

Vladimir Tismăneanu and “The Devil in History”

Livia SEICIUC

liviafeidaros@yahoo.com

“Ștefan cel Mare” University of Suceava (Romania)

The title chosen by professor Tismăneanu for his study, probably suggested by the Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski, whom he quotes on page 17, does not allow us to accept – albeit in a philosophical idealist manner – the Marxist utopia, a phenomenon that seems to have fascinated many outstanding intellectuals of the nineteenth or early twentieth century, during the interwar and postwar periods, as a response to anti-Semitism and fascist eugenics. Even though some reviewers have associated a theological vision to this approach, we can only regard this aspect as a metaphor in pertinent antithesis to the secular religions of those dictatorships, in which fascist Messianism and Stalinist *egocracy* (pp. 54-72¹, with the mention specified by the author that this concept belongs to Solzhenitsyn) represent a secular eschatological vision (pp. 58-78).

The Devil, in Tismăneanu’s vision, acquires the value of a concept, encompassing in its specific area certain concepts he frequently refers to, such as: violence, crimes against humanity, Holocaust, Manichaeism, atrocities, ethnic cleansing, antisemitism, hatred, Gulag, concentration camps, and the examples could go on, inciting to ethical discernment, high moral values, firm attitude in denying and rejecting any possibility of “nostalgia” for the past regime, as it may risk to re-occur especially in the times of economic shortage we are living at present. Besides, according to the communist ideology, *the devil* was represented by “private property, the bourgeoisie, the priests, the kulaks” (p. 3)², and, for the Nazis it consisted in “the Jewish «vermin», «Judeo-Bolshevism», «Judeo-plutocracy» and Marxism” (p. 3)³.

Written initially in English, the book is meant for the Anglo-Saxon world, and it represents not only a political history lesson, but also a manifesto against the antidemocratic danger, an attempt to submit a pertinent testimony about the crimes against humanity committed by totalitarian regimes, which testimony is supported by numerous assertions and researches of renowned specialists in the areas of political history, philosophy, sociology, such as Hannah Arendt, Tony Judt, Robert C. Tucker, Kolakowski, etc.

In the six chapters, the author accomplishes a gradual transition from the establishment of the two major types of dictatorships of the twentieth century (the fascist and communist-inspired ones) until their dissolution, under the influence of postwar social and political changes, and those that occurred behind the Iron Curtain. In the first chapter, *Radicalism utopic și dezumanizare (Utopian Radicalism and Dehumanization)*, the author starts from the utopian origins of totalitarianism built on a genuine populist mytho-

¹ The quotes in the text are excerpted from the original English version, Tismăneanu, Vladimir, *The Devil in History. Communism, Fascism, and Some Lessons of the Twentieth Century*, University of California Press, London, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2012, and the pages correspond to that edition; when two different pages are cited, the first one corresponds to the English version, and the second one corresponds to the Romanian version, Tismăneanu, Vladimir, *Diavolul în istorie. Comunism, fascism și câteva lecții ale secolului XX*, Humanitas, București, 2013.

² In the Romanian version: “[...] proprietatea privată, burghezie, preoți, culaci” (p.17).

³ “[...] plaga evreiască, iudeo-bolșevismul, iudeo-plutocrația și marxismul” (p.17).

logy, and makes a first comparison between the social premises that favored the establishment of the fascist and communist regimes.

The chapter *Pedagogia diabolică și (i)logica stalinismului (Diabolical Pedagogy and the (Il)logic of Stalinism)*, proposes, as a novelty, the Stalinist experiment of ideological education and rehabilitation applied in the majority of the countries that fell under the communist regime, supporting his exposé with texts from the archives of the *Securitate*, letters and forced confessions. It also brings to attention a particular type of anti-semitism, especially the postwar Stalinist one, and it is interesting to note that, in contradiction to German antisemitism, the Soviet one did not involve the racial elimination of the Jews, but their agglutination in a uniform and ideological nation.

In the third chapter, *Secolul lui Lenin (Lenin's Century: Bolshevism, Marxism, and Russian Tradition)*, the author establishes the criteria for a comparison between the communist and the fascist dictatorships, and also the ideological differences between the two remarkable periods of the communist history, Leninism and Stalinism.

