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Myth, rhetoric, and ideology in Eastern European education: schools and citizenship in Hungary, Poland, and Romania.EUROPEAN EDUCATION, 41 (1) 55-78

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**Myth, Rhetoric, and Ideology in**

**Eastern European Education**

Schools and Citizenship in Hungary,

Poland, and Romania

Educational study is always a matter of choice between different theoretical paradigms (Paulston, 2003). Sometimes, however, it also runs the risk of taking a dichotomized and ideological stance. Comparative education is an emblematic case in point, especially the excessively ideologized versions of comparative thinking inspired by the cold war (Sander, 1997). The choice to interpret citizenship and education through the lens of such concepts as myth, rhetoric, and ideology is not to promote a particular worldview in a dichotomized and ideological sense, nor to reveal “negative” or dysfunctional issues. On the contrary, the concepts of myth, rhetoric, and ideology provide a more appropriate framework and theoretical approach to enable us to highlight important aspects of the

realities under investigation. Such an “eschatological search,” however,must not be viewed as an exclusive trait of these contexts, even though the intensity of social tensions and the dissolution of traditional identities make it more evident (Tismãneanu, 1999, p. 61). I will first discuss a conceptual framework of myth, rhetoric, and ideology and then apply it to Eastern citizenship and education. These concepts are addressed in three sections dedicated to different historical phases: presocialist,

socialist, and postsocialist.

**Citizenship and education as historical and mythological/**

**ideological constructions: A conceptual framework**

During the past sixteen years, both international and national observers

have analyzed the social and educational transformations at work in

postsocialist contexts mainly within a neoliberal and new-management

conceptual framework. This approach represented the main line of reasoning,

even though some scholars and many practitioners were well aware of

and equally disenchanted with the disjunction between rhetorical function

and practical outcomes of the reform strategies such as decentralization

and democratization. Conversely, political and social scientists questioned

the prevailing neoliberal vision as well as the reform rhetoric introduced

by key international agencies such as the World Bank and the organization

for economic cooperation and development (OECD), though the reforms

were introduced with some differences (Robertson, 2005). Historians and

political analysts drew attention to difficulties, internal distortions, and

peculiar social and mental phenomena, such as “anticommunism with a

communist face” and “fantasies of salvations” (Tismãneanu, 1999). Some

scholars (Kozma, 1992) have observed that the traditional concept of “political

culture” does not apply to postsocialist realities, at least during the first

decade since the collapse of the socialist bloc in 1989, and that concepts

such as political mythologies and ideologies are more appropriate. In fact,

some analysts adopted general political paradigms, notably the neoconservative

paradigm to explain the phenomena (Kozma, 1992, p. 93).

Hence, a more critical interpretation of these educational settings is

necessary given the complexity and lack of linearity of the postsocialist

transformations. In line with Freeden (2000), this study argues that at a

theoretical level, political ideologies are linked to and sustained by educational ideologies and myths. Yet, at a practical level, their relationship

is not deterministic. This is the case of imposed ideologies, such as the

socialist one, which produced educational and social paradoxes. On the

one hand, political myths are seen as substitutes for a more formal political

culture, that is, as rituals that “guide processes in which policies are

made and public opinion is formed” (Bennett, 1980, p. 167). They are

also unquestioned truths about society. Conversely, political ideologies

are somewhat different phenomena: “[w]hile the myth is telling a story,

the ideology is based on systematic ideas” (Tismãneanu, 1999, p. 37).

Both have in common the appearance of a coherent narrative, based on

emotional elements, which give an illusionary sense of protection.1 On the

other hand, educational “rhetoric” or “ideology” represents a key concept

in the study of education reforms. It is a form of “merged rhetoric” of

themes derived from different educational theories: the human capital,

the new common school, and the clientelism theory (Paris, 1995). “This

overlap [of different themes] is more than rhetorical. As a practical matter,

our institutional arrangements seem to reflect the attempt to combine

these various aims” (ibid., p. 51). The ideology of school restructuring

shows both the fragmentary implementation of different theoretical issues

and an exceeding of expectations, which are often contradictory. Its main

function is to replace the lack of vision of contemporary reforms.

Educational myths and “idols” are linked with the effects of globalization

on educational matters, the creation of “national imaginaries” and the

process of citizenship formation (Popkewitz, 2003, p. 269). A sociohistorical

strand in comparative education examine how universal principles,

such as the “cosmopolitan Enlightenment,” “liberal democracy” or more

generally rational systems of reasoning underlying the idea of human

progress are locally embodied in foundational narratives of the nation.

These latter are intrinsically intertwined with and supported by pedagogical

ideas widely diffused on a global scale and locally reinterpreted. In

this sense, it can be assumed that political ideologies and mythologies,

in their global/local dynamic, are closely linked to educational issues,

serving the processes of national invention and reinvention.

**Roots of Eastern European citizenship: From nation**

**formation to the socialist era**

Focusing on citizenship allows observers to analyze the elite’s ways of

receiving and reinterpreting political ideas at different historical moments.

The selective dynamic of political ideas and their successful impact on some social groups (i.e., the Eastern European intelligentsia)

may be explained by the particular modernization phase and geopolitical

conjuncture. Such an acquired “thought heredity” became part of

the elite’s political representations in the form of up-to-date political

languages, acting as tradition filters for successive ideas and ideologies.

