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Silence in the age of transnational memory

Recovering political violence in Romanian contemporary debates

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CONCLUSION:

1. The Genealogy of the Backlash against Liberalism

Starting from the debates prompted by negotiations around liberal democracy in Romania and Central and Eastern Europe more broadly, in the 1990s and the later 2000s, the research in this dissertation charted how distinct narratives of collective memory of political violence became bound up with the ideals of liberal democratization and, at the same time, contributed to the demise of the myth of liberal progress. I focused, in particular, on narratives of fragility, vulnerability, victimhood and persecution, on the one hand, and of hope and transformation on the other, in order to trace how remembrance started as a mobilizing force only to become a deterrent of liberal notions. I have done so at the confluence of memory studies, intellectual history, and political history because, in hindsight, the context and implications of these issues today speak about a complex process of unravelling of the idealism of liberalism and global liberal democracy. In his 2023 book *Liberalism Against Itself*, Samuel Moyn argued that the liberal ambition of the 1960s descended into authoritarianism and materialism due to the ascent of “modernization theory” that captured democratic thought. He suggested that many of the progressive liberal ambitions were thus converted into neoconservative (and neoliberal) policies, also transforming what is considered a ‘liberal mindset’.¹⁴⁸ To a certain extent, this dissertation has traced precisely this process in a different historical moment, and by moving the focus to Central and Eastern Europe.

Specifically, the manuscript has looked at the long history and the trials and tribulations of the memory of political violence, which has been a productive terrain of dispute, debate, and cultural construction of liberal democracy in Central and Eastern Europe. The historical angle to memory offers many insights about what we might call a general unease in debating and

¹⁴⁸ Moyn, *Liberalism Against Itself*, 25.

discussing the past in times of political and social transformation. Having a public debate guided by justice pursuits on past political violence was, in many ways, a given for all countries looking to reinforce their emergent liberal democracies in the 1990s after long authoritarian rule, but this quest slowly turned into a restricted field of negotiations, at first nationalist, and subsequently sovereigntist and nativist by the 2000s. At the outset of this process, a modernizing frame attributed to transitional justice determined a strong link between governance, policies and collective memory, but also constructed a restrictive sphere of debate. Second, national histories of political violence, such as those of the Holocaust and crimes of state socialist regimes, were quickly aligned with agendas about Europeanism, Europeanization, and the strengthening liberal democracy, only to impose clear boundaries when it came to actual accountability. Indeed, Europeanism became a deterrent in opening up uncomfortable truths. In this sense, political violence gradually changed from an instrument of the liberal consensus, which brought a sense of common past and reinforced a shared goal (that is, achieving the ideal of liberal democracy and the affordances it would bring), to an instrument of exceptionality. In tracing this transformation, my dissertation draws attention to some of the blankspots that have rendered liberal ideals fragile.

By placing the focus specifically on post-communist Central and Eastern Europe in this examination of the paths taken by liberal ideals, some aspects of the dynamic of collective memory become clearer. The analysis shows how global collective memory disputes and debates have been a constant in the politics of the region, and that they rarely were actually only about remembrance, victims or reconciliation. Such memory disputes spoke to wider dynamics – most directly to those inscribing the collective memory meant to ground the European project especially after the EU constitutional crisis of 2005. The Europe-wide memory work made narratives about past political violence – the Holocaust and the Second World War, first and foremost – a wishful instrument in the need to ‘stabilize’ the European polity around a guiding

set of narratives and ideals. Although scholars initially considered the notion of European memory as a success story and a consensus project for the EU, there were clear dichotomies at play from its outset, divided across narratives of victimhood and political representation.

Since 2010, what has emerged from scholarship and political debate is largely a “divided” memory regime between “East” and “West”. Central and Eastern Europe is thus most frequently characterized by negative (victimhood, nationalisms) aspects of European memory, while in contrast in the “West” both progressive and conservative forces debate the sturdiness of “European” values, and of liberal democracy. As much as collective memory was a shared narrative attributed to liberal democracy (and to Europe) in the 1990s, by the 2010s, it became *la terrain rife* with dispute for both these political and cultural constructs.¹⁴⁹ The analysis presented in this dissertation further opens up this perspective, and explores three interlinked scales - global, European and national - to show how these binaries driving consensus have always been at play, often stifled memorial reflections, and ended up encouraging nativist, exclusionary and limiting discourses about liberalism which, in the end, failed the very promise of building it.

