RECYCLING ROMANIA'S COMMUNIST PAST AS AN ENTREPRENEURIAL PROJECT

Oancea Claudiu

Interdisciplinary School of Doctoral Studies, University of Bucharest, Romania

Abstract

This paper analyzes a series of recent entrepreneurship projects in Romania, whose activity centers on creating economic, social, and cultural value from artifacts created in socialist Romania. The paper takes into account the historical context of post-socialist Romania and the political, economic, and cultural changes which have created a proper context in which the socialist past would be turned into cultural and economic value, through private entrepreneurship projects. The analysis also takes into account such projects within the larger emergent entrepreneurial ecosystem, which has been bolstered by Romania's accession into the European Union. The paper relies on participant observation, personal oral history interviews, as well as on primary sources drawn from written and digital mass media, as well as social networks. It focuses on several case studies of entrepreneurship projects, such as Ferestroika, in Bucharest, and the Communist Consumer Museum, in Timișoara. The paper argues that while such projects are part of a larger entrepreneurial ecosystem, at a worldwide level, which relies heavily on retromania (I.e. the usage of past models for present and future projects), they also present several local specificities, as their contribution is not only economic, but nuances the ways in which younger generations interpret a communist past they never lived in reality.

Keywords: *entrepreneurship, post-socialist brands, post-communist memory, nostalgia, museum*

1. INTRODUCTION

The image of the communist past in post 1989 Romania has undergone several phases over a period of more than 30 years. These phases have been marked by political changes and economic crises, as well as by Romania's accession into the European Union and NATO, during the 2000s. At the same time, one can argue that there has not been a generally accepted discourse on Romania's communist past and that gaps have been created within society as well as within the Romanian political realm. While views in Romanian society over its communist past constitute a topic which is more difficult to tackle and which is highly dependent on generational transition, those within the political realm have shifted throughout the so-called transition period which arguably lasted until Romania's entry into the European Union, in 2007. The early 1990s were marked by two, diametrically opposed views. One was fiercely anticommunist and manifested a strong nostalgia for the interwar period, while also advocating recent-day European values and a pro-Western stance. This view was embraced by those political parties which represented the opposition during the first half of the 1990s and gained power from 1996 until 2000. It was this view which started the so-called privatization process, a first phase of making use of Romania's socialist heritage. The second view was prevalent politically during the first half of the 1990s and it was represented by the parties which held power during this period. While acknowledging the negative aspects of Romania's communist dictatorship, this second view sought to preserve the status of national economy and its reliance on the state as sole proprietor.

During the years 2000, the Romanian political spectrum adopted a much more unitary view on how the country should regard its communist past and what its main international political targets should be. The etatist stance was replaced with a general policy of continuing the privatization policies of the late 1990s and this ranged from major industrial complexes to national networks of distribution. Romania's entrance into the European Union in 2007 was greeted inside the country with high level of enthusiasm and expectations. These high expectations, coupled with the country's scandals of high level corruption, and the economic turbulence at the end of the 2000s have consecutively brought upon a resurgence in the level of euro-skepticism. The causes for this increasing mistrust of the European Union's capability of solving Romania's economic and social problems are manifold and one can argue that they encompass both internal and external factors, high level actors, as well as grass-roots

realities. While it is not the purpose of this paper to delve into such details, one should take into account the influence of such euro-skeptic views upon the nostalgic adherence to an idealized communist past, especially among younger generations, as they constitute a part of the target audiences for the entrepreneurial projects under scrutiny.

2. MEMORY AND PUBLIC MEMORY

Whenever tackling the issue of memory and the communist past in Eastern Europe, most approaches focus on two different directions. The first one deals with official collective memory: memoirs published by public intellectuals depicting the authoritarian rule of the communist regime, educational state programs aiming at teaching pupils about the economic and political actions undertaken before 1989, or even state sanctioned committees and institutes with the purpose of gathering evidence in order to condemn communism as an ideology. This was the case in 2006 with Presidential Commission for the Study of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania, formed in April 2006, by Romanian President Traian Băsescu. The findings of the Commission appeared in a report based on which President Băsescu officially condemned communism before the Parliament Assembly in December 2006. The report, which has been a controversial issue since its inception, was published in 2007 and it sparked numerous discussions in the Romanian public sphere (Mark 2010, 32-46). Such public debates also influenced private initiatives. For instance, in 2004 Romanian artist Gabriela Cristea held an exhibition, which focused on everyday life under communism. Entitled "Domestic Red", the exhibition centered on ideological aspects, as well as problems created by the communist legislation for ordinary citizens – for instance, an abortion kit was on display as part of the exhibition (Stan 2014, 220).The second deals with personal memories, narratives of ordinary and less-than-ordinary people who remember their own life experiences, usually through oral history interviews. These narratives are usually more diverse than the official discourses constructed officially, incorporating both traumatic experiences and nostalgia for certain aspects of the communist way of life. The two approaches have different channels of emission and different statuses of authority, but are interrelated in various ways. Official collective memory influences what people remember and what they remember in front of other people; narratives of ordinary people can accumulate and serve as evidence of a story different from the one projected from the top downward by the state.

