

UNIVERSITATEA BABEȘ-BOLYAI  
FACULTATEA DE STUDII EUROPENE

**Gender regimes of the school in the late ceaușism**

- PhD Thesis -

SUMMARY

PhD student: Alin Cenan

PhD coordinator: Prof. dr. Enikő Vincze

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# Gender regimes of the school in the late ceaușism

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## General features of the study

The doctoral thesis entitled *Gender regimes of the school in the late ceaușism* aimed to highlight some aspects of the school during the communist regime, specifically issues related to gender. I am referring to gender regimes of the school in the late ceaușism as to a system that produces and reproduces normative behaviors of individuals. Because specialized literature speaks about gender in terms of plurality, so we cannot talk about gender, but rather about genders, I think the same situation applies to gender regimes. It is considered that such a regime is specific to each institution, but the first argument against this idea is that in the case of school we can speak at least about two types of schools: the institutionalized one through the staff and the informal one represented by students. Each of these two categories may exhibit one specific gender regime within a single institution. The second argument for the existence of gender regimes within an institution is related to the diversity of people and the ways in which they produce and reproduce gender. Given the diversity of ways in which gender is constructed within an institution, I believe it is unlikely that an alleged scheme to keep the same gender regime exist, one that does not leave room for the emergence of alternative gender regimes.

In regard to gender, I watched both feminine and masculine as in my opinion they are complementary, not only that we cannot talk about a "construction" of the female, but we should be talking about a "construction" of the male. It is considered that some behaviors are learned by social actors, that society imposes some rules that people adopt. A person acts in a certain way because it has been "taught" to do so. However, in the area of gender studies there is a tendency of confusing *gender* with female, because the first persons who studied the impact of social attitudes on the behavior of people were women and their researches were about women. Hence the association of *gender studies* with *women studies*, but if we have *women's studies* and *men studies*, *gender studies* remained (or might have) the space for both genders. In conclusion, the attempt to establish the gender regimes of the school in the late ceaușism should follow the impact on both the feminine and the masculine.

My work deals with an analysis of the way by which the romanian communist school constructed or reproduced femininity and masculinity during the last decade of Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime, a period which I refer to as *late ceaușism*. The purpose is to describe and interpret the gender order, delineated by the school, as an important element of the socialist socio-economic system. The gender order consist of a set of cultural conceptions and social

practices that prescribe behaviors and gender relations (both feminine and masculine), but also of power relations between women and men which give birth to gender hierarchies and structures the division of labor and the decision making processes.

In the discussion about school I am interested in the communist state and the politics that he imposed upon this area, taking account of the assumption that no matter what political regime a state has, the educational system will follow the route assigned by this one and has a decisive role in constructing the society.

I should give some explanations regarding the interest in this subject: first of all, I consider that gender as a social factor has an important role in the development of the individuals, of the relations between them, but also of the social system in its whole, so gender is a central element of the social world; then, I see school as the second institution, after the family, responsible of this development and of reproducing the socio-political system. So, the gender regimes of the school are being structured by the social system and this one is reproduced also through them.

The research aim was to develop a two stage analysis, trying to identify the gender regimes for each one of these (behaviors, power relations, the division of work, decisional processes). The first part of the analysis is focused on the written documents from the studied period, while the second one focuses on the empiric material resulted from the semistructured interviews. The first part is trying to recreate the discursive reality of the '80s in the romanian communist society as it is reflected in the law of education, in the children magazines and the school textbooks.

Regarding the legislation, the communist period experienced an educational decree for the law of education in 1948 and two laws of education in 1968 and 1978. In the '80s there were no other modifications brought to the education law, so my analysis will be limited to the 1978 law, considering that this one influenced the period that I am interested in by the fact that it provided the legal framework for the education system.