Europeanism and Europeanization have, accordingly, been key elements in this analysis, and all chapters in fact show how anti-liberal constructs have permeated these notions, specifically through the conduit of collective memory. The impression that emerges is that Europeanism has become a building block of anti-liberal constructs that are easily mainstreamed into the social and political space. With its human rights-tinged narrative, collective memory and remembrance have been a field where these anti-liberal and illiberal narratives have grown, under the guise of a normative, value-driven narrative about community, national as well as European. This memory architecture has not led, indeed, to a more nuanced understanding of the past but, more often than not, just placed competing ideas of the past side

¹⁴⁹ Assman, “Europe’s Divided Memory”.

by side.¹⁵⁰ Without really drawing connections between them, collective memory has been reduced to competing claims for recognition and narratives of victimhood. Implicitly, this has strengthened an authoritarian streak of the (neo)liberal political European context in subtle ways that often prey on idealized notions of the interwar period and the supposed beginnings of a European identity.¹⁵¹

One by one, the chapters of this dissertation have shown how memory regimes, debates and perspectives which have relied on the idea of lessons learned (of past infringement of rights or state abuse) – whether about the Holocaust or communist regimes – can be key in understanding both contestations of liberal democracy since the mid-2010s, primarily through the adaptations of the past to the liberal ideal, as well as the roots of the dissatisfaction with the “European” values narratives. Indeed, the chapters traced a process where collective memory became a marker of the resilience of other correlators – such as democracy, markets, anticommunism, Europe – in a process that began in the 1990s and is still on-going. Consequently, the research charts specific cultural narratives about liberal “values” across time, how they came into being, the way they influenced collective remembrance and the appropriations and usages of narratives about the past, specifically in relation to the rise of liberal vocabularies, for which they were instrumental. The argument historicizes the connections between liberal vocabularies - human rights, constitutional law, economics – and cultural narratives such as Europeanization, as well as the interlocking relation with Europeanism as an identity consolidator (this dynamic is explained in the introduction).

The dissertation thus argues that some of the national dynamics of difference at play since the 2010s should not only be attributed to old adages about “good” or “bad” Europeanism, and more or less “learned” liberalism, but also to the roots of these processes. We thus need to

¹⁵⁰ Sznajder, “The Ethics of Never Again”.

¹⁵¹ Michael Wilkinson, “Second Time as Farce? Authoritarian Liberalism in Historical Perspective”, in Jeremy Rayner, Susan Falls, George Souvlis and Taylor C. Nelms eds., *Back to the '30s? Recurring Crises of Capitalism, Liberalism, and Democracy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 133–54.

untangle some of the biases that existed in the very construction of the liberal transformation after the Cold War, and which have subsequently shaped anti-liberal and far-right debates. This is why the three sections of the manuscript – development, resentment, norms – hint at the actual role of memory discourses for liberal democracy and their limitations. Instead of making the case for a rigid boundary between these last two constructs, liberal democracy and Europeanization, the argument follows how the mobilization of collective memory around “democracy” triggered a side effect of normalization of more conservative narratives of Europeanism. The other direction the research builds on is a growing awareness of the drawbacks of liberalism itself, as a set of exclusionary and marginalizing narratives for certain groups or communities. Collective memory becomes a key indicator of these issues, with memory debates (as is highlighted here) showing a thin and often porous boundary between liberal and anti-liberal formulations.

Consequently, the argument develops in two distinct, but interconnected, directions. One points to several new adaptation processes of national collective memory of political violence to the global “liberal” script, a term that defines the prescriptive liberal mainstream – anticommunism, Western-Centric in its view and economically-directed, and exclusionary. In this vein, I also discuss the “calibration” of past political violence into a form of ‘banal’, everyday usage of Europeanism and the cultural norms of liberal democracy, which often slipped into anti-liberal formulations and a type of national focus fusing nationalism and authoritarianism. These processes often entailed fluctuations in the public visibility or urgency of a particular history, such as that of the far right or the Holocaust.¹⁵² They also rely on a steadfast Cold War liberalism and anticommunism that endured, as discussed in chapter 1 and

¹⁵² Samuel Moyn, “Antisemitism, Philosemitism and the Rise of Holocaust Memory”, *Patterns of Prejudice*, 43, no. 1 (2009), 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313220802636023>; Jeffrey Herf, “The Anti-Zionist Bridge: The East German Communist Contribution to Antisemitism’s Revival After the Holocaust”, *Antisemitism Studies* 1, (1) 2017, 130–56, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/718360>.

chapter 6 more at length. Indicative here are arguments about the imposition of communism from abroad, or innocence in relation to the Holocaust.

