell and Jeremy Seabrook, questioning E. P. Thompson’s use of the category of experience: “Of all things, experience cannot be inherited” (Blackwell and Seabrook 1986, 28).

Ernest Gellner made a related point:

We do not perform the acts we perform because we believe that certain things had happened: we believe that certain crucial events had happened because we do what we do. England does not have a great landed aristocracy because of the Battle of Hastings. The Battle of Hastings is invoked because England has a great landed aristocracy (Gellner 1987, 63).

In other words, the present explains the past, rather than vice-versa. This also applies to the memories of Communism. The current wave of *Ostalgie*, of nostalgia of Communism, all over Europe, is an illustration of this mechanism.

2. Sauerland's paper is a lucid argument in favour of finally presenting the course of Kurt Sauerland's life "as it really was". This expression seems to consciously echo Ranke's famous dictum, on depicting history "*wie es eigentlich gewesen*". This is by no means an obvious point, and it should be used as a starting-point for a truly historical discussion (and remembrance) of Communism as it really was (as opposed to the individual – inevitably sentimental – memories of it). Eric Gordy – a specialist of Serbian history – has argued that the opposite of memory is not forgetting: it is incoherence (Gordy 2014; see also Gordy 2013). This incoherence is precisely the stage at which many memories of Communism currently are, in many European contexts, not only in the Eastern part.
3. I will conclude with another anecdote, appropriately enough. It was a story told at the time at which the Chinese Communist leadership proclaimed that "Imperialism is a paper tiger" (and therefore it could be defeated, at whatever human cost). Mao and Khrushchev go on a hunting spree. Suddenly, a tiger jumps in front of them. Khrushchev promptly shoots and kills the tiger. He then says: "Thank goodness I shot it in time!". Mao answers: "What tiger?"

The moral of the *anekdot* is the following: victims can relax. Communism happened in 'an absence of mind'. It never happened, in fact. People who still talk about 'Communism' are deluded. They are speaking a dead language.

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