

The Little Genre that Could: CHAT Mapping the Slogan of the Big Communist Propaganda

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This article describes the political propaganda of the Communist period of Romania (1947-1989), in which the one-party political system shaped the rhetoric of public discourse. I contextualize the political slogan and the radical tone it developed over time. After analyzing the genre of the slogan and its political context, I resituate this genre into a different context. In graduate school, when I was once prompted to write a personal narrative about my childhood, I found humor in introducing this genre into my story. In doing so, I have aimed to decontextualize the slogan from a serious time, when it represented powerful Communist propaganda, and secondly, to show how in a different context, the slogan could bring to my story both local color and humor in the way its status was degraded to derision.

I came to America for the first time in the late 1990s after growing up in Romania. Years later, when I started graduate school in a creative nonfiction class at an American university, far away from my native land, my professor nonchalantly said: “Write about your childhood.”

Just like that. As if saying, “Describe this table right here.” If only it were so simple!

I grew up in Communist Romania, in the half of Europe that was under Soviet influence and at war with Western Europe and America—the Cold War. Romania had a Communist system between 1947 and 1989. In the totalitarian regime of Romania, the Communist Party was the only political party. In such a regime, everything is government-owned, there are no elections, and the president can stay in power for decades. The president of Socialist Romania, Comrade Nicolae Ceaușescu,¹ was in power for almost 25 years, as he was reelected by the Communist Party every five years. In 1989, however, a wave of change went through the Communist Bloc. It was the year when the Berlin Wall fell, and change was starting to happen in Eastern Europe. The anti-totalitarian revolution came to Romania too.² In a

totalitarian regime, all schools are public, people can only own one apartment or house per family, traveling abroad is almost impossible, and people can't own a business; in short, people have limited liberties. But one thing is certain: they have to obey the government and do what they are told. That is why the government has its own specific ways of telling people what to do and how things are.

For my creative writing class, I wanted to write about a lot of things from my childhood: about my experience growing up in a Communist country, about my family, and many other things. And I did. Ultimately, I decided to retell a funny story about my cousin and me when we were between eight and ten years old, so it must have been during the late seventies. We were pretending to "interview" his four-month old brother, my youngest cousin at the time. The interview had us laughing so much that at one point, we fell and rolled on the floor in laughter, taking the baby's stroller down with us with the baby in it. (The baby was OK, though we did get in trouble!)

I remembered playing the reporter, asking mock questions, and laughing at the baby's cooing answers. It was supposed to be funny. While trying to write about these beautiful summers as a child, I wanted to show that there were also serious things going on in my childhood, not only fun: my intention, therefore, was to find a way to show the Communist dimension of the society at the time, as it had been a crucial and determining part of my childhood. So I paused, and with my grown-up mind, thought about the genre of propaganda slogans as I remembered them from those years—a genre integral to the Communist society in which I grew up.

The Genre of the Slogan

Merriam Webster Dictionary lists the following explanations under the "slogan" entry:

1a: a war cry especially of a Scottish clan

1b: a word or phrase used to express a characteristic position or stand or a goal to be achieved

2: a brief attention-getting phrase used in advertising or promotion³

In general, the slogan is a political sentence or a catchphrase intended for persuasion. They can often become clichés. The kind of slogans I grew

up with could fit a little in each of the three explanations given by *Merriam Webster*, but they were also more than that.

I realize now that those slogans were indeed like a “war cry,” that they “express a characteristic position or stand or a goal to be achieved,” and that to some extent, they attempt at “attention-getting”: “LONG LIVE THE MULTILATERALLY DEVELOPED SOCIALIST SOCIETY AND THE ADVANCEMENT OF ROMANIA TOWARDS COMMUNISM!” They were not trying to advertise or promote anything in a commercial way; after all, the audience had no actual option but to buy whatever the establishment had to sell. Advertising, in fact, didn’t even exist in those times, as the free market didn’t exist, and there was no choice but to buy whatever the government was selling.