Most historians or social scientists who deal with memory tend to compare the latter with history, to define it as being historically-conditioned and constructed, or to emphasize the difference between memory and history, the former consequently appearing as a reaction to the latter. Conceptualizing what he calls *lieux de mémoire*, Pierre Nora constructs a theoretical absolute opposition between memory and history, arguing that the "acceleration of history" has led to a "conquest and eradication" of memory by the former (Nora 1989, 7-8; Nora 1984, XIV-XVII). In a very literary, and sometimes vague style, Nora considers that memory is "affective and magical", "it nourishes recollections", it "installs remembrance within the sacred", it is "blind to all but the group it binds", "it is multiple", "collective, plural, and yet, individual", "it takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images and objects", finally adding that "memory is absolute" (Nora, 1989, 8-9) History, on the other hand, "belongs to everyone and to no one"; it "can only conceive the relative" (Nora, 1989, 8-9). Thus, "history is perpetually suspicious of memory, and its true mission is to suppress and destroy it" (Nora, 1989, 8-9).

In most cases for this comparison, Nora makes use of a highly ambiguous style, at times unnecessarily literary. One might wonder in what ways is memory absolute and how can this absoluteness be defined. Still, what needs to be taken into account is Nora division between memory as life, as subjectively perceived experience and history as a representation of the past, therefore as an intellectual construction, even though this distinction in itself raises numerous problems, as it disregards the intertwining and often interdependent relationships that bind history and memory, relations by which history is often a construction built on memory and memory is frequently influenced by official histories.

Susan A. Crane states the theoretical differences between the two concepts of collective memory and historical memory, claiming that they reside "in the decision of what to 'save'. History can save what has been personally lost, by preserving a collective representation of memory. Collective memory can preserve the memory of lived experience, in living experience, and sustain the loss of other memories. But morally speaking […] collective memory cannot sustain the loss of historical memory" (Crane, 1997, 1383). Other scholars have not taken the same approach of classifying several theoretical types of memory as opposed to history, or distinguishing between history and memory. They have rather attempted to focus on both the similarities and the differences between history and memory. For instance, Paul Thompson perceives the two concepts not as a stark dichotomy, but as aspects of the same thing (Thompson 2000, 215-216) Thompson argues for two different aspects of memory and of history: the personal and the collective, stating that each individual's history is based on his own memories, and that collective memory is based upon public history (Thompson 2000, 224). Although he is right to point out the interrelationship between history and memory – an observation that makes Pierre Nora's distinction to appear biased in its strive for absoluteness – Thompson fails to define concepts such as *public history*, or to indicate the means by which a personal history is constructed on personal memories only. This is caused by the fact that Thompson does not offer any clues to the interrelation between the memory of an individual and the social context in which the respective individual exists. Nevertheless, in these cases, memory is presented as a strictly intellectual construct, something that is structured in and acts through texts. Such texts refer only to the ideological aspect of the communist experience, creating an almost out-of-body, non-sensitive, abstract memory (Bast et al., 2018, 18-20).

3. REMEMBERING COMMUNISM AND CREATING VALUE IN POST-COMMUNIST ROMANIA – GENERAL ASPECTS

As already mentioned, the official condemnation of Romania's communist past in 2006 has had a considerable influence on the debates on communism in the Romanian public sphere. Furthermore, the Presidential Commission for the Study of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania continued its activity in different institutional forms throughout the 2000 and into the 2010s. Other state financed institutions continued several aspects of its inquiry, focusing especially on the crimes perpetrated by the communist regime. In the early to mid-2010s there were also public debates considering the establishing of state supported national museum dedicated to the crimes of the communist regime. All these initiatives were subject to political controversy and to fierce debates in the cultural public sphere.