From the gradual-ideological perspective, this chapter might be a climactic point of the research, as subsequently, in the chapter *Dialectica dezvrăjirii (Dialectics of De-senchantment: Marxism and Ideological Decay in Leninist Regimes)*, “the disintegration of authoritarian regimes of Leninist persuasion” (p.124)⁴ would occur.

In the chapter *Ideologie, utopie și adevăr (Ideology, Utopia and Truth: Lessons from Eastern Europe)*, Tismăneanu suggests a reflection both upon the fascination with the Marxist utopia, even after the dissolution of communism, and upon the survival of a political religion, represented by the “Stalinist gnosis” (p.177)⁵, which was characterized by the degradation and manipulation of the individual.

The last chapter, *Malaise și resentiment (Malaise and Resentment: Threats to Democracy in Post-Communist Societies)* projects, as a conclusion, the real danger of the return, in the present social plan, of the totalitarian forms of government, such as “competitive authoritarianism” (p. 209)⁶, which falls upon the deficiency of the civic consensus and the political distrust affecting the post-communist countries.

From a phenomenological point of view, we can consider that the work reveals that which is irreducible and essential, from the ideology / doctrine to the totalitarian social system and its consequences, within the comparison the author draws between the National Socialist and Stalinist regimes. Although the focus and the approach favor the analysis of the communist regime, especially Bolshevism and Stalinism, Tismăneanu is tempted to find basic elements that both systems, fascist and communist, share in common, rather than the distinctive features which differentiate them. This phenomenon finds its explanation in that Tismăneanu does not mean to “promote” or to highlight Holocaust as a dramatic consequence of Nazism, in the detriment of the victims of the Soviet Gulag camps and those in other communist countries, which were mentioned throughout the history only in the secondary plan – because of the hypermemory that Jews have maintained a long time with the intention of racist victimization – especially since the extensive research performed by the author, in order to escape the circumstances of the communist totalitarianism, has resulted in such works as: *The Archaeology of Terror* (1992), *The Ghost of Gheorghiu-Dej* (1995), *Stalinism for All Seasons: A Political History of Romanian Communism* (2003), etc. This is all the more admirable, since Tismăneanu himself is of a Semitic origin.

⁴ “dezintegrarea regimurilor autoritare de factură leninistă” (p.147).

⁵ “gnoza stalinistă” (p. 203).

⁶ “autoritarismul competitiv” (p. 237).

In this regard, we notice a statement that apparently conveys a degree of uncertainty regarding how the author wants to bring into focus the issue of the secularization of religion, whereof we can talk only in the case of Nazi Germany: “Fundamentally atheistic, both Communism and Fascism organized their political objectives in discourses of alleged emancipation operating as political religions meant to deliver the individual from the impositions of traditional morality and legality” (p. 3)⁷. At this level, these two régimes do not support comparisons or similarities. If in the case of communism we can speak about an outright atheism, supported ideologically by all the totalitarian systems of the same kind, even if some interpretations we consider abusive stipulate that the Party would represent a form of religion, in fascism there were various stages in assembling a mystical-religious context, from the de-Judaization of Christianity, to Hitler’s Messianism, and the attempt to create a specific religion full of mystical symbols and Northern mythology. The secularization of religion does not mean atheism. For example, “Mussolini describes fascism as a religious idea, and the politics of the régime as religious politics, since fascism started from the premise that man was in contact with the *volontà obiettiva* and thus received personality in a spiritual empire, the empire of his people”⁸.

But a really remarkable aspect that emerges from this research is the way it addresses fascist and communist dictatorships from the perspective of the dynamics of their establishment. Fascism – is it a revolution or a counterrevolution? The question emerges naturally, considering that Russian Bolshevism posed a socio-economic and political threat for the Western countries and that fascism offered a Bolshevik pretext for the establishment of a nationalist regime. The second question is obvious: the Stalinist communism – is it a revolution or a counterrevolution? It is only natural to think that after the atrocities of fascism, communism offered a counterpart solution. Reideologization of the masses in the spirit of Marxism spirit is due largely to fascism. Actually, the author wishes to emphasize that both Stalinism and National Socialism had many common elements including the removal of the bourgeoisie, which in Germany was represented by newly rich Jews: bankers, capitalists, landowners. So the revolutionary efforts of both dictatorships have materialized in a common purpose: “their joint offensives against liberal modernity” (p. 21)⁹.