The school textbooks offer a very large sample for analysis and since sciences are less influenced by ideology and gender regimes than the humanities, I focused on the second category. In the category of human sciences I have stopped only on the Romanian language and literature textbooks because I have considered that regardless of the school's or high school's profile, this area was studied. As a result I had a set of 14 books of Romanian language and literature, since for grades VII and VIII there were two manuals, one for grammar and the other for literature.

## **Methodology**

Regarding the research methods, I have used the interview to obtain the necessary data, especially semi-structured interview. I preferred to go from people to the institution, by listening to what people say about the whole system of human relations I could reach to an overview of the relationships constructed inside and by the institution where some people have spent part of their lives and others are still working there.

Interviews were conducted with 14 former students and 16 teachers from four high schools and three elementary schools in the Mureş and Cluj counties; former students' ages were between 31 and 47, and those of teachers were between 49 and 62 years old. Speaking of school in general terms and not intending to establish certain characteristics of a school, I did not write the characteristics of the interviewees, I did not use criteria such as sex, age, place of origin of the interviewee, the school where they teach. This decision was somewhat imposed by the respondents as most of their initial reluctance to talk about the school system of the communist regime made me resort to confidentiality regarding their identification data. The need for both categories of analysis is obvious; in a certain way can be seen the socialist school through the eyes of a former student and in a different way by a former teacher, not just the visions of the two groups may differ in terms of age, but the individual experiences may vary due to social position of each. For this reason I made one interview guide for each category, students and teachers.

The results from the interviews were related to information obtained from the analysis performed in the first part of the research that could influence gender relations in the school, the latter outlining a discursive reality of the communist regime, one of the ultimate goals that I proposed was to compare what is said about gender relations in the school (what the regime wanted?) and what actually happened.

Because in a qualitative research data analysis is the most important part of the research, I used thematic analysis to interpret the data from the interviews and content analysis for the materials from the first part of the research. Instead of in-depth approach, we can take "samples" of material and key themes that emerged by carefully reading the interviews. This means identifying a theme that we want to explore, extracting relevant material for this in every interview, categorizing the material according to the themes found in it and producing an

analytical justification for how these issues intersect. What follows is an overview of how the research participants give meaning to the themes discussed with them.

### **Structure of the study**

In the first chapter I am referring to the theoretical aspects of the research methods used to obtain and interpret the empirical material necessary for the analysis that I wanted to do. I will refer to some features of the interview as a qualitative method and I will try to look into certain aspects of the methods used for data interpretation.

In the second chapter I will highlight the various meanings that were given to *gender*, the relationship of this concept with the concept of *sex*, the way feminism is perceived in relation to gender and the characteristics of masculinity in the context of gender analysis. Gender, both as an analytical category and as a social process, is relational. That is why gender relations are complex and unstable processes constituted by and through the parts involved in a relationship. These parts are interdependent, which means that each part has no meaning or existence without the other. Through gender relations are created two types of persons: woman and man, which are perceived as exclusive categories. A person can be a single gender, never the other or both. Gender is a social relationship established, but also a relationship of dominance, so the way men and women understand the anatomy, biology, corporeality, sexuality and reproduction is rooted in part, reflects and justifies (or denies) the existing gender relations. Instead the existence of gender relations helps us to understand the facts of human existence. Unless gender is perceived as a social relationship rather than an opposition between different beings, there can be identified varieties and limitations of power and oppression of different women (or men) in societies.

The third chapter reviews the evolution of the theories about gender on which I rely my research. Starting with the sex role theory and its criticism, I will get to the concept of *gender development*, that of *doing gender* and then to the *gender performance*. Role theory is a form of social constructionism and was often used to give direction to processes through which gender was acquired. According to role theory, men and women become male and female by social conditioning, learning the gender role that matches their biological sex through interaction with social structures such as family, school, media, etc. When the sex role theory has provided the main framework for discussion on gender, there was already a fixed image of how this was acquired, there was the idea that sex roles were acquired by "socializing". Different tools of



socialization, mainly family, school, the group of friends and the media influenced the child's development period. Through a huge number of interactions these tools inoculate the boy or girl with the social "rules" or expectations about their behaviors. This can be done by imitating a role model, such as father to son, or may be adopted gradually.