Here are some examples of the slogans I grew up with. (See also Figures 1, 2, and 3). The slogans were always in capital letters, usually followed by exclamation points, which was a way of showing conviction about the things said, in addition to the intended imposition:

LONG LIVE THE ROMANIAN
COMMUNIST PARTY!

BUILDING SOCIALISM
TOGETHER, DAY BY DAY!

A GOOD PIONEER MAKES A
GOOD FRIEND!

MOTHERS: CHILDREN ARE THE
FUTURE OF OUR NATION!

FARMERS: MORE BREAD FOR
OUR LAND!

MINERS: MORE COAL FOR OUR
COUNTRY!

The banner in Figure 1 reads, “LONG LIVE OUR FREE AND INDEPENDENT COUNTRY, SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF ROMANIA!” Here, the emblem of the country is at the top, and at the bottom are two wheat branches, which represent the peasantry.



Figure 1: Sample Slogan from Communist Romania⁴

The slogan in Figure 2 says, “CEAUȘESCU, HEROISM – ROMANIA, COMMUNISM.” Red represents blood, violent change, militant tendency, fighting, and revolution: actions by which Communism came into existence in the world.

The Slogan According to Aristotelian Rhetoric

In a system where the political establishment never changes, the rhetoric becomes collateral damage. After a while, the classical, Aristotelian rhetorical modes of persuasion of *ethos* (*credibility*), *pathos* (appeal to *audience's* emotions), and *logos* (*message*) no longer apply the way they would in a society where opposing voices can exist and a plurality of ideas is at least tolerated. Therefore, from the three corners of the classical rhetorical triangle, first, *credibility* goes out the window. Because there is only one political party, one voice, and thus one absolute Truth with a capital “T,” credibility is already established by default. Thus, in the cultural-historical context dominated by one voice, embodied in one political party, the *audience* was reduced to a silently obedient mass of people over which the establishment ruled without challenge or



Figure 2: Sample Slogan from Communist Romania

accountability. Since opposing views are not allowed to exist, the audience doesn't need to be acknowledged because it doesn't actually matter: no one can disagree with the message, at least not overtly or aloud. “THOSE WHO ARE NOT *WITH US ARE AGAINST US!*” was one slogan with a clear message meant to cause fear at the time these Communist regimes established themselves by force after World War II. The slogan made it clear that *us* and *them* where the two teams at play. One wanted to be counted among the *us* team because *those* who dared oppose *us* in any way could end up being put in prison or killed.⁵ As a result of silencing the audience and because the establishment's credibility could not be challenged in any way, the singular aspect of the Aristotelian rhetorical triangle that remained standing was the *message*. The message could only be unchallenged, undeniable, truthful, and precise.

Situating the Slogan through Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT)

In addition to using the classical rhetorical modes to analyze this genre, we can also use Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), which teaches that we should look at a text from many perspectives in order to better situate it in different contexts in the world. The seven categories of CHAT are *production*, *representation*, *distribution*, *activity*, *socialization*, *ecology*, and *reception*.⁶

In keeping with the background of the Communist political system, explained above, if one were to make a CHAT map of the Communist slogan in such a regime, *distribution* would be listed first—the most important thing. Spreading the message was paramount to propaganda, and the slogan was only a small part of the larger propaganda machine. Its distribution was intended for the political stage, journalistic discourse, textbooks, and the streets themselves, because all these places were politicized anyway. Slogans were distributed everywhere, inundating TV and radio programs, displayed on banners throughout towns, and even in classes taught in schools. Schools included at least one hour of propaganda, Marxism, or socialist political economics every week. The genre's distribution shows how that society was organized differently than other, democratic societies.

For slogans, Distribution is closely linked to *socialization*, which involved the work place and the Communist Party meetings periodically held there, because the Party, being one of *the People*, was present and represented everywhere. Meetings and demonstrations were mandatory, and people pretended to be interested, just like they pretended to do a lot of things those days for the eyes of the oppressive regime. After all, the dictator was watching from the portraits that decorated classrooms and other public places, reminding everyone who the Absolute Boss was. Moreover, these messages, displayed on street or classroom banners, were indisputable to the point that they were almost orders.

