

TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN. EXAMPLES OF FREE AND UNFREE EDUCATION IN SLOVAKIA DURING THE PERIOD OF SOCIALISM

By BLANKA KUDLÁČOVÁ (ed.). Berlin: Peter Lang, 2023, 296 pages. ISBN: 978-3-631-90307-0

This book deals with education in Slovakia under the communist regime. The volume brings together a collection of contributions covering different aspects of the educative reality and is grouped in two large blocks: unfree education and examples of free education. This dual dimension justifies the title of the volume: *Two sides of the same coin*.

This thematic duality takes the volume beyond the history of education to stand as a vindication of the memory of dissidence in the dark days of communism. The aim is to lay out clearly the need to overcome the moral desolation to which Andrej Rajský refers in his chapter and to account for the complex and painful ordeal of learning to live a double life, public and private, and, more difficult still, to pass it on to one's children. In addition to this problematic accommodation of totalitarianism, the book also deals with the struggle to act and gradually expand the islands of freedom.

This dimension of resistance makes the book particularly interesting for two reasons: on the one hand, the necessary recovery of the memory of dissidence and its capacity to patiently erode totalitarianism; on the other, the limits of totalitarianism, a key historiographical question. The existence of these islands of freedom meant that, despite everything, the totalitarian project was not able to impose itself completely. An important element in preventing this from happening was the survival of the churches. Their role as a brake on totalitarianism is an element that

could perhaps have taken up a little more space in Rajský's considerations.

The book opens with a timely introductory chapter by Blanka Kudláčová that situates the reader in the historical coordinates of the communist regime in Slovakia and provides an authoritative review of the literature on the subject. This is followed by Rajský's theoretical chapter on totalitarianism, which has already been referred to above. After these two introductory chapters, it groups the contributions into the two parts already mentioned.

In the unfree education block, the first two chapters focus on the study of the education system: the first one on infant, primary and secondary education, the second on university education. The following four chapters deal with specific aspects such as civic education, religious education, extra-curricular education and the education of Roma children. As the title of this block indicates, the chapters focus on the oppression and control imposed by the totalitarian pretensions of the communist regime. Kudláčová's chapters show the regime's will to control all aspects of education as well as the repressive policies against students and teachers. In this particular area, the text might well have benefited from the inclusion of some data on the purges of teachers and students provided in Rajský's chapter. On the other hand, for a historian of Western education unfamiliar with the Slovakian case, it would have been interesting to add information on the evolution and characteristics of the education system in Slovakia under communism beyond the process of ideologization, although it is true that the chapter focuses on this issue.

Of particular interest are the chapters on civic education, religious education, extra-curricular education and the education of Roma children. They provide an overview of the extent of the totalitarian pretensions of the communist regime, but also of its limitations in achieving its goal of absolute control of society. This is what the conclusions of these chapters seem to indicate when they point out that the regime did not attempt a radical ban on religion or that it did not really know what policy to adopt for the education of Roma children, not to mention the contradictions regarding civic education and the huge contrast between theory and reality in this field.

Particularly interesting is the second part of the book, which deals with dissent against the totalitarian project through the creation and gradual expansion of islands of freedom. Far from being trivial or banal, many inconsequential attitudes in democratic societies were part of a patient process of erosion of totalitarianism, of digging small holes in the solid communist rock by taking advantage of the cracks it offered. Under a totalitarian regime that aims to control even the most intimate behaviours of citizens, everything becomes political, from the way in which we speak to the music we listen to, and everything is quickly endowed with political meaning, even involuntarily.

In this approach to the spaces of freedom, the book presents two chapters on the churches which underline their importance as a brake on the totalitarian project. After all, the churches were the only institutions allowed to survive outside the party and the State. Additionally, the book also includes other forms of dissent in areas that were within the party's sphere of control, such as thought, artistic creation and culture. In general, this block becomes a necessary vindication of the historical memory of the struggle for freedom and of the people who put their careers and even their lives on the line to defend their principles against totalitarianism. It is also a contribution to the shaping of a genealogy of dissidents on which to build the historical legitimacy of today's freedoms.