Moreover, fascist ideology, claims the author, promotes a series of typical Marxist elements (pp. 21-36); at the same time, antimarxism is a central element of National Socialism. These statements are not contradictory as long as we distinguish between ideology and doctrine. As a response, we also find antisemitism on the communist side, since Stalin associated the Jews with the Mensheviks, and only those who gave up their Semitic identity and conformed to the ideology had the chance to be tolerated (pp. 83-98). Therefore, Tismăneanu promotes an interesting concept, that of national-Stalinism: “[...] Communism and Fascism can merge into a baroque synthesis. Communism is *not* Fascism, and Fascism is *not* Communism” (p. x)¹⁰, but have many common elements: racialization (p. x), which, in the case of Bolshevism, is exemplified by deportation, imprisonment, ethnic cleansing in the occupied territories of the USSR, but the author does

⁷ “Fundamental ateiste, atât comunismul, cât și fascismul și-au amenajat obiectivele politice în discursuri străbătute de o pretinsă emancipare, acționând ca religii politice menite să elibereze individul de obligațiile moralei și legalității tradiționale” (p.16).

⁸ Eric Voegelin, *Religiile politice*, Humanitas, București, 2010, p.141 (our translation).

⁹ “[...] ofensivele lor combinate împotriva modernității liberale” (p. 36).

¹⁰ “[...] comunismul și fascismul pot fuziona într-o sinteză barocă. Comunismul *nu* este fascism, iar fascismul *nu* înseamnă comunism” (p. 55).

not brings into question in his assertions fascist Arianism, which had the same result. Another common element is social Darwinism, materialized in biological determinism among the fascists, and in ideologically adaptive behavior among the Bolsheviks (p. 58).

Although the notions he operates with are bound to political history, in the attempt to delimitate the conceptual area Vladimir Tismăneanu professes an interdisciplinary approach, which follows a philosophical and psycho-social trajectory, based on a synthetic exposé of ideas excerpted from scientific works in various domains of research, with an appropriate informational contents, which offers its work multiple erudite ramifications. Besides, one of the novelties of this work consists in the approach of dictatorship as “radical social engineering” (p. 2)¹¹ generating ideological constructs which drift away from the originary doctrines in the context of dictatorship. In this line of thinking, syntagms such as “repressive ideocratic dictatorship” (p. 13)¹², referring to communism, and “consensus dictatorship” (p.13)¹³ defining Nazism, become authentic concepts, and their common area is “ideological state” (p. 6)¹⁴.

Another fundamental concept he operates with is that of the *escatologie seculară* as a radical vision upon the Marxist world (pp. 59-78). This is an aspect widely discussed in the chapter entitled *Secolul lui Lenin*, containing a comparative analysis of the two millenarisms; Stalinism promotes the concept of *Messianic class of history*, referring to the proletary revolution aiming for the end of the capitalist world and the installation of a perpetual regime which would radically change the destiny of humanity – *Bolshevism as political Messianism* –, so it emphasizes the eschatological significance of the Party (pp. 115-138).

Vladimir Tismăneanu also notes that in Bolshevik totalitarianism the natural duality self/ social being is ideologically annihilated through the complete dissolution of the self within the Party, a mechanism that he defines as *ideological absolutism* (p. 95-116). In fact, the emergence of the self has a complex trajectory on the axis proletariat-Party-leadership-egocracy, i. e. through referring the self to Stalin’s persona (p. 54-72).

In conclusion, Vladimir Tismăneanu examines the political history of the two dictatorships, the premises of their formation, the mechanisms leading to the instauration of the dictatorship in contradiction to the ethics of the originary ideology, the climactic moments of the two régimes and, finally, their failure, with a focus on the communist dictatorship and the beginning of the end in the countries behind the Iron Curtain. This research is useful for the scholars who want to understand the socio-political context of communism and rather exciting for any reader who needs a pertinent opinion and a minute analysis of those infamous times.

(Vladimir Tismăneanu, *Diavolul în istorie. Comunism, fascism și câteva lecții ale secolului XX*, Humanitas, București, 2013)

¹¹ “inginerie socială radicală” (p. 16).

¹² “dictatura represivă ideocratică” (p. 28).

¹³ “dictatura consensuală” (p. 28).

¹⁴ “statul ideologic” (p. 20).