From the socialization of the genre, another CHAT category resulted: *activity*. Students talked about propaganda in classes, Communist Party members discussed it in regular Party meetings, and obviously, some people had to physically engage in the activity of displaying these banners in various places. Recall that according to our Aristotelian analysis of the genre, the message is what truly counts with a slogan. This notion ties into the next CHAT category, *production*. The production of the message was prolific and encompassed written materials and the spoken word broadcast by TV sets and radios. Although the message became the most important thing, after a while even the message became expected, self-understood, well-known,

predictable, and in the end, boring, which allowed for the most ridiculous things to be said in a communist slogan. Once the message was produced and distributed, since the audience was never really accounted for, the *reception* of the slogan was not the one intended by those who produced them. With the passage of time, people increasingly acted like they cared when they actually didn't; even children heard them and knew that they were just a part of life. The message got lost in a sea of indifference and the slogan attained its utmost status: that of a cliché.

Figure 3, which reads “LONG LIVE THE ROMANIAN COMMUNIST PARTY, LED BY ITS SECRETARY GENERAL, COMRADE NICOLAE CEAUȘESCU!” demonstrates one example of the *representation* of a slogan. As a visual artifact, the representation of the banner in Figure 3 has artistic characteristics that can be interpreted through the rules of graphic design. The capital letters and the exclamation point denote a shouted order. No other color challenges the overwhelming red of the image-text, mirroring the fact that, other than the Communist Party whose traditional color is red, no other political voices were allowed to exist in the regime. At the top of the banner sits the coat of arms of the Romanian Communist Party, the

hammer and sickle (universal symbols of Communism) surrounded by stylized wheat. Lastly, the stenciled letters invoke the militant nature of Communism.



Figure 3: Sample Slogan from Communist Romania

Since the material in the banner in Figure 3 is sheet metal, the *ecology* category of CHAT is perhaps one of the most interesting to discuss. In general, the slogans were represented in what we would call today “low-tech” forms. They were sometimes made of metal sheets, which could rust, exposed as they were to the weather, sitting on the side of the road. Moreover, because the Communist economy could not sustain itself in the absence of the free market, increased attention was given to resources, especially as the economy started to decline. A well-known slogan of the 1980s, therefore, became “THE THREE R’s: REUSE, RECYCLE, RECONDITION,” which means that sheet metal banners were reused and repainted occasionally. This attention to consumption was not driven out of any genuine care for

the environment, but because production was scarce since the economy was completely government-owned and ruled by planning and centralization. The real reason for the “Three R’s” slogan was because there were not enough materials and merchandise to go around.

Resituating the Slogan by Inserting It into My Personal Narrative

When I thought again about propaganda and its slogans as a graduate student, I decided that I really wanted to insert it into my writing about my childhood. I knew that my readers in the United States could get a better feeling about my childhood if I showed that Communist slogans were everywhere. Since the totalitarian system doesn’t exist anymore in Romania, but is alive and well in other places, I thought that de-contextualizing and re-contextualizing this system for people living in a democratic system could mean something. Not only was it part of my personal history, but it could give insight into a historical time hard to imagine and impossible to experience first-hand by many people in the United States. I thought that this genre’s trajectory could serve to add humor into my narrative and teach a history lesson at the same time.

Finding the right pretext to add elements of this genre into my narrative was my next step. After all, it was supposed to be a funny story. Where would such a serious thing go into a ten-year-old child’s story of turning upside-down a stroller with a baby in it? When I started writing, I realized that the point where I was “interviewing” the baby was a good place to insert the genre, especially because even TV or radio interviews were full of propaganda. But I didn’t quite know how to do it. My first attempt looked like this:

Suddenly, I got the idea of “interviewing” the baby with an “invisible microphone.” I was so excited; I was already anticipating the fun we were going to have. I started by asking questions like a reporter talking to an important government official who had opinions on current affairs.

“So, Comrade Costea, what do you think about this year’s crops?”