Many scholars believe that this is the case of Eastern Europe2 during the

nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which reveals a common pattern if

compared to West European countries.

Between 1770 and 1850, Eastern Europe was undergoing a process

of late modernization. It was the first important attempt at providing an

original reinterpretation and synthesis of the ideas of the French Enlightenment

and German Romanticism. The citizenship profile in Eastern

Europe was molded round this ambivalence of different traditions: first,

the rational choice represented by the historical cosmopolitanism and

paternalism (as Josephinism) of the Hapsburg empire, and second, the

romantic alternative represented by the feelings of belonging to an ethnolinguistic

community. This ambiguity of civic and ethnic components of

citizenship, forged during the 1848 Revolutions, produced an “ideological

confusion” between liberalism and nationalism and subsequently generated

“the great debates which influenced and continue to influence the

development of the politics of this area” (Neumann, 2001, p. 39).

In other words, the cosmopolitan ideal as represented by the French

rationalist Enlightenment was entangled with particularistic-nationalistic

visions. It is interesting to note that East European nationalism has

been interpreted as a localization outcome and reaction to globalizing

ideologies. Thus, over the nineteenth century, and in contrast to the universalistic

ideology of Western liberalism, it was mostly ethnic, while

during the socialist period and the Soviet domination it was largely civic

(Shulman, 2002).

The cultural climate during the first half of the nineteenth century was

strongly influenced by the French rationalist Enlightenment, as attested in

Poland by Father Kornarski’s initiative of reforming the *scolopi* schools

in order to instil the ideas of the Enlightenment and civic virtues in the

new elite. Another example comes from the analysis of school speeches

and other public discourses between 1831 and 1877 in the Romanian

provinces of Walachia and Moldova. The prevailing model was the

patriot-citizen, based on moral and religious values and inspired by a

Christian civic culture (“the good Christian”; Murgescu, 1999, p. 43).

However, as most authors note, this initial cosmopolitan orientation

was rapidly superseded by the romantic feelings of national belonging

as a particularistic perspective, which contributed in the long run to the

prevalence of ethnicity and of cultural differences. This orientation was

emblematically represented by Herder’s thought, and politically favored

by the overwhelming influence of Prussia in the East. More generally, it

has been argued that Herderianism favored the idea of a linguistically and

ethnically organic community, explicitly excluding cultural pluralism and,

at the same time, impeding the social emancipation of these populations.

In actual fact, the eastern regions of Europe were characterized by the lack

of a middle class and by limited urbanization. The main drawback was

the social distance between the people and the elites. The emancipation

and democratization processes were limited to the privileged strata of

the population. The abyss thus created between the elites and the lower

classes underwent recurrent renewal.

Traditionally, political science considered that the dual pattern of a

cosmopolitan versus Herderian orientation was at the origin of the wellknown

contraposition between a good/Western/civic and a bad/Eastern/

ethnic type of nation creation. However, this oversimplification of Eastern

citizenship has recently been radically questioned on empirical grounds

(see Shulman, 2002).3 On the other hand, some scholars such as Dressler

give a positive evaluation of the Herderian influence for its “integrative

synthesis of cultural and social forms” (1999, p. 54). The goal of the

“cultural nationalism” was to synchronize “liberal politics and centralized

democracy, represented by the French Jacobin universalism, with

cultural autonomy of nations characterised by a plurality of languages and

religions, without imposing any criteria for defining identity” (Dressler,

1999, p. 54). The problem is not with Herderianism itself, but its interpretations

and instrumental uses by elites (*rétro-nationalisme*).

The 1848 European revolutions and the subsequent period of national

identity formation, in the second half of the nineteenth century,

were nevertheless influenced by a plurality of traditions: not only the

prevailing Herderian4 ethnoculturalism, but also the cosmopolitan values

represented by the French Enlightenment and practically endorsed

by the Ottoman empire in the area of its influence. The main difficulty

of the process of national construction was the weak tradition of civic

culture and the overestimation of the “collective-individual.” Thus, the

new political philosophies were based first and foremost on mythologies

such as “common origins” and “continuity,” that is, *daco-romanism* for

the Romanians and *sarmatism* for the Poles. These early political myths,

mostly an elite invention, also influenced the idea of the national school,

viewed as an opportunity to both civilize and form the nation. The poor

classes viewed school mainly as an opportunity for social redemption,

as documented by the Romanian school speeches of the time.

Until the nineteenth century, the building of national identity in the

region was a matter of geography: the nations were composed of various

regions and provinces, mostly under foreign control, but they all shared

the same influences cross-nationally. Historical conditions created a variety

of local realities: from autonomous Galicia under Austro-Hungarian

dominance, to the regions under German and Russian cultural oppression.

The Polish high sense of community was favoured in Galicia by the use

of their own language in schools (Tworzecki, 1996); in other parts of this

country, identity was a matter of struggle for culture and language. It is

then not difficult to understand the role played by the school as the central

arena for the struggles over culture and national language. The issue of

national identity, in all the countries here considered, resembled a mosaic

of “internal voices” or of “national souls,” depending on how national

cohesiveness is assessed by different scholars or mentally represented

by the people themselves. This cultural diversity, prior to the process of

nation formation, is still discernible in regional differences as confirmed

by the voting behavior pattern, strength of civic culture and, especially,

ideological and political orientations (Tworzecki, 1996).