The other direction of my research looks at what happened in the specific Romanian context, namely a type of selectivity and silencing of certain histories, mainly aimed to ease the integration of liberal values into new narratives of identity. In order to look at this selectivity in relation to liberal values, the research builds on the notion of silence as coined, among others, by Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger, who define silence as a zone of contact, where topics and representations are sometimes emphasized or mobilized, to trigger attention and public reaction, or, on the contrary, ignored, in order to avoid political or social controversy.¹⁵³ Here, the concept of silence is identified as a negotiation and a changing space of adaptation of images of the past to contemporary political and social ideas. There is also something to be said about how this terminology inspired the methodology adopted in the dissertation, in that the manuscript does not only look at “elite” or political actors. Instead, it probes public debates, involving journalists, commentators, and wider political and cultural communities, specifically to understand how such mainstreaming of restrictive ideas of the past – often informed by a need for radical change - operated.

Indeed, by taking the 1990s as a turning point – instead of a starting point – in the politics of memory, this dissertation expands on the idea that collective memory of past political violence was defined in anticipation of the (liberal democratic) future. The assumption about the representations of the past was that they had to defend some kind of (liberal) values and further cultivate their roots. In politics, economics, and a polarized public sphere, this fragility often triggered a limited space of debate, easily prone to appropriations and falsifications that followed, and took a new turn after 2010. Accordingly, silence functioned as a form of memory-making that calibrated images of national relevance into a content that can apply and be easily

¹⁵³ Vinitzky-Seroussi, Teeger, “Silence and Collective Memory”.

accepted within the growing obligation towards a collective memory of shame, apology, and regret. The dissertation has also shown how nationalist or nativist narratives that exclude particular groups or categories have co-existed with the continuous attempts to redress historical injustices, using constitutional means, in this dynamic of silencing for a new liberal space to come.

The intimation of the argument is that collective memory operating since the 1990s, as a form of collective mobilization for a better, brighter future, on ideological grounds, also shaped the very contestations of this future. The dissertation thus hints at how the global trajectory of liberalism relied on such virtualizations and prescriptions and hopes of the future, yet through a limited political language that entailed the reiteration of a few and repetitive scripts of the past. These discourses met their purpose in that they did indeed impose a canon of remembrance, in largely liberal terms, but they also impeded debates on complex, competing representation of the past. The three general sections of the dissertation – development, resentment and norms – are thus intended to sign-post how collective memory influenced visions of the future and insured a sense of virtualization that often seemed restrictive.

2. Liberal Narratives

The central thread in the dissertation is how the trials and tribulations of the persistence of Cold War liberalism and anticommunism since the 1990s in relation to politics and memorial discourses have been directly bound up with the ideals of liberalism. This entanglement has informed a “negative memory”, a term which I borrow from previous work on the memory of the Holocaust as a denominator of the past meant to act as a warning and as a restrictive sphere of reference. Here, I specifically look at communism and the Holocaust, which were paramount for both liberal democracy and European ideations, but often solidified into reductionist perspectives. The “competition” between these two collective memories of violence was one of

the emerging effects, connected also to the role these two histories had in the consolidation of liberal democracy. The Holocaust framed future visions, by lending itself to discourses of human rights, inclusion, and liberal values, albeit as warning. The communist past was, on the contrary, a rather uncomfortable legacy, which was integrated into the virtualizations of liberal democracy not as a (learned) lesson, but as a potential threat.