The undeniable interest of the book does not make it immune to some criticisms. The main criticism to be raised would probably be its narrow linkage to the Slovakian case, which perhaps leads it to lose sight of some general theoretical issues. In this sense, there is a certain confusion between the measures taken by the communist regime and their reduction to defining features of this regime. Thus, a certain reading could be interpreted as devaluing the unified school as a totalitarian communist project when its origins are precisely the opposite, as it has its roots in the educational conceptions of American democracy and arrived in Europe via progressive sectors that were in no way communist. Similarly, the nationalisation and secularisation of the system after 1945 seems to be understood more as a prelude for communism than as the realisation of a radical democratic project common to several countries. In fact, educational laicism and policies opposing the presence of the Catholic Church in education were part of the French democratic republican legacy and cannot be reduced to communism, which seems

in this respect to be more tepid in Slovakia than in the French Third Republic or the Spanish Second Republic. In the same vein, identifying educational proposals aimed at labour supply and the development of practical skills with the Soviet Union is reductionist and ignores the fact that this vocational vision of education had solid positions of power in the United States (not to mention its underground, but nowadays transversal, popularity). Thus, the statement of Marek Wiesenganger's chapter that it constituted a "degradation of the very value of education and also of the child" could be seen as inappropriate in an analytical framework that seeks to maintain some distance from the object of study.

There is also a lack of international context in the treatment of religious education. In view of the previous chapters on totalitarianism and the absolute control of society by the communist regime, one would expect the suppression of religious education, as in France or other secular countries. However, the regime allowed it; there was pressure and control, to be sure - but it was tolerated. In this sense, it could be said that in his exposition, Pavol Jakubčín does not confer to this permissiveness the centrality that it has; this allows him to conclude that in reality the regime did not attempt a radical ban on religion. This side-lining of fundamental issues is repeated regarding the Catholic Church. The situation of the Church under the communist regime is rather confusing. We are told about harassment, repression and the imprisonment of priests and bishops, but, on the other hand, it appears from other statements that religious practices were allowed, that the institution continued to exist and that some priests taught in schools. Additionally, several assertions of the author lead the Western reader to wonder whether there were two churches, one dissident and the other accommodating to the regime. This seems to be Viola Fronková's thesis in his chapter on the Evangelical Church, for she speaks openly of a Church that collaborated with the regime. This is not a small matter and should be made clear to the international reader. Also missing from this chapter is a contextualisation of the Evangelical Church in Slovakia and even an approximate quantification of its followers.

The narrow link to the Slovakian case is also evident in the chapter on the education of Roma children, which is otherwise very interesting. The author considers it a transcendental and characteristic issue of communism that Roma were not recognised as a national minority, but

such recognition does not exist in any Western country, democratic or not, and in fact, it seems more the exception than the rule on a universal scale. In the same vein, it should be borne in mind that neither in Spain nor in France, with significant Roma populations, has the Roma language been used (or even proposed) as a language in schools. The comparison with Western countries makes it difficult to turn its educational policy with the Roma into a criticism of the communist regime. To the contrary, some aspects appear commendable in comparison with the Spanish and French cases. Finally, the reference to the limitations of educational provision for most of the population is somewhat contradictory to the picture of expansion briefly sketched in the introductory chapter, resulting in the absence of a general framework for the evolution of the education system beyond ideological issues.

Despite these objections, the book is undoubtedly a remarkable contribution to the international literature, and we must thank the editor, Blanka Kudláčová, for her work in internationalising the Slovakian case. It would be desirable to have similar books in English on other Eastern European countries that would allow us to learn about the work being carried out by our colleagues in this region.

Antonio Fco. Canales
Universidad Complutense de Madrid
antcanal@ucm.es