

Mihai Stelian RUSU

Book Review: Archie Brown, *The Rise and Fall of Communism*, New York: Ecco, 2011, 720 pp.

Mihai Stelian RUSU
Babeş-Bolyai University
Cluj-Napoca, Romania
mihai.rusu@ubbcluj.ro

The long cycle of the growth, maturation, decay, and eventually collapse of communism had sprawled throughout the “age of extremes” of contemporary history (Hobsbawm, 1995). Compacting even more the already “short twentieth century,” placed by the British historian between 1914 and 1991, so that its symbolic debut coincide with 1917, it can legitimately be spoken of communism as the defining phenomenon of the past century. Both as intellectual subject matter and human social reality, communism has never ceased to fascinate, and equally terrify, scholars venturing into the socio-political universe sprang out of the doctrine of dialectical materialism. Hardly can anyone remain indifferent to the atrocities of communist regimes, whose death toll reaches 94 million (Curtois et al, 1999). Not even the “opium of the intellectuals” whose power of cognitive seduction was highlighted by Raymond Aron (1957) can alter the consciousness of this brute statistical reality. The same intellectual fascination towards both abstrusity and evilness (two constitutive elements of totalitarian communist states) underlies the analytical approach deployed by Archie Brown in *The Rise and Fall of Communism*. Except that, unlike of its forerunners trying to provide a synthetic image of communism, the work of Oxford University’s scholar takes full advantage of the new information become available with the partial opening of the former USSR’s secret archives.

Archie Brown presents the historical career of the communism idea, and ideal nonetheless, in parallel with its concrete empirical incarnations into the diverse political configurations that had scudded across significant areas of the globe in the aftermath of World War II. The resounding theme seems to be: an idea(l) gone bad, since between the values of social justice and equality that formed the central core of the primitive idea of communism and the political application espoused by its totalitarian practitioners the gulf couldn’t be any wider.

As expected, the historical narrative evolves predominantly along the Soviet axis, from which the author engages into short exploratory excursions, assessing the developments made in the other provinces of the Communist commonwealth. If possible, a topographical analysis of Brown’s historical discourse would reveal that Moscow is the central location to which the author is compelled to return. Its Soviet-centric account of communism, with its strong emphasis on the political decisions taken in the Politburo of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), recommends this book as being a Kremlinological account of communism.

The historical story told by Brown progresses linearly through the conventional eventual-chronological coordinates: from the origins of the idea of communism, through the Russian Revolution of 1917, followed by the phase of socialism building within the Soviet Union until the World War II (Part One: Origins and Development); “Part Two: Communist Ascendant” covers the communist takeovers in Europe and China (through Soviet imposition or following “indigenous paths”); “Part Three: Surviving without Stalin” evaluates the shockwaves sent by Khrushchev’s “secret speech” denouncing the personality cult of the Stalin, whose immediate impact was seen in the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, but whose delayed effects were being fully felt in Prague Spring of 1968, crushed by Warsaw Pact Army tanks. The “era of stagnation” under Brezhnev which followed, disturbed by civil society’s pressure of reform, creates the prelude to “Part Four: Pluralizing Pressures.” The Soviet story ends in “Part Five: Interpreting the Fall of Communism,” thanks to Gorbachev’s perestroika and glasnost policies.

Despite announcing that „the book [...] sets out to be more than a narrative history of Communism” (p. 4), for most of the time Brown’s account remains restricted to the traditional narrative strategy of eventual chronicle, thus touching only the „surface disturbances, [the] crests of foam that the tides of history carry on their strong back” (Braudel, 1995, p. 21). Moreover, this *histoire événementielle* goes hand in hand with a Carlylesque brand of historiography, given Brown’s emphatic insistence upon the biographies, decisions, and political deeds of the Great Communist (Anti-)Heroes. The book’s *iconothèque*, placed in the middle-pages of the book, certify this conclusion: from the total of 40 images, 31 are portraits (29 of them portraying Communist leaders, while the remaining two depicting Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Pope John Paul II, respectively), and only 9 pictures presenting military event and ordinary (anonymous) people.