In this sense, the transnational sphere of memory (both European and that defined by the global rise of liberal democracy in the 1990s) has had an important role in marking out the status of a liberal democracy, a process that began long before the “transnationalization” turn in memory of the early 2000s.¹⁵⁴ If in the 1990s, the “transitions” in Central and Eastern Europe triggered a careful and often restricted investigation of communism, this selective perspective was later carried into the “proper” liberal political and social sphere, which would be beneficial to the transformation. But this correlation had also other implications. Human rights discourses and the (neo)liberal narrative of the development of the 1990s morphed into important coordinates for the liberal state, but did so, in the region, based on a specific, limited, and often conservative understanding of anticommunism in the political spectrum.¹⁵⁵ In time, this remembrance solidified the connection with the core values of liberalism (human rights, freedom of expression), and continued to grow into the 1990s.¹⁵⁶

The memory of communism graduating from a national discourse of persecution to an element of wider EU politics of memory was reinforced by the Cold War reification of the regime in terms of “totalitarianism” (adverse to human rights and economic freedom), propelled into the European orbit. In fact, the “illiberal” alternative emerging from Eastern Europe in the

¹⁵⁴ Quinn Slobodian, “Jurisdiction Leap, Political Drain, and Other Dangers of Transnational History”, *New Global Studies* 4, 1 (2010), 8.

¹⁵⁵ Hans Kundnani, *Utopia or Auschwitz: Germany's 1968 Generation and the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 2–14.

¹⁵⁶ Larissa Allwork, “Holocaust Remembrance as ‘Civil Religion’: The Case of the Stockholm Declaration (2000)”, in Diana Popescu, Tanja Schult eds., *Revisiting Holocaust Representation in the Post-Witness Era* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 288–305.

2000s simply exacerbated the conservative streak of older European Christian democracy. This discourse sidelined any possible variants of social-democratic anticommunism, specific to 1950s and 1960s debates in Western Europe, as shown in chapter 1. The already conservative approach of the 1990s, whereby social democrats and liberals alike toyed with nationalist ideas and a rather exclusionary politics, was extended into the late 2010s' contestations of liberal democracy across Central and Eastern Europe.

Chapters 1, 2 and 3 outline the evolution of such narratives in the Romanian context in relation to the global advent of liberal democracy. Chapter 1 shows how narratives of development, bolstered by the political and economic neoliberalism of the 1990s, had an imprint on memorial debates that imposed a conservative and restrictive tone to national discussions. Social actors often borrowed from a deep-seated and powerful narrative of underdevelopment, or 'interrupted' modernity, that after the 1990s was attached to communism but in effect, continues a long political and intellectual tradition dating back to the nineteenth century. In the 1990s, "underdevelopment" acquired a cultural definition of economic discrepancies and a "catching up" to Europe and the West, directly correlating with modernization influences. Furthermore, such a developmental perspective echoed the cultural narratives of the World Bank- and International Monetary Fund-type of neoliberalism that swept through the former East in the 1990s.¹⁵⁷ This narrative borrowed much from the Cold War notion of totalitarianism, where authoritarianism and dictatorship directly challenged the development of liberal democracy. Such arguments warrant a better understanding of the ideas of the "radical change" and the "narrative of hope" embedded within the liberal democracy and the persistent Cold War liberalism that shaped the political and cultural sphere in the region after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The entanglement between an aversion against anything related to the political Left and the emphasis on the liberal democratic sphere attached to

¹⁵⁷ Quinn Slobodian, "Demos Veto and Demos Exit. The Neoliberals Who Embraced Referenda and Secession", *Journal Of Australian Political Economy* 96 (2020), 19–36.

Europeanization placed Europe at the centre of “the liberal script” in local debates. Europeanization was a driving factor but also one that restricted public debate further through its association with anticommunism and the totalitarian narrative.

Indeed, initially compliant with the liberal (public) sphere’s demands, the new democracies in Eastern Europe, partially weakened by the financial crisis of 2008, showed signs of a revival of the early nationalizing and exclusionary languages of the 1990s. Nevertheless, the dissertation has avoided attributing this shift only to nationalist politics in the region, and pointed out how they were also strongly shaped by the narratives of neoliberalism, of culturalization of democracy, individual ability and economic success. This research has especially looked at a constant drift of the discourses on liberal politics into conservative and at times far-right positions, which regularly draw upon memories of political violence. The Romanian context’s specificity is that this type of politics did not affirm itself against Europeanization but vocally in its favour, unlike other states in the region such as Hungary.