West and Zimmerman's approach considers gender as a routine acquisition, one that is always repeated. *Doing* gender is assumed by women and men whose competences as members of the society are subject to its production. *Doing* gender involves a complex of socially guided activities, which distributes different tracks as expressions of male and female "natures". When we see gender as a becoming, an acquired property of the behavior, our attention moves from internal issues to the individual and focuses on interaction and, finally, on institutional arena. But it is a framed *doing*, developed in the virtual or real presence of the others who are supposed to be oriented to the same production. Rather than an individual ownership, we consider gender as a feature resulting from social situations: both as a result of various social arrangements and as a way to legitimize a fundamental division of society.

Butler developed a theory of gender performativity where gender is said to be performed through discourse, which includes social interaction, but also the discourse from textbooks, media, legislation. In contrast with the notion of self that performed gender, like West and Zimmerman puts it, Butler argues that there is no gender identity that can motivate gender performances. She suggests that the recurrence of some gender performances creates the illusion of a self supportive gender identities. If at Butler gender is *performed* through discourse, at West and Zimmerman gender is produced through interaction, gender is *done* in interactions. Butler distinguished between *performativity* and *performance*, as act, arguing that performativity consist of reiteration of the norms that precede the performer and in this sense they cannot be considered as his own wish or choice.

The fourth chapter aims at exploring aspects of the relationship between gender, school and communism. Based on some research from the specialized literature, I will try to illustrate the role that the school plays in shaping gender, while casting a look at the human prototype that the communist regime tried to create, also following the socio-economic aspects of the '80s, emphasizing certain characteristics related to tacit resistance that seems to mark certain areas of communism, and the school apparently.

The aim of totalitarian education is to produce the ideal subjects of power. Despite the propaganda claims of "multilateral development of personality" totalitarian education leads to the limitation of this development, to the uniformization of individuals and to the deformation of their personalities. In addition, it operates under the principle of exclusion. On the one hand are excluded from education, and therefore from the possibility of personal fulfillment in social life, those who do not meet the criteria established by ideology for access to political and social life, on the other hand are excluded, based on ideological criteria, those contents of education that are not consistent with the ideology imposed by the power or that do not support learning obedience. The person that obeys is the subject that totalitarian regimes want. This obedience should be voluntary, imposed by the personality, by its beliefs and skills. This is why the regimes were concerned for the education of all members of the society in the spirit and the discipline imposed by power, the efforts for people to learn this discipline, to consider it theirs.

Despite the discipline that people living in such a system as communism are subject to and despite the many possibilities that the regime has to supervise them, there are, as in any system, methods of resistance to the rules imposed on participants. This applies not only to the macro level of society, but also to the micro level of the institutions within that society, such as school. Every subordinate group creates, in the words of James C. Scott, a *hidden transcript* that is a criticism to power developed beyond the eyes of the dominant. The powerful ones also develop such a *transcript* representing their claims and practices that cannot be acknowledged openly. A comparison of the subordinates' *transcripts* with those of the dominants and of both *transcripts* with *public transcripts* on power relations offers a new vision for understanding resistance to domination.

School is not just a manner to change in some way the lives of people, but also a mode of organizing those lives. It helps shaping society starting from the level of relations between people to that of structures. At the level of social order as a whole, schools play an important role in producing the relations between classes and sexes. The school prepares students for sexual division of labor in the home and at work. It does not only reflect the dominant sexual ideology of the larger society, but actively produces gender and heterosexual divisions/differences.