The eventual chronicle of communism is only once interrupted by a brief, but analytically important, theoretical exposition in which Brown (pp. 105-112) identifies the defining six features of a communist system (as distinguished from a “communist” social order, i.e. the utopic classless, stateless, conflict-free society dreamt by Marx): a) *the monopoly of power of the Communist Party*; b) *democratic centralism*, a misnomer for bureaucratic centralism characterized by a “rigid hierarchical, severely disciplined party” in which the decisions flow invariably from top to bottom without a drop of critical feed-back; c) *non-capitalist ownership of the means of production*; d) *command economy*; e) *the declared aim of building communism as the ultimate goal*; f) *the existence of, and sense of belonging to, an international Communist movement*. The first two characteristics define the specific political system of a communist society, the third and fourth singularize the economic system, and the remainder two features pertain to the ideological sphere of the archetypal communist society. Setting out these defining features, Brown pleads for a “precise and parsimonious” use of the term communist. So that, after espousing these pack of feature as forming the minimal criteria of accepting a society as communist, it becomes clear that “no African state has ever been Communist” (p. 105).

By far the most attractive parts of the book are the closing “interpretative” chapters, into which, after bringing to a conclusion the long narrative history of the rise and fall of communism, Brown sets out to tackle what he calls to be the “big questions” of communism: a) Why did communism last so long? b) Why did it collapse? c) What’s left of communism?

Addressing the first question Brown points out a number of factors. For one thing, all the surviving communist regimes developed unusually efficient repressive state apparatuses, being able to procure mass, collective obedience to the regime’s authority. The propaganda machine, whose effects were supplemented by pervasive official and internalized self-censorship, further ensured that everybody stay in their party designated place. Another reason why the communist systems lasted so long is to be found in the population’s accommodation with the regime, made possible through the evolution of a parallel system of “informal rules of the game” (p. 580). In all the sectors of society, polity, and economy, the rigid formal bureaucratic procedures were systematically being bypassed and shortcut. For the ordinary person, procuring basic goods and services in the conditions of a shortage economy, with its chronic systemic failure, meant that possessing a repertoire of informal tricks was an everyday necessity. The economy itself needed to be deglogged in order to be minimally functional: “The command economy would scarcely have worked at all if informal practices have not oiled its wheels” (p. 581). Nevertheless, Brown concludes that the public services offered by the state (free education and health care, full employment) were played a great part in creating collective loyalty towards the regime.

Why did communism collapse? The irony of Communist history lays in the fact that precisely the large-scale educational campaign, in the long run, turned against its master planners. From the Party’s perspective, the unintended consequences of educational policies consisted in fostering critical thinking into an intellectually repressive society, progressively fed by a growingly freer flow of information which was made possible after the Glasnost policy (meaning “openness” or “transparency”) has been adopted. As Brown puts it, “By nurturing a highly educated population, Communism contained the seeds of its own destruction” (pp. 588-9). The accruing of economic difficulties also had its role in weakening the communist systems, but Brown rejects an overtly economic deterministic explanation of the fall of communism. He considers that economic problems created only the *stimuli* for political reform, the latter being the deciding factor. What put an end to communism wasn’t the economic chronic failure. It was the radical reform of its political system (through Perestroika and Glasnost) which turned out to short-circuit the nervous center of the communist socio-political order. Political “reform produced crisis more than [economic] crisis forced reform” (p. 598). The democratization of the Party could not been contained to spread throughout the social system. But although the reformist wing of the Party elite, personified by Gorbachev, wanted to inflict only intra-systemic change, they soon lost their grip on the democratizing forces unleashed, which converted into full-fledged systemic transformative change.

What's left on communism? Very little; indeed, only some crumbs, seems to be Brown's reply. In the world of today, only five states declare themselves to be communist (China, Cuba, Laos, North Korea, and Vietnam). But China, undoubtedly the most important of these last standing communist states, took decisive steps away from the theoretical model of a communist system. The radical economic reforms implemented by Deng Xiaoping transformed Chinese society into a hybrid system which was paradoxically dubbed "party-state capitalism." Only the North Korean case remains a pure relic of the ideal-typical communist system. The almost complete crumbling of the communist systems (survived only in a few minor enclaves) leads Brown to write the "epitaph for [the communist] illusion," which, despite comprising some universal idealistic aspirations, ended up as a "ghastly failure."

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