While the Romanian Communist regime's official status and abuses were the subject of intense scrutiny for reasons that often had to do more with present-day political battles than with serving moral causes of the past, there was another form of recuperating and making use of the communist past, albeit one that was unofficial and strongly connected to aspects of everyday life. This form of nostalgia was part of a larger phenomenon, one which journalist Simon Reynolds has called "retromania" (Reynolds, 2011, 1-4), but which, nevertheless, had its own regional and local specificity. While initially it was more of a Romanian form of *ostalgie*, marked by generational change, the passing of time, it soon became a source of cultural and economic capital for various ventures and private entrepreneurs. Romanian entrepreneurs more or less copied models of such projects they encountered in foreign countries, but adopted them to local contexts. Based on participant observation and oral history interviews conducted over the past eight years, it can be argued that this was a typical case of demand that was followed by supply. An increasing level of autochthonism and resurgent nationalism in the contest of consumerism triggered a demand for former socialist brands, as well as for socialist cultural and everyday artifacts.

Apart from this, one should also mention another factor which has proven decisive in this brand resurgence. The entrance of Romania into the European Union in 2007 has also meant a significant increase in the number of foreign tourists and the emergence of a tourist market aimed at attracting international tourists with local, "Romanian" brands. This interest has gone beyond the area of "socialist heritage", including other aspects of Romanian national history as well, but it contributed to to the development of a local market dedicated to former socialist brands. As argued, this resurgence

included brands of everyday consumer products, ranging from alcoholic beverages to skincare products. In most cases, the revitalization of these brands proved to be a successful one and it allowed their marketing companies to further develop sub-brands based of the initial products. In such cases, the companies profited from the advantages of products that had already gained a cultural and social capital among older audiences, but presented an interest with younger audiences as well. This meant low expenses for PR and marketing campaigns, as well as usage of former employees who were already experienced and professionally trained in the manufacturing of such goods.

Thus, it can be argued that a series of entrepreneurs throughout the 2010s have taken advantage of a series of brands which either were created and established during the socialist period, or were remembered as part of a socialist legacy and integrated into a larger, nationalist one. As already seen, the issue of branding and the usage of brands provided these entrepreneurs with numerous advantages, both from the perspective of marketing and of manufacturing networks. Their clients have been numerous and diverse and included different generations, as well as different social class members. One observation should be made in this latter regard: while socialist brands were addressed to larger audiences, there were also new brands presented as pertain to the interwar or even prewar periods and their cost and branding made them rather exclusive to urban, middle-class consumers.

While such brands are numerous, for this paper the focus will be on two entrepreneurial projects which have made use of actual artifacts from the socialist period, with the purpose of creating not only economic, but also cultural value. The first case study is *Ferestroika* in Bucharest, a private museum centered around a communist apartment. The second one deals with *The Communist Consumer Museum* in Timișoara, a collection of socialist artifacts gathered in a permanent exhibition.

4. THE CASE OF FERESTROIKA AS AN ENTREPRENEURIAL PROJECT

Opened in November 2018, by a young family, the Ferestroika Museum is based on a three room apartment, owned by the grandmother of one of the entrepreneurs. The name of the Museum is a world play of the Romanian word *fereastră* (window) and the term *Perestroika*, coined in the USSR during the 1980s, to define a political movement which called for reforms inside the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Instead of modernizing its interior and refurbishing it, the two entrepreneurs decided to add more artifacts from the socialist period, namely the 1980s and turn it into a palpable experience of communist history, addressed primarily to foreign tourist, as well as locals. Unlike the Communist Consumer Museum in Timișoara, which is free of charge, Ferestroika offers three main types of services, starting with the simplest one, a one hour and thirty minutes visit with a historian as a curator, which costs 24.99 EUR or more. There are also the possibility to visit the museum at night, as well as that of an interactive dinner, with produce considered typical of the late socialist period, as well as national dishes and beverages. All options include an English speaking touring guide and the museum social media as a PR means, as well as its own website, which details every service. The Museum brands itself as a "touch and feel" experience, which would make it different from other museum experiences. While the offer would seem minimal to a local who either remembers most of the artifacts and produce in the apartment-come-museum, or actually still has some of them at home, the experience is presented in detail as an exotic one for foreign tourists coming from beyond the former Iron Curtain, for whom "the communist experience" would seem like an exotic adventure. The entrepreneurs who have started the project use the "exceptionalism" of the grim 1980s period in Romanian history as a brand in itself, in order to create economic value, while also allowing classes of young pupils to take tours of the museum, in order to provide an educational value for the project.