According to Barrie Thorne, notions of femininity and masculinity, the gender division that one sees in the school, the structures of male dominance, the idea of gender itself, are all social constructions. Children, under a hypothesis of this perspective, are socialized into the existing

gender arrangements. Socializing influences, ironically illustrated by the clothes and toys that reproduce gender stereotypes on magazine covers who say something about biological programming, are coming from multiple directions. Parents dress their boys in blue and girls in pink, gave them names and toys according to gender and expected to behave differently. Teachers usually give more attention to boys in class than girls. The children adopt the invading gender stereotypes from books, songs, commercials, television programs, movies. Groups of friends, holding information about what it means to be male or female, perpetuate gender-based interaction. In short, if boys and girls are different, they are not born that way, but *made* later.

Chapter five seeks ways in which gender is constructed through textbooks, highlighting the role that institutionalized education plays in *creating* gender. Content analysis will be used to determine different patterns of gender in Romanian language and literature textbooks from the 1st grade to the 12th. I think that these textbooks of the '80s are objects that produce and reproduce gender models in school. I have used the Romanian language and literature textbooks for analysis because I have considered that they had the widest spread in the ceaușist school system, the whole school population, regardless of their profile, had studied Romanian, and this could have formed some habits on gender, while other subjects as history, geography, mathematics, were taught according to the profile of each class of students.

In the sixth chapter I will try to talk about organizations and institutions limits' not in the sense of their shortcomings but in that of their edges as social structures. In other words, from what specific point can a social structure be called an institution and what is the barrier that that structure must exceed to be classified as an organization. The call for specialized literature will be more than necessary for this. The second part of the chapter will follow aspects of the connections between organizations, institutions and gender, how they come into contact with each other and how they influence each other.

Schools are crowded and bureaucratic spaces where some adults organize and evaluate the ongoing activities of many children. In these circumstances, keeping proportions, schools are likely to be considered "total institutions". Closed organizations or institutions involve total control of the bodies of their members, including their sexuality, since people eat, sleep, work and play under the umbrella of a unified organizational structure. Total institutions do not occur by chance recruiting under certain limits. They tend to collect the old, the young, the sick ones, criminals, the poor and sometimes the rich ones.

The last chapter contains the analysis of empirical material derived from interviews with former teachers and students that were part of the school in the '80s. I will first take a look at the students expressed characteristics about gender, and in the second part of the chapter I will focus on the answers given by teachers.

The school is a social process, a set of social relations responsible for formal and informal meanings that appears. All aspects of schooling are subject to these meanings and are used in a variety of areas including discipline and control, formal and hidden curriculum, teaching councils and auxiliary staff. Research on masculinity suggested that schools provide interpretations of what it means to be "male" or "female" through these meanings.

Interview analysis revealed a lack of clarity regarding gender specificity among students and teachers. In communism it seems like gender exist only at the discursive level of the egalitarian speech, which is adopted and reproduced by social actors, whether they are students or teachers. Responses seem to be geared toward social class rather than gender in many of the interactions I had with the interviewees, they were showing a certain tendency to identify class as creating differences between people in the communist regime and not gender, though, in the same time their examples identified differences manifested because of gender.

Another important aspect is that there is a certain essentialism manifested, and that could be identified in the case of Romanian textbooks of that period, on specific models for each gender. It is not questioned the fact that girls are assigned with certain characteristics, and the boys with other, or that certain activities are performed only by some persons, while other activities are only representative for the others. All these are taken for granted just as they are provided by the system that produces them. Deviations from the norm are few, but there are some, marking a possible tendency for change in gender relations.