Chapter 2 demonstrated how the liberal consensus of the 1990s influenced the “normalization” of the far right and the trivialization of the Holocaust, not only through the reification of the communist “experience”, but also through a very restricted understanding of democracy. Primarily, it shows how, as anticommunist and neoliberal narratives took precedence over much of the debates on memory in the early 1990s, they reduced the urgency of the debate on the far right. There was an emphasis on the robustness of the “state” (weakened by the communist past) and a sense of victimization connected to a wounded national idea. Thus, when certain topics, such as antisemitism, have arisen, there was a ready-made arsenal of narratives at the disposal of those arguing it is irrelevant or “foreign” to the fabric of society. This redactional element was further strengthened by the narrative that the “modernity” of the interwar period was interrupted by communism.

This contributed, most visibly, to the uncomfortable and selective history and representation of the Holocaust. Chapter 3 shows how this history has been consistently brushed aside, not only due to the dominant anticommunist perspective, but also because collective memory seemed to be politically engaged in the process of “modernization”: locating the roots of a local “liberalism” was more important than admitting guilt for injustices in the past, such as Nazi collaboration. In a similar manner, debates that could have shaped the memorial image of the far right, were not investigated in their context. Chapter 2 has shown, indeed, that ideas of the far right re-emerged with the virulently nationalist revival and return of anticommunist heroes and have continued on the same path ever since. Against this discursive background, the “competing” aspects of communist crimes and the Holocaust exemplify much of this manifestation. In Chapter 3, I also showed how this debate was reflected in the heritage sites of Sighet and Târgu Jiu. As I have demonstrated, memorials and museums have embodied disputes about the memory of political violence in Europe – both communist crimes and the Holocaust– in an overly simplified manner. In this sense, they operated as an early indicator of “resentment”, one of the recent tenets of “populism”¹⁵⁸ responsible for a new political narrative of historical national “wounding”. Furthermore, the concept of transitional justice not only shaped democracy through references to injustices in the past, but also shaped memorial narratives. Chapters 1 and 5 depict how these also incited a polarizing public debate about what memory should and should not do.

All chapters, but in particular chapters 3, 5 and 6, have highlighted how the “long 1990s”, that is, the consensus and the triumph of the end of the Cold War, were the cradle of selective constructions of the past in the late 2000s. This is the main takeaway from the paradigm of the transition-marked debates over commemoration. The emphasis on moving forward and progress also turned left-wing and right-wing ideas on their heads in the post-

¹⁵⁸ Koncewicz, “Understanding the Politics of Resentment”.

socialist Romanian 1990s. Finally, the emergence of the “illiberal” factions and contestations of democracy which belong to the 2020s have found a fertile terrain for instrumentalization in that decade, as shown in the way a sense of victimhood has been mobilized by such forces, and economic divides and disenfranchisement have been invoked, also in the politics of memory.

3. Emerging Narratives from Silences

The process of adaptation to liberal democracy explicitly triggered the selectivity of memory to European and global political norms. The main finding of this research, however, is that such selectivity and silencing did not happen by ignoring liberal credentials, but through them, precisely by adapting to their norms. Silences were ample spaces for the negotiation of political identity, as a post-socialist but forward-looking state, in the global sphere of liberal democracy. “Calibration” also plays a crucial role in how the historicized approach sets the Romanian debates apart from the main actors of the “illiberal wave” in Central and Eastern Europe, while also showing some points of convergence. If “illiberalism” works to externalize liberal processes, suggesting that they are “foreign” to the fabric of the nation, a different process shaped the political and memorial spaces in Romania, although contestations of political imposition from the EU sometimes occurred here as well. The central tendency was to “internalize” liberalism and to construct memorial representations that strengthened it. National debates in Romania have thus continuously tried to relocate it against the communist intermezzo and in general rejected anything that was not conducive of this purpose related to liberal imaginaries. Liberal values also played an essential role in a narrative countering the former idea of “underdevelopment”. For society at large, “liberal identity” represented a “return” to Europe from which Eastern Europe had been separated in 1945 and stood for a just transition to neoliberalism, and justice for abuses.

As described in chapter 3, 4 and 6, the communist angle overtook the Holocaust in Romanian national narratives. For instance, the collective memory, interpretations and narratives about the Second World War and the Holocaust were limited, aggravated by a notion that the grievances were elsewhere (state socialism) and somehow separated from the national roots of the far right. As anticommunism was becoming a European discourse, rather than only a regional discussion, a local “banal” Europeanism, which emerged in the 1990s in Eastern Europe, re-exhumed the history of the far right and of authoritarianism.