During the first half of the twentieth century, the polarization of public

themes around a cosmopolitan ideal, such as the “European idea,” and

an endogenous ethnospecificity became even more manifest. Public

discourses supporting industrialization and urbanization processes

were paralleled by the circulation of particularistic ideologies, such as

“traditionalism” and “agrarianism,” the latter in the Romanian versions

of *samanatorism* and *poporanism.* Thus, Hungarian culture oscillated

between urbanism and populism (Gyurgyak, 1991). Further, the experience

of fascism in Hungary and Romania, with the enactment of racial

laws and the Nazi occupation of Poland, influenced civic culture, reinforced

intolerant values, such as anti-Semitism, and introduced behavior

patterns and mentalities of political repression also cultivated by the

communist regimes.

At the turn of the century, educational developments became increasingly

bound up with political ideas and ideologies. The traditionalist

and agrarian political cultures in Romania favored the building of

rural schools for the masses, which had been hitherto largely ignored.

This resulted in a substantial decline in illiteracy. Another significant

consequence was the creation of a “rural” sociology, which influenced

pedagogical thought, producing the theories of pedagogical “regionalism”

and “localism.” These theories, based on statistical and empirical

analyses, were supposed to improve the social and cultural conditions

of small rural communities.

In all probability, the idea of a differentiated curriculum for rural and

urban areas did not produce the expected outcome. On the contrary, it

ran the risk of aggravating an already polarized situation. In practice,

rural education continued to be inadequate. Because the intellectualistic

tradition of the Romanian school was slow to die, education in rural

settings was neither really pragmatic, nor did it promote an explicit

political and civic education. It therefore ran the risk of strengthening

existing stratification. The “dual” rural/urban education reinforced the

crystallized “dual” citizenship on social grounds. Not surprisingly for

that time, the idea of “two kinds of children” was also put forward, in

accordance with the “ethnical spirit of the Romanian pedagogy” (Stanciu,

1995, p. 213).

This analysis reveals the extreme significance of social stratification

and polarization in explaining Eastern European realities. The resemblance

of these social realities explains the “Eastern” internal contradictions

and, consequently, partially validates a differentiated East/West

national pattern. The source of Eastern nationalism lies in a peculiar

social stratification, which traditionally lacks a consistent middle class

and cuts across urban/rural differentiation. The configuration of the political

myths and ideologies, with their educational subproducts, confirms

the relevance of social factors as an underlying pattern in the formation

of Eastern European national identity. Unlike in Western countries,

where the label “urban students” refers to a more disadvantaged or “at

risk” social group, in Eastern Europe, especially in countries with huge

discrepancies between rural and urban contexts such as Romania, the

term has come to indicate a relatively privileged group.

**Experiencing communist ideology in its “real socialist” meaning**

From the perspective of educational outcomes, a process of ongoing

stratification was rooted in school practices, especially after the 1970s.

The communist sociopolitical and educational experiments in Central

and Eastern Europe displayed common traits as well as differences. The

communist parties and regimes officially promoted the communist ideology.

It is questionable whether its historical and actual consequences

can be analyzed as the result of a genuine political culture, though the

only one accepted, or as the outcome of a “negative” coherent structure

of thinking that obscures incongruous elements in order to uphold a

particular social order. As Freeden (2000) points out, this is a matter of

context and it is characteristic of any given ideology.

The communist ideology exhibited an eschatological dimension of

moral and societal progress. The discrepancy between its high aspirations

and its practical forms is revealed by the expression “real socialist”

meaning, coined by the socialist people themselves at the time of the

communist disenchantment and collapse.

On practical grounds, during Stalinism a certain democratic effect

of social justice has been noted, even though it was more visible in the

poorest national settings. These positive outcomes, which were limited

to the initial stage of the socialist period, were rapidly replaced by many

other social and political dysfunctions, such as the discontinuity between

socialist citizenship and its precommunist model, the lack of political

information and pluralism, which would have created a more critical

and authentic citizenship, and finally the emphasis on social rights to the

detriment of civil liberties and political, economic, and cultural rights.

The communist ideology denied alternative discourse on social developments,

which meant that the official discourse based on collectivism,

democratic centralism, polytechnic/vocational education, and citizenship

education had a mere ritualistic political function. Besides, such catchwords

“produced” or veiled exactly contradictory outcomes and paradoxical

realities, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s. This was true not only for

dictatorial and “sultanistic” Romania, but also for authoritarian Poland and

“advanced post-totalitarian” Hungary (Linz & Stepan, 2000, p. 208). As a

matter of fact, the ideological cage was for all those countries a common

*trait d’union* that remained a ritualistic duty until 1989.

Education in communist settings was full of such paradoxical effects.

The communist “hidden curriculum” was more than an educational output.

The ideological “duty” of education was paralleled by deeply rooted

social habits that sharply contrasted it. Unsurprisingly, the statistics of

political officials did not acknowledge this effect, a general trend in the

East. However, this was not the case of teachers, parents, and students,

who were particularly pragmatic in coping with the real situation, as charcterized by paradoxical and counterproductive effects. The latent curriculum

was the outcome of excessive educational centralization. In fact,

the myth of a classless society was related to “democratic centralism.”