However, the question regarding the analyzed textbooks and interviews about the apparent lack of gender persists. One possible answer could be that members of a modern society can accept, for example, the consolation of religion or nature just as a matter of choice, which must be conscious to a point. They can choose to project their meaning of life on God or to imagine that their beliefs and behaviors are caused by their natures and natural differences, but is much easier to hide those choices from themselves and claim that they are not in any way the authors of their own destinies. They are forced to be more ingenious about this process of hiding: they should, as if they were hiding from something they secretly hide, to forget that they chose to forget. The

fetishism of religion (in which people project their existential anxiety on God and tries to cope with it through imagined relationship with Him) was replaced by the fetishism of sex in which existential anxiety is often treated by projecting it on sexual differences, imagined as gender.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps this idea of forgotten oblivion is what makes in the case of communism that most of the people who lived in that period do not recognize gender or certain relationships that involves it. As long as gender is considered a naturally "given" it cannot be seen as problematic by people who perceive it so, for those persons gender is nonexistent.

### **Discussions and limitations of the study**

A qualitative research is not meant to be exhaustive, but tries to understand certain processes or changes that took place within a group or within a society. So, by researching gender regimes of the school in the late ceaușism I have tried to get an overview of an institution considered very important in the gendering process of people by throwing a glance at a small sample of persons who were part of that institution in the period that I have studied. The results of the research will highlight the relevance of that sample for the institution or his specificity for the population to which it belongs.

People's narrations are nothing but memories of the past, and this certainly limited my research and interpretation. These memories need certain "objects" outside individuals or communities that have the power to remember, given the fact that such an "object" can act as a catalyst for the production of memory. In other words, it mediates memories and things that an individual or group reminds. It seems much easier to remember and have memories if such "objects" are there to help us. However, here we are dealing with a distorted kind of remembrance, the communist regime, as any totalitarian regime, had a major role in this action, but there is another factor that involves oblivion and distortion, is what Paul Connerton<sup>2</sup> calls, using the words of John Barnes, *structural amnesia*. This would mean that a person tends to remember only those things that are important to her in social terms, prioritizing personal information over other types of information. Thus, events that are important to one person or group are registered (stored), while events considered unnecessary are disappearing from memory. Also, the distance in time to the reported events might play an important role in the story of the interviewed. The bigger it gets

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<sup>1</sup> John MacInnes, *The End of Masculinity. The confusion of sexual genesis and sexual difference in modern society*, Open University Press, Buckingham, Philadelphia, 1998, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Connerton, „Seven types of forgetting” in *Memory Studies* 1, 59, 2008.

the period of time between the events and the narration of the story, more difficult becomes the remembrance, and factors such as social events, social position, current situation of the interviewed can act as barriers to the functioning of memory.

## **Conclusion**

What I have tried to show in this research is that despite the widespread impression that gender is not an important factor in everyday life, a closer look at certain aspects of society proves the reverse.

According to Máirtín Mac Ghaill and Chris Haywood gender occurs in school, at the level of school's administration gender is a central feature in organizing records, toilets, individual files, wearing uniforms, sharing lockers. Researchers from the area of studies related to childhood challenged the simplistic notion of gender and argued that the school is not only an institution that arranges and regulates gender relations, schools simultaneously distribute normalizing models for childhood and the adult period. In other words, the structuring of teaching and learning processes is not established simply through gender practices but simultaneously articulates the ascription based on age. So the categories boy or girl are gendered because they are related to age.<sup>3</sup>

In this case, the Romanian school of the '80s is far from being categorized as neutral in terms of gender. The impression is widespread among interviewed persons. They adopted the declared idea launched by communism about the equality between women and men and transpose it into interpersonal relationships within school. For them gender is not an important factor in the interaction between school's staff, between students and between the two groups together. To a certain extent gender is nonexistent in school in the '80s, but that's just happening at a declared level, it is a specific feature of the regime in which school was functioning. Homogenization is apparent both in textbooks and in the interviews with former students and teachers but this only intensifies the idea that there was an influence and an intention of the regime to create the unique person, asexual, the communist human prototype, the new man. The influence of this idea is so widespread that it really seems like there is no gender in communism.

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<sup>3</sup> Máirtín Mac an Ghaill, Chris Haywood, *Gender, Culture and Society. Contemporary Femininities and Masculinities*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 97-98.