5. THE CASE OF THE COMMUNIST CONSUMER MUSEUM AS AN ENTREPRENEURIAL PROJECT

However, the theoretical framework presented above does not take into account the performative aspect of a realm of memory, nor does it refer to consumerist aspect that such a realm may offer. These two features lie at the foundation of the Communist Consumer Museum in the city of

Timișoara, Romania, in 2015, by actor Ovidiu Mihăiță. Housed in an old villa, which also hosts a bar and an alternative theater, all run by Mihăiță, the Museum is presented as an old communist apartment, complete with a living-room, a bedroom, a bathroom, a storage closet (the so-called *debara*), and a kitchen. The rooms displays a variety of household communist objects, from Romanian brand beer, milk, and yogurt bottles, to children's toys, cosmetics, furniture, and clothing. There is also a record and tape collection, mostly albums released by the state-owned Electrecord record company, which can be played on old tape and record players. While most of the artifacts are former communist Romanian brands, one also finds contraband merchandise, especially taking into the account the fact that Timișoara is located near the border with Hungary and Serbia (formerly Yugoslavia) (The Communist Consumer Museum). The location of the Museum, in a city with a multicultural richness, well-connected by means of transportation with major cities throughout Europe is also a factor which has contributed to the success of this entrepreneurial project (Peris-Ortiz and Merigó-Lindahl 2015, 24-25). In this sense, there is an interdependency between project and location of the project, which is socially and culturally conditioned (Thornton 1999, 20).

There was no actual curatorial or political idea behind the project, as its founder recalls: "Don't ask me how I got the idea, because I don't know what to answer. […] We just collected all these objects for five years, myself, my friends, and people who come to our bar and theater. […] I started collecting these because of my obsession with records, I used to collect them. When I was a kid, I used to listen to them, music records, story records, and this is what that period means to me. For others it might be the glass fish on the TV set, or trinkets" (Mihăiță 2015). The Museum has no ideological or political aim, it is independently funded. According to its founder, access is free, but visitors can make donations and receive material artifacts from the era as souvenirs. Thus, the actual purpose of the Museum is to recover the lost memory of socialist era artifacts, to constitute a new tourist attraction for Timișoara, and to stage a part of life as it used to be (Mihăiță 2015). In this sense, the Museum is already starting to attract new tourists and even beginning to have its own life in the blogs and travelogues of foreign tourists, drawn by its exotic nature, as well as by its claim to be the only such museum in Eastern Europe. Such a project is not entirely new, even in Romania, but what sets it apart from other previous endeavors is the fact that it has no open ideological or political agenda. This becomes even more important when taking into account the fact that the issue of a museum dedicated to the communist experience has been a recurrent topic of discussion in the Romanian public sphere (Blandiana 2014).

However, by being an unofficial initiative and devoid of a state agenda, the Communist Consumer Museum produces a democratization of the approach to history. While the setting itself is not authentic, mainly because of it being housed in a villa which precedes the communist era, as well as because of the amount of material artefacts which turn the "apartment" into a post factum conglomerate of objects, it is the very accumulation of such artifacts within the museum that offers its viewers the opportunity of choice. The reaction of the latter is open ended and it can range from nostalgia of familiar household items to amazement caused by never before seen objects (Bridge et al. 1998, 61-65). More importantly, however, in a context still marked by ideologization of the communist past, the very existence of such a museum can supplant historical and anthropological research by unearthing realms of memory that had lain forgotten. At the same time, the Communist Consumer Museum represents further proof that innovative entrepreneurial projects can go beyond the boundaries set by dominant public discourses and unearth a collective memory which has mainly remained ignored by mainstream mass-media and official institutions.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The two case studies under scrutiny for this paper are an example of the interactions between a young entrepreneurial ecosystem and its interactions with political changes and cultural debates at a local level, as well as larger phenomena which go beyond geopolitical borders of past and present. They exemplify the entrepreneurial creed of creating value out of resources that are scarce, or that have not yet been seen by others as having the potential for providing any kind of value. This latter aspect has been influenced by several factors, out of which two are worth mentioning: one has to do with the lack

of an entrepreneurial culture, the other one is largely influenced by the ongoing debates in Romanian public sphere about the present value of communist material heritage. It is worth noting that the value brought forth by such project is not only financial, but also cultural and social. Such projects provide an important contribution to a nuanced discussion about the legacy of socialism, while providing young entrepreneurs with new models of how to create a start-up and develop an entrepreneurial project.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This article was co-financed from the Human Capital Operational Program 2014-2020, project number POCU / 380/6/13/125245 no. 36482 / 23.05.2019 "Excellence in interdisciplinary PhD and post-PhD research, career alternatives through entrepreneurial initiative (EXCIA)", coordinator The Bucharest University of Economic Studies".