The long-established centralizing tendency of East European educational

systems was once again strengthened by means of political ideology. This

had the effect of producing tremendously rigid configurations.

However, proclaiming educational uniformity did not mean that the

education actually received was the same everywhere and this for several

reasons. Historically, in some contexts, such as in Hungary after 1975, a

certain diversification of the educational offer was created by changing

the standardised curriculum into a *core curriculum,* based on minimal

standards and complemented by a local version and a personal choice

(Bathory, 1986). Conceptually, it is hard to believe that the socialist

uniform *syllabus,* defined as “one curriculum–one textbook” and “the

curriculum is a law,” would have reach a complete standardisation of the

educational practices. In addition, it must be considered that “where the

central curriculum is dominant, there it will inevitably appear a latent

curriculum” (Bathory, 1988, p. 127).

Such paradoxical issues show how communist egalitarian politics

resulted in highly selective educational institutions, strong discrimination

between academic and professional pathways and special training

of gifted students. A well-known comparative study on educational

inequalities, *Persistent Inequality: Changing Educational Attainment*

*in Thirteen Countries* (Shavit & Blossfeld, 1993), plainly demonstrated

that officially promoted politics produced unexpected outcomes and

paradoxical effects. But this was not a novelty in the socialist area. In

fact, from the 1970s onward public opinion, especially in Hungary, was

accustomed to the shocks engendered by the publicity of International

Energy Agency (IEA) studies results (Bathory, 1992) and other internally

conducted studies on the ongoing stratification, which became, however,

a common sociological topic in the area. Mass education in communist

settings was not so successful in promoting a lessening of social class

discrepancies. In the Polish case, an “unintended positive effect” has

been reported regarding gender equality, “as this effect was neither

a stated aim, nor an expected outcome” (Heyns & Bialecki, 1993, p.

304). In the Hungarian case, social inequalities and the influence of the

“father’s profession” on educational achievement as a predicting factor

of educational and social success, were more significant than in other

West European settings. Similar findings are reported for preunification

East Germany. The enrollment quotas, intended as democratic measures

favoring disadvantaged people, had a very limited effect. They proved

efficient mostly in the immediate postwar period and in the case of the

elementary school (Barbu, 1999).

Another peculiar effect was a certain “encyclopaedism,” an overcharged

and compulsory elitist curriculum. In fact, the emergence during

the 1970s of a *sui generis* social class, the so-called *nomenklatura,* was

another sign of reinvigorating the process of stratification, also supporting

more elitist orientation. The other side of the coin was that the education

for the masses had an unbalanced and thus excessive professional and

technical profile, brought about by the “polytechnic education” myth.

The “polytechnic principle” revealed itself from the outset as typical

Soviet rhetoric, which informed all the Soviet educational reforms from

1921 to 1984. While it was supposed to represent a genuine search for

an educational solution to the classical distinctions between intellectual

and manual work, its obscure and shifting meaning testified to a mostly

ideological function (Mincu, 2004). In fact, this was a rather ambiguous

notion, given its practical implementation as both an educative principle

transversal to the levels of the school system and, at the same time, as

mainly concerning the lower secondary level. Soviet education itself

displayed this shifting meaning with every reform. Another ambiguity

is linked with its theoretical application: as a technical dimension of

the curriculum or as a laboratory practice (Smart, 1968). Ambiguous,

and thus ideological, as it was, its practical consequences have been

impressive: a massive “specialization” of secondary education schools

as technical, agricultural, and industrial profiles and the quasi-absence

of general academic profiles.

Highly selective rituals accompanied the collectivist rhetoric: “school

Olympiads,” demanding selections, “private lessons” for privileged

urban students who wished to gain entrance to the best schools. An

ethnography on an East/West sense of self-efficacy in 1990 Germany

reports that, under the collectivist veil, classroom interactions generated

informal hierarchical classifications and thus an elitist orientation

(Oettingen, 1999). This illuminating analysis helps us to understand the

way collectivism was practically implemented. In fact, it assumes that

traditional and Herbartian-style5 methodological cultures sustained power

disparities, masculine values and thus a competitive school ethos. The

outcome was the institutionally produced demotivation of the lowestperforming

students, a category that significantly overlaps with the

socially disadvantaged groups. However, this was the same target group

that collectivism was ideologically supposed to protect. The dysfunction

of communist collectivism as a form of cooperative teaching was shaped

by the specificity of social and educational contexts. Such undemocratic

regimes produced an elitist-individualist counterculture that opposed

truly collectivistic-cooperative values.

Citizenship education also reflected all the above contradictions.

The overarching educational and societal goal was the promotion of the

communist citizen according to the precepts of morality, ideology—

intended as an explicit educational dimension—and patriotism. The

sharp divergence between the communist theory of social change and

its practical effect, especially in the past twenty years of the socialist

period, resulted in an artificial conception of citizenship that lost most

of its original persuasiveness. The educational strategies to promote the

new citizen were based on traditional pedagogy. The citizenship profile

was that of a disciplined hard-working subject, able to exhibit accepted

public behaviors in a “civil” rather than “civic” sense.