Chapter 4 describes how the 1990s, and specifically Yugoslavia’s dissolution, represented a first moment where selective histories of the Second World War came to be a valuable political resource that responded to geopolitical insecurities triggered by the conflict and the wider international and European context. Because of a predominant emphasis on security in the region, the problematic nationalism shared between Serbia and Romania dating back to the interwar period, was an absent narrative. It replaced another narrative of antifascism with a new, de-ideologized notion of sovereignty and self-determination in an anticommunist dimension.¹⁵⁹ Such framings neatly matched the humanitarian reason, as defined by Didier Fassin, shaping the international politics of those years globally. In the context of the 1990s, political violence, its memory and its history was a step towards affirming a distinct identity, on the one hand, but also an obstacle to attaining it because that debate on identity relied exclusively on older national narratives.

The analysis also looked at how liberal instruments – law, transitional justice, geopolitical imaginaries – that in theory were to work against “silencing”, turned into a distinctly supportive mechanism *for* silencing. Such instruments were co-opted into a vindictive perspective on remembrance, which only compounded silences. The research suggests this dynamic was not limited to political actors but also engaged other societal actors (museums,

¹⁵⁹ Kopeček, “Sovereignty, ‘Return to Europe’”.

intellectual groups, NGOs) that made memory a question of global politics of liberal democracy, rather than a self-reflective investigation.

Chapters 5 and 6 build on the recent reversal of narratives of “hope” and look at memory’s appropriations. Transitional justice and human rights, particularly in their entanglement with memory, have constructed a conservative sphere of debate where rights and justice have become terrains of victimhood claims. Nationalist, nativist, and exclusionary discourses have thus emerged from a supposedly shared memory of “totalitarianism” across Europe. This conflict came to play an essential role in the growing divisions regarding liberal democracy in the region. In the “illiberal” alternative emerging from Eastern Europe, the state is no longer expected to operate on the liberal “rule of law” that defined the “long 1990s” consensus.¹⁶⁰

This study has, furthermore, demonstrated how looking at political violence entangled with national and transnational memory permits us to understand new ways of silencing. For instance, the anticommunist debates in the 1990s in Romania show that the collective memory of political violence transcended the national level and was determined by a global liberal democratic dimension. Yet, on the other hand, the emerging silences in this new politics of memory and in the global alignment of liberal values such as human rights and tolerance coincide with the public and political “usability” of remembrance. The cases of silences in debates and in remembrances of the Holocaust, as well as of the 1989 and 1990 protest movements, also suggest that “liberal memory” led to a deep counter-critique of liberalism. In particular, the “anticommunist” character has drowned out the fascist and exclusionary nature of the far right in memory narratives, while also silencing the interwar beginnings of the communist movement. The antifascist discourse of the Second World War became associated entirely with the Cold War ‘communist occupation’ idea. Other histories, such as those of the

¹⁶⁰ Lipinski, “Polish Right Wing Populism.”, 342.

Holocaust and the history of the Second World War, took a backseat, also overshadowed by their use by state socialist propaganda.

The entanglement between the victims of communism and of the Holocaust has, moreover, produced images of the past that silence, reduce and minimize problematic episodes of Romania's twentieth-century past. My research suggests that these "curated" visions of history have adapted to and accommodated the ideals of the "long" 1990s of liberal consensus. With the European focus on a shared past, victims of communism and National Socialism might be increasingly lumped together by policy and politics, but this recognition does not apply to all. As historian Jelena Subotic has argued, the very idea of "crimes of communism" has been predominantly about Stalinist victims. Consequently, it reduces both the dimension of history and devaluates, in fact, the anti-fascist dimension across Europe.¹⁶¹ However, in Tito's Yugoslavia as in postwar Romania, Stalinist communists themselves were victimized by trial and internment in detention camps, complicating a singular "European" memory of such crimes.¹⁶²

There is also something to be said about the memory-making of negative memories and this "liberal" construct in terms of collective memory production. One of the most evident traits of this entanglement has been the epistocratic dimension of the memory of political violence (which is defined in the text as the idea of an expert knowledge limited to a few, particularly governance instruments). This focus on memory as a state-making process, rather than as a shared collective reflection, only reinforced a view that collective memory is not fit for popular discussion or consideration, and that it rather should be directed and instrumentalized towards a distinct vision of the future. Institutes of "national" memory, partly working on public remembrance and partly institutions channelling remembrance to a liberal "norm" of conduct, have been one of the main protagonists of this restrictive sphere of remembrance,

¹⁶¹ Subotic, "The Big Gray Truck", 9.