REFERENCES

Bast, Gerald, Carayannis, Elias G., Campbell, David F.J. (eds) (2018). *The Future of Museums*, Springer.

Bridge, Simon; O'Neill, Ken; Cromie, Stan (1998). *Understanding Enterprise, Entrepreneurship & Small Business*, London: Macmillan Press.

Burns, Paul; Dewhurst, Jim (1989). *Small Business. Planning, Finance and Control* (2nd Edition), London: Macmillan Education.

Blandiana, Ana (2014). Există sau nu există un muzeu al comunismului în România? (Available at <http://revista22.ro/46996/exist-sau-nu-exist-un-muzeu-al-comunismului-n-romnia.html> accessed on June 27th, 2020).

Coșman, Oana (2018). Ferestroika: Apartamentul din Militari transformat în muzeu despre viața de familie în comunism. (Available at <https://start-up.ro/ferestroika-apartamentul-din-militari-transformat-in-muzeu-despre-viata-de-familie-in-comunism/> accessed on July 25th, 2020)

Crane, Susan A. (1997). Writing the Individual Back into Collective Memory. *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 102, No. 5, 1372-1385.

Ferestroika. (Available at <https://ferestroika.com/booknow/> accessed on July 25th, 2020)

Kolb, Bonita M. (2015). *Entrepreneurship for the Creative and Cultural Industries*, Oxon & New York: Routledge.

Lee, Byungku; Kelly, Louise (2019). Cultural Leadership Ideals and Social Entrepreneurship: An International Study, *Journal of Social Entrepreneurship*, 10:1, 108-128.

Landström, Hans (2005). *Pioneers in Entrepreneurship and Small Business Research*, Boston: Springer.

Mark, James (2010). *The Unfinished Revolution. Making Sense of the Communist Past in Central-Eastern Europe*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Mihăiță, Ovidiu (2015). Bun venit in Epoca de Aur! S-a deschis Muzeul Consumatorului Comunist (Available at <http://www.tion.ro/bun-venit-in-epoca-de-aur-s-a-deschis-muzeul-consumatorului-comunist/1535050> accessed on June 26th, 2020).

Monge, Cris Bravo (2018). Identifying Cross-Country Key Drivers of Social Entrepreneurial Activity, *Journal of Social Entrepreneurship*, 9:3, 181-199.

Murphy, Bernice L. (ed.) (2016). *Museums, Ethics and Cultural Heritage*, London and New York: Routledge.

Newey, Lance R (2018). 'Changing the System': Compensatory versus Transformative Social Entrepreneurship, *Journal of Social Entrepreneurship*, 9:1, 13-30.

Nora, Pierre (1984). Entre Histoire et Mémoire. La problématique des lieux. in Pierre Nora (ed.), *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, Vol. I (pp. XIV-XXXVI), Paris: Editions Gallimard.

Nora, Pierre (1989). Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire. *Representations*, No. 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory, 7-24.

Peris-Ortiz, Marta, Merigó-Lindahl, José M. (2015). *Entrepreneurship, Regional Development and Culture. An Institutional Perspective*, Heidelberg, New York, Dordrecht, London: Springer.

Smallbone, David; Welter, Friederike (2009). *Entrepreneurship and Small Business Development in Post-Socialist Economies*, London and New York: Routledge.

Sparviero, Sergio (2019). The Case for a Socially Oriented Business Model Canvas: The Social Enterprise Model Canvas, *Journal of Social Entrepreneurship*, 10:2, 232-251.

Stan, Lavinia (2014). *Transitional Justice in Post-Communist Romania: The Politics of Memory*, London & New York: Cambridge University Press.

The Communist Consumer Museum (Available at <http://www.timisoara-info.ro/en/culture/museums-and-galleries/363-muzeul-consumatorului-comunist-.html> accessed on June 25th, 2020)

Thompson, Paul (2000). *The Voice of the Past. Oral History* (3rd Edition), Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Thornton, Patricia H. (1999). The Sociology of Entrepreneurship, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 25, 19-46.

Zhuk, Sergei I. (2011). Visual Culture, Media and Cultural Consumption in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia, *Russian History*, 38, 515-527.