This pedagogy was far from reaching the expected goals. Actually,

some Romanian field studies, for instance Nestian (1988) demonstrated

that less ideological and more creative approaches were more efficient in

instilling commitment to communist values and genuine patriotism. It has

been concluded that “literature could instil patriotism only on condition

that it display an undoubted artistic value.” The excessive moralism of

some narratives drawing on *clichés* originated by “samanatorism” and

“proletcultism”6 reached undesirable effects: “They bored like a rainy

day in the autumn, since they embodied a hyperreality from which the

artistic emotion was expelled. Their weak patriotic message was the result

of an equally weak aesthetic value” (Nestian, 1988, p. 20).

Collectivist ideology, the classless society and socialist democratization

were different names for the same thing: the great communist aspiration

of social cohesion. Such a political ideal remained mostly a chimera,

although some observers noted a certain “flavor” of solidarity (Garton

Ash quoted by Tismãneanu, 1999, p.133). Many scholars highlighted the

individualistic and atomistic configurations of Eastern European societies.

The solidarity ring as a political myth of social uniformity was contrasted

by concrete forms of corporatism in the Polish case (Zielonka, 1989), by

the rediscovering of different forms of pluralism, such as religion, or by

the accentuated and peculiar stratification after the 1970s as previously

discussed. A nationalistic revival was also noticeable, which depended

on the manipulation and promotion of artificial solidarity in times of

economic difficulties by the politicians.

It is not hazardous to assert that the communist educational landscape

was teeming with rhetorical catchwords, ideological slogans, and political

and educational myths that did not take account of the real situation.

Socialist citizenship is best described as the “paradox of social cohesion”

formulated by Saunders (1993), and revealed by the inefficacy of

“imposed collectivism” as a duty to interact or collaborate with other

people (p. 85). The parents’ obligation to collaborate with teachers and

schools as unique educative agency is an example (Svecovà, 1994). The

role of the teacher-parents associations was only to support the school as

unique educative agency. Parents were responsible only with regard to

the rules for their children and the accomplishment of the patriotic duties,

for example, assuring the requested amount of materials for recycling

practices in Romania. Excepting the Hungarian attempt to institute a

more substantial collaboration with parents in 1985, parents’ disaffection

with schools was clearly denounced by the “private lessons” system in

the area (Timar, 1990, p. 30).

The communist ideology had nevertheless a differentiated influence

on the educational systems of the socialist area, from an intensive

indoctrination with nationalistic overtones in the Romanian case to a

ritualistic duty in Hungary and, finally, to a communist ideology promoting

a pluralistic scene in Poland. The different impact of the ideological

factor is mainly to be linked with the sociopolitical internal dynamism.

For instance, in the advanced post-totalitarian Hungary the official duty

to comply with ideology guaranteed remarkable educational, social, and

economical innovations.

**Reinventing politics and restructuring education**

***Political mythologies in continuity***

The political scene of the 1990s exhibited many traits in continuity with

the previous historical stages as well as plural political references. For

instance, in Hungary two main political ideas were revived, urbanism and

populism, which were typical of the 1920s (Schlett, 1991). They reflect

the traditional contradiction between the adhesion to European values

and the appreciation of peasant culture. In addition, several “political

cultures” have always been at work in Eastern Europe, perhaps with the

exception of Poland, where the Catholic Church has played a unifying

role. The reason for the existence of fragmentary political cultures lies

in the above-mentioned discrepancy between the elites and the masses,

in terms of the “geographical distribution” of national identity and the

uninterrupted regeneration of the dual citizenship pattern (i.e., a cosmopolitan

orientation versus a particularistic traditional peasant culture).

Eastern European political settings were also represented by “political

mythologies” of salvation (Tismãneanu, 1999, p. 13). These, however,

were mere “ideological surrogates” competing with common political

ideas. Examples of “political mythologies” are “the return to Europe”

(Silova, 2005, p. 129; Tismãneanu, 1999, p. 61) and to a certain extent

even the regulative ideal-type of “civil society” (Keane, 1998, p. 41). Such

syncretic phenomena perpetuated ancient collectivistic passions and a low

level of trust into the institutions of the state. Hence, immediately after

1989, they performed a unifying function in terms of public discourse

and served as visible markers of personal identity, in the absence of a

more active or ethical commitment to politics. As a result, public behavior

showed self-compassion and victimization as well as fear of the “other” as

a rejection of difference and otherness. These mythologies are classified

as (a) salvation-focused and authoritarian, (b) messianic and demonizing

(ethnic nationalism), (c) revengeful (i.e., decommunization and political

justice), and (d) reactionary and restorative (Tismãneanu, 1999).

During the initial stage of Eastern European transitions, such mythological

foundations of politics, which emphasized ethnic relations and

superficial cohesion, nevertheless sustained the reconstruction of a sense

of community. In addition, the dominance of the ethnic roots of citizenship

can be observed in the renewed postcommunist nationalism. At a

general political level, the theory of a neoconservative ideology as the

expression of an endogenous orientation brought about the resurrection

of precommunist and thus out-of-date institutions, given that the communist

period was considered a mere historical accident. At an educational

level, the consequences were curriculum nationalization, the revival of

“old” educational structures “for new purposes” (Silova, 2004, p. 85),

and the privatization of the educational system. Hungarian liberals and

populists agreed on such strategies based on ideological and rhetorical

motivations (Kozma, 1992). A similar neo-conservative scenario is

reported in the Polish case, still at the end of the 1990s. Significantly,

this may be considered a sign of the slow normalization of the political

scene (Tomiak, 2000).