¹⁶² Blaive, *Clashes in European Memory*; Jarausch, "Contours of a Critical History".

unapologetically striving for consensus. Set up in the 2000s amid a flurry of interest in the technocratic, purportedly apolitical, dimension of memory, such institutes have become the “keepers” of records. Despite the initial enthusiasm for their existence, they often transformed into organizations that have simply recreated the selectivity and politicization of memory. Their agenda, in the Romanian case, has not been explicitly nationalist (or nativist) as in Poland, Hungary or even the post-Yugoslav states, but they have become the main actors of public memory perpetuating the idea that history is increasingly displayed in a “better” way through a resort to democratic, Europeanist grounds. Throughout the chapters, however, a quite different reality emerges.

Several tropes of the notion of “belonging to Europe” have become apparent throughout this research. The first one is an apolitical consensus. All chapters, and perhaps 1, 2 and 4 in particular, show how the architecture of collective memory in Eastern Europe more widely and in Romania specifically, owed to an interest in a common narrative of progress aimed at cutting off the past from potential controversies. While the past was predominantly represented by the political right to memory, because of the anticommunist angle it was intrinsically defined by a politics of silencing, calibrating the past in the present and aligning it to diverse (Europeanizing as well as nationalizing) identity ambitions. This memory politics that is partial to a politics of claiming political rights is a constant in the narratives analysed in the dissertation, and more often than not, shared by parties and actors across the political spectrum. A second key trope is a form of nostalgic sovereignty that looks back at imagined histories where the state was emerging as a modern entity. Chapter 4 suggests that this idea of sovereignty has, in fact, been encouraged by a rather benign consideration of notions of national purity and innocence, erased by “Soviet” aggression. Debates about collaboration, complicity or deep-seated authoritarianism are simply replaced with a dimension of victimhood provoked by a loss of national sovereignty, independence, or autonomy. Chapter 4 also suggests that the tropes of

sovereignty played an important part in the reception and memorial dynamics around the wars in Romanian “historical territories”, such as the Banat and Transnistria. Those memories also played an important part in the ambiguous memory of the Yugoslav wars in Romania today. A third trope is that of a liberal “norm” that should be internalized. But, by looking at the employment of legal instruments and principles of human rights in legal debates, chapters 1 and 5 demonstrate how this norm has only perpetuated a restrictive sphere of reflection on the past. While remembrance is easily and readily accepted as a norm, these two mechanisms that statedly promote a “duty to remember” have, in fact, imprinted simply a prescriptive (and restricted) approach to remembrance.

Looking at the “long 1990s” in relation to memory is also important because it presages how (and why) many of the cultural ideas about liberal democracy collapsed after 2008 and how, since then, anti-liberal, “illiberalism” has been able to produce new historiographical interpretations and memorial regimes. Indeed, the ‘Holocaust-communism competition’ identified here became a fertile background of populist negotiations of the histories of sovereignty in the region, such as the Trianon moment for Hungary, where the territory of the country was divided between the former imperial powers. The exact same history in Romania was articulated as a triumph of national self-determination or “sovereignty”. Indeed, the research presented here tackles many of the causes and implications of the turn towards authoritarianism in the region, and the long roots of the “illiberal” narrative, that only came into full view with the systemic shift in the imaginary of “the long 1990s” of neoliberalism. The historical approach helps set out how some of these phenomena are not new at all; their roots can be traced back for over a century and have since lived through several iterations.

Part of this dynamic is also linked to a distinct moralization of memory, defined more and more by what is “acceptable”, and what carried a duty to “remember”. This dynamic, I have argued, cannot be reduced to erasures, but it did lead to a “cultivation” of the past through

liberal credentials that hid and impeded a necessary reflection of the tares of liberalism itself. In the dissertation, I have argued that Europeanization has functioned as a crucial conduit of this dynamic. Later, it also became a conduit for anti-liberal politics.