***“The language of civil society”***

The postcommunist reconstruction aimed at reinventing politics in terms

of the creation of a truly “political society,” given the people’s disenchantment

with politics under communist regimes and the reconstruction

of state institutions. However, the *leitmotif* seems to be the rebuilding

of civil society, intended as a social and moral transformation as well

as a remedy to the communist atomisation effect. As many scholars

have showed, such an ambitious purpose raises some doubts, since the

formation of civil societies is a historically and culturally unplanned

process. The catchphrase “civil society” represents the Eastern or Marxist

counterpart of the more classical citizenship idea (Keane, 1998; Turner,

1993) and it is meant to imply civil solidarity and morality. During the

socialist phase it played the role of an “effective moral and political

utopia” (Keane, 1998, p. 21), while for the difficult transition processes

that of a more tangible guiding vision. As Keane (1998) maintains, we

assisted at the worldwide diffusion of the “language of civil society . . .

with a variety of different meanings, and for a wide variety of purposes”

(p. 21). In point of fact, the civil society ideal sometimes happened to

turn into no more than another ideological slogan. This was the case of

social and moral settings with weak civil societies, such as Romania.

For some observers, Romania was completely lacking moral and civic

resources so that civil society renewal was deemed quite impossible.

Despite the difficult reconstruction of “civil society,” which remained

more a rhetorical exhortation than a real outcome, this initial supposition

was too pessimistic even for an atomized and postdictatorial country

such as Romania.

The difficulties and paradoxes of the transition processes, such as an

individualism of possession, intensive stratification processes, corruption,

and superficial democratic forms—the “decorative pluralism” (Barbu,

1999, p. 125)—are parallel public discourses that focus on community,

participation, and the common good, familiar collectivist values updated

with an unexpected communitarian flavor.7 It is doubtful whether this

represents a genuine search for the reinvigoration of social values and

virtues, or whether it is mostly a renewed form of rhetorical government

and administration of the public sphere. Poland may represent an exception,

because of its strong Catholic culture, commonly recognized as one

of the main ingredients of a genuine communitarian perspective.

***The method to renovate education***

During the 1990s, a “re-regionalization” process emerged, suggesting

significant differences between the pathways of transitions and citizenship

patterns. Nevertheless, Eastern European education systems continued to

be more similar than dissimilar to the communist past, as the imported

new “forms” preserved the “old contents.” At the outset, postcommunist

education displayed the temptation of differentiating itself from the

“totalitarian and monolithic education” of the socialist past. Educational

debates moved from an ideological recuperation of some precommunist

school structures to the “best model to be imported” policy, viewed as

a quick fix solution to “rapidly pass through the savage phase” (Birzea,

1994, p. 25). Some major scholars involved in political decisions declared

that there were no models to reproduce, that it was “not easy to opt for a

liberal or a centralistic model,” and that “situations [were] very different”

(ibid., p. 25). From interviews it emerged that other scholars recognized,

more or less overtly, that restructuring strategies were actively favored

by some precisely identifiable international “partners” (a specific country),

and that “prominent scholars offered advice.” Many more admitted

that international financing was not neutral but ideologically driven and

conditioned. Some others appreciated the “method” of international guidance,

offered by request, as a cooperative form of peer-review involving

international specialists. This use of an external consultant was viewed as

an important way to put pressure on local politicians, and thus, as a positive

incentive to change (in interviews with the author in 1999–2000).

***Democratization through decentralization***

The unequivocal sign of the lack of vision of educational reforms was the

recurrent emphasis during the 1990s on two “priorities:” the decentralization

and democratization of education. Obviously, these labels were

justified by the real situation of the educational systems. In fact, after

almost fifty years of excessive centralization, both the Polish and Romanian

systems exhibited very similar organizational and structural traits.

From a political point of view the Polish experience with communism,

as an authoritarian regime after the 1980s and with important sources of

internal pluralism (e.g., the Catholic Church, the strength of civil society,

the strong socialist tradition of the beginning of the twentieth century,

and the historical opposition to Russian imperialism) was more similar

to the Hungarian experience as an “advanced post-totalitarian regime”

of gradual withdrawal from communism. However, from an educational

point of view the resistance of the initial influence of Soviet education

principles8 (Szebenyi, 1992) linked with a traditional methodological

culture and the weakness of the internal resources to diverge from this

pattern; for example, the peculiarities of the political and social scene,

the historical precedents (Mitter, 1991) of the educational systems, the

contacts with the international and then “western” pedagogy and the

capacity and desire to undertake educational reforms made Polish and

Romanian education immediately in the aftermath of the 1989 events

more similar than dissimilar.

The Hungarian system, however, was an exception, having initiated

politics of decentralization long before 1989. In fact, already in 1978

the center attempted to delegate the innovative function to lower levels

of the system and thus to initiate an experimental stage; allowed for the

possibility to adapt the centralized curriculum to the local contexts and

introduced teaching autonomy (Nagy, 1994, p. 46). A more substantial

attempt to reform the system was made in 1985 with the law of school

autonomy, which undertook significant provisions toward decentralisation.

Its efficacy was however partial and the result were inconsistent

given the incongruence between school autonomy and a centralized

curriculum that was only adapted on a local base, the lack of a control

since the inspection system was replaced by school guidance, different

regulations of primary schools (local authorities) and secondary schools

(central authorities), the imprecision of defining the autonomy concept

itself and actors’ mentalities. The 1985 Hungarian Reform Act was more a

matter of legislative innovation. However, it was a singular and outstanding

watershed with the centralised past, a useful precedent that opened

the way to a radical decentralization of the Hungarian education.

As far as democratization is concerned, all these systems needed

substantial changes, since the socialist intentions of social equality

produced systematically ad-hoc hierarchies and peculiar stratification

dynamics. The two priorities mentioned above displayed, however, an

ideological function, as revealed by the educational strategies chosen for

implementation and by their effects. The significance of the decentralization

movement was rather radical since it was inspired by the politics of

Thatcher and Reagan of the 1980s (Beresford-Hill, 1998). This was also

the case of the 1985 Hungarian educational reform and the postcommunist

restructuring. Moreover, the single strategies and the coherent reforms

produced for almost ten years after 1989 produced only rhetoric and

thus disappointing outcomes. This was also true for the Hungarian case

during the 1980s, which survived a long adjustment phase. The reason

is that truly decentralizing politics are sustained by specific mindsets

that are not easily modifiable and take time to become reality. Numerous

reforms worldwide reached a “deconcentrated” systemic configuration

that sometimes carried out a regional neocentralistic effect, as is the case

in Poland and Romania. This effect is a clear sign of the discrepancy

between educational aims, at a rhetorical level, and mentalities, at a

practical level, which can be viewed either as a negative outcome or as

a first step toward the introduction of more substantial changes.

Most studies on decentralization show that it is not a simple and homogeneous

strategy (Fullan, 1993; Halasz, 1999). In fact, it involves different

levels and areas of educational governance and the relationships between

the general system of public administration and educational administration

translate into different decentralizing strategies. Additionally, it is

commonly argued that centralization was more appropriate for a state-led

(communist here) massification of the education process, and that recent

autonomist politics uphold flexibility as well as a democratic process of

educational differentiation and individualisation. Other scholars adopt a

more subtle view, arguing that “neither centralisation nor decentralisation

works” and that “both top-down and bottom-up strategies are necessary”

(Fullan, 1993, p. 22).

For these reasons, educational decentralization as a “general cure” was

more of a myth, at least in the postcommunist settings here considered.

Looking at the results it has produced so far, especially in highly centralized

countries such as Poland and Romania, it is reasonable to say that

during the first postcommunist decade it did not bring about real changes

of educational practices. In fact, notwithstanding different educational

priorities and peculiar outcomes, such as the civic schools in Poland

(Klus-Stanska & Olek, 1998; Laciak, 1998) and the private higher education

institutions in Romania, structural diversification was rather limited

in these countries and until the late 1990s it could not be described as an

“innovative dynamic from below,” nor an efficient reform “from above.”

The continuing convergence between Polish and Romanian education in

the late 1990s is given by the nature of the changes, as nonstrategic and

fragmentary (Birzea, 1997; Bogaj, Kwiatkowski, & Szymanski, 1999)

lacking a coherent and clear vision of a systemic reform. Educational

discourses confirm the need for a global and systemic reform and the

urgency of its implementation.

On the contrary, it created confusion and artificial change in contexts of

inertia (Poland and Romania), as well as financial shortage and inequalities

between different regions in “dynamic” contexts, such as Hungary.

It also has been reported that there was a decrease in educational quality.

In the past, intellectuals and nonintellectuals alike believed that communist

education worked properly because it produced elites and good

students. Similarly, after 1989 many believed that an advanced reform

of decentralization was a clear sign of a good education. Both convictions

reveal educational myths: in the former case, that of a competitive

national system of education, legitimized by a limited number of excellent

students, often with the “right” backgrounds; in the latter case, the myth

of an intrinsic goodness of educational decentralization.

On the democratic side, the vision of postcommunist reforms initially

had a more general political meaning. Education was supposed to be

“humanized” and “socialized” in a renewed sense of democracy. In addition,

rendering education more democratic meant adopting “classical”

strategies to allow large groups of people to gain access to education.

This resulted in the elimination of highly selective tests and the increased

tertiary-level enrolment. At the same time, “democratic education”

acquired a more “decentralizing” sense, which involved a diversification

of educational provisions and institutions. This trend of “external

diversification” and privatization conducted rapidly in a loosely coupled

system led some educationalists, like Kozma, to wonder “who owns the

school?” (quoted in Halasz, 1998, p. 68).

***Old and new ideologies at work***

From the study of postcommunist education, it has been noted that the

lack of a reforming vision and the persistence of the “Manichean mindset”

favored an ideological approach to education and citizenship. The

question is whether ideological catchwords can eventually transform

social realities or whether they irrevocably lead to a “denial of change”

(Popkewitz, 2000). Actually, the lack of real change is most probably

engendered by such “mythological” accounts, which ignore real developments,

mentalities, and social configurations.