At the same time, the dissertation has teased out how collective memory almost always supports narratives about the future, making these negotiations always explicitly political. Such narratives are only about the past in as much as they are able to support “progress” and a sentiment of moving forward, both instrumental for liberal theory. “Modernization” and “transition” in Eastern Europe have thus been instrumental in this narrative of liberal democracy. This framing also allows us to understand why ‘reconciliation’ and ‘consensus’ attributed to collective memory are untenable aspirations.

4. Directions for Future Research

The dissertation forms part of a wider research agenda aiming to shed light on how memory politics appropriate elements of the “liberal script” and “European ideals” to ends that, in practice, go against ideas of social justice or dialogue, and meaningful investigations of political violence perpetrated by and in Europe, let alone outside it. It argues that silencing the past, as a persistent practice of memory, should be interpreted rather as an intrinsic dimension of building liberal narratives, but also as a cause of dissensus and contestation. From these conclusions derive several implications for research that are outside of this dissertation's scope. In the following, I outline three of these, namely silences and other memory dynamics employed in building liberalism, cultural geographies of liberal imaginaries, and narratives of the ideological dimensions of liberal democracies.

First, the core of this dissertation was to capture the means through which collective memory narratives that employ a flattened vision of history come about as a defensive instrument of liberalism, that operate to limit debate. For instance, I have made the argument

that the correlation between the victims of communism and that of National Socialism continues to be a contested story which can easily veer, as it has on many occasions, towards conservative and far-right narratives. This perspective on liberal victimhood can also open related pathways of reflection, however, which remain to be investigated, such as on the victims of colonialism, and the victims of European racial politics, who have also been part and parcel of “Europeanization” and have also triggered excesses of political interpretations and forms of silencing.

Similarly, the silencing of the history of the Left across Europe, and of the vital place of antifascism, in narratives of liberal democracy, is not only relevant for Central and Eastern Europe or for Romania. This suggests new comparative areas of focus and of attention that have not been the object of this study: for instance, examining the legacy of these two elements in the narratives of contestations of democracy that are happening also in more ‘established’ liberal democracies elsewhere in Europe.

At the same time, a deeper reflection on the way the 2010s European memory project overshadows the beginnings of the European Union, its conservative roots, and the impact this has had behind the Iron Curtain in defining the European project requires a separate analysis. In a way, the “liberal’ dictum overshadows long-enduring intellectual links between fascism, colonialism, and genocide. Of particular interest here are the entanglements of neoliberalism and distinct visions of globalization which tend to be overshadowed by the project of neoliberalism itself.

Furthermore, research should be dedicated to the formative encounters and entanglements between Eastern Europe and the Global South in memory politics, which have equally been silenced and reduced to ‘simply’ questions of national identity and today fuel xenophobia, discrimination, and a lack of memorial language about the deep political entanglements between the Middle East, Asia, and Eastern Europe. Such an approach could

complement the image of the “alternative globalization” of the Cold War in the socialist space, as recently discussed by James Mark and Artemy Kalinovsky.¹⁶³ Alternative histories of the dynamic exchanges between socialist countries, particularly in the Middle East, relating, for instance, the origins of postcolonial theory to earlier dynamics of Soviet communism and Arab self-determination movements, are essential also to understanding the Europeanism “bias” in Europe. Such research could also present a different angle to the idea of a “white” and nationalist Eastern Europe which emerged in the 1990s and has been the source of anti-Muslim feelings or exclusion.

Finally, there are the internal ideological dimensions of liberalism which could be further investigated, starting from the Romanian debates on integration and modernization. Colonial metaphors from within Europe, often backed by liberal narratives, have strengthened “benign” formulations of the far-right. The role of memory practices in mainstreaming radical and far-right ideologies, in Romania and elsewhere in the region, would therefore deserve deeper attention. Looking at the beginnings of liberalism is paramount to deciphering these routes, and here, thinkers of the right in the interwar period are a particularly potent case study. A further connected direction of future research are the cultural and political narratives set by neoliberalism in Eastern Europe and how these have dominated memory politics. New research would need to investigate collective memory's role in stabilizing and confirming the changing but ever-stable supremacy of ideas of marketization, ideas about deservedness and social hierarchy.

¹⁶³ Steffi Marung, James Mark, Artemy M. Kalinovsky eds., *Alternative Globalizations: Eastern Europe and the Postcolonial World* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2020), 56.