In other words, the question allows for real change to be brought about

by social and educational ideologies. Following Archer’s interpretation,

Mitter claims that the “ideological factor” was unproblematic in the

absolutist state (2004, p. 352). The implicit assumption in his words

is that the emergence of regional and global “new educational spaces”

has complicated the scenario. The effects of educational ideology in a

globalized world nevertheless need further investigation.

For Freeden (2000), an ideology may however induce social and

educational change if its characteristics are “flexible” and if the political

culture within which it is situated is pluralist. In his words, “if moral

and political theory are ordinarily entrusted to tell us how to act, can

an ideology, in its dual role, both as theory and practice, do the same?”

(Freeden, 2000, p. 305). Moreover, ideology must not be considered as

an inferior form of political thought and theories. Postcommunist ideologies,

such as the neoconservative paradigm, should not be considered

negative or “perverted” political cultures, but products of specific settings

and mentalities. It is assumed that even when “ideologies involve distortion,

misrecognition or rhetoric, there are contextual reasons for those

features, and they too evidence ideational patterns that may be decoded”

(Freeden, 2000, p. 321).

**Conclusions**

The postcommunist area represents an interesting challenge for understanding

citizenship and education as ideological phenomena, rhetorical

outcomes, and mythological effects. This approach is an attempt to

interpret and connect political and educational developments. The East

European modernization path was therefore mainly molded by a contradictory

fluctuation between the European idea and national identity.

Often, education reinforced sharp social stratification, although the

underpinning ideology attempted to reduce it as reflected in endogenous

pedagogical perspectives. Education also accentuated an additional

discrepancy, the difference between rural and urban education, and,

consequently, between a rural and an urban citizen, as in the Romanian

case. The communist ideology had a differentiated influence on the educational

systems of socialist countries. The existence of rival ideologies,

as in the Polish case, or the economic evolution to a free market, in the

Hungarian case, shaped a somewhat pluralistic framework. Hence, the

communist ideology became a mere ritualistic duty. However, it also created

educational and social paradoxes that contrasted starkly with official

ideology. During postcommunism, political mythologies and ideologies

guided the restructuring of states and educational systems. The globalized

educational rhetoric and the myth of educational decentralization tried

to renovate educational cultures, but they generated only poor results.

The more significant the discrepancy between real social and educational

configurations and new reformist visions (i.e., between a civil society

and a decentralized education) the more it will impede the achievement

of desired social and educational changes.

**Notes**

1. For instance, in the educational realm we can distinguish the myth of quality

education as proved by the extraordinary performances of an elite in the “Olympiads”

and jointly held by parents, teachers, and administrators. Its suggestive narrative

is obviously different from that expressed by the more systematic ideology of

decentralization, satisfying the need to both feel competitive and be reassured.

2. For some scholars, Hungary and Poland belong to Central Europe and

Romania to Southeastern Europe. This controversial issue of terminology is more

a matter of politics than geography, as maintained for instance by Coulby (2000).

For a full account of this issue of terminology see Kozma and Polonyi (2004).

3. In fact, the interpretation of a Western state-led nation building versus an

Eastern ethnocultural nationalism (i.e., from state to nation versus from nation to

state) is not completely convincing. Similarly to Wandycz (2001), who argues for

an initial “Western” model in Hungary and Poland and a later “oriental” model after

traumatic events, that is the Hungarian defeats of Mohacs in 1526 and the White

Mountain in 1620, and the Polish partitions in 1772. Sugar stresses the varieties

of Eastern nationalism, identifying an “aristocratic” nationalism in Hungary and

Poland, a “petty-bourgeois” nationalism in the Czech Republic, a Bulgarian and

Serbian populist-peasant nationalism, and finally a “bureaucratic” nationalism for

the Romanians and the Greeks (Neumann, 2001, p. 50).

4. Herder replaced the traditional concept of a juridical-political state with that

of the “folk-nation” as organic in its historical growth, ethnically and linguistically

homogeneous. Herderianism opposed cultural pluralism and undervalued

the relevance of social factors. His works were frequently cited by Czechs,

Hungarians, Romanians, Serbs, and Greeks and contributed to a widespread use

of the ethnonationalistic thesis, which became a major ingredient of the political

cultures of this area.

5. Traditional pedagogy implies frontal teaching of the whole group of students,

“teaching ex-cathedra,” while herbartian pedagogy is mainly associated with the

organization of lesson in highly articulated phases.

6. ”Samanatorism” is a Romanian literary strand from the early twentieth

century, cultivating the rural and historical inspiration. “Proletcultism” is a Soviet

literary strand linked with the October Revolution and supporting the idea of a

purely proletarian culture.

7. The sources of the post-1989 perfectionist discourses in Eastern Europe

are the ethos of the communist collectivism still partially active and some more

updated communitarian stances, mainly linked with Catholic culture. For such a

definition of perfectionism see Metz (2001).

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8. These principles are educational ideology, detailed state curriculum, state

monopoly of schooling, uniform school structure, and hierarchically centralized

management.

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