“Goo-goo. Gaa-gaa,” said the baby, his vivid eyes sparkling joyfully.

Bursts of laughter came out of our mouths. We laughed so hard we almost wet ourselves. We were bent forward, our faces hurting.

Well, that’s surely funny, I thought, but what about my slogan? Would anyone in my American audience know about the national planning of the economy and agriculture sectors? A Soviet concept, many countries still have

a five-year economic plan, such as China.⁷ The urgency was to accomplish said plan in four-and-a-half years. Which slogan should I use? Something about the proletariat? The Communist Party? Should I somehow mention a street banner that was hanging outside the window of my relatives' typical Communist apartment building? I tried this:

Outside the window, a banner could be seen in the distance. It read: "Long Live Socialist Republic of Romania and Romanian Communist Party!" I got the urgent idea of "interviewing" the baby . . .

That still didn't quite fit what I really wanted.

Although this entire thinking process went through my mind fast and in not so many words, the only idea explicit to me was to present the historical dimension of my childhood, that particular time and place in modern history where I'd happened to grow up, an experience different from other peoples'. The story of the baby being overturned by his crazy cousin and brother is vivid in my memory, and the baby, who's now a grown up and still laughs at the story, fortunately doesn't remember a thing. But since as far as I'm concerned there are things I'm not ready to forget, I kept thinking about it, and at last, I came up with my final version:

Suddenly, I got the idea of "interviewing" the baby with an "invisible microphone." I was so excited; I was already anticipating the fun we were going to have. I started by asking questions like I was a TV or radio reporter talking to an important government official who had opinions on current affairs.

"So, Comrade Costea, do you think that the proletarians of all countries will unite?"

"Goo-goo. Gaa-gaa," said the baby, his vivid eyes sparkling joyfully.

Bursts of laughter came out of our mouths. We laughed so hard we almost wet ourselves. We were bent forward, our faces hurting.

"However, Comrade Costea," I tried to continue through the laughter, "Will the realization of the five-year plan in four-and-a-half years advance Romania on the road to Communism...?" I couldn't go on as I was already overwhelmed by laughter, and Cosmin, my cousin, was out of control.

When the baby cooed again, I lost my balance with laughter. Somehow, my leg, which had been resting on the bottom part of the stroller, got tangled, and I started to fall. I remember the next few moments vividly, in slow motion, and I can see them in

my mind clearly, to the tiniest detail, again and again. In my fall, the stroller itself started to turn: one end slowly rose up to a fully vertical position. I could see it move but could not make it stop as I was busy falling myself. I looked for Cosmin, but he, the rat, instead of helping, was already out of the room on his way to alert his mother. I was on my own, trying to save the baby from the fall.

The baby's eyes grew larger with amazement at the realization that his comfortable horizontal was becoming a worrisome vertical. When he reached the vertical, he started slowly sliding down along the stroller's mattress, the blankets around him wrinkling up. I could never forget his eyes at that moment. I knew he would fall face-down next, and I was trying to anticipate it.

He had started his fall forward. That's when I was able to catch him. For a moment, I thought his mouth almost hit the stroller's handle, but it didn't. I looked at him, and he was all right, only scared. He started crying.

I know the baby couldn't have been hurt, but the next instant, my aunt was already there. We were in big trouble.

Endnotes

1. Nicolae Ceaușescu was the President of Socialist Republic of Romania and the Romanian Communist Party Leader. He ruled from 1965 to 1989, when he was executed during the December 1989 anti-Communist uprising in Romania.
2. In the Romanian Revolution, about 1,000 people were shot in the streets by the army, the police, and the political secret police.
3. See <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/slogan> for the definition.
4. See <http://www.ceaurescu.org> for the images included in this article.
5. Some people who opposed the practices of the regime were killed; the Global Museum on Communism cites 435,000 killed (<http://romania.globalmuseumoncommunism.org/>).
6. For more information on CHAT, see Joyce Walker's article "Just CHATting" in the 2010 issue of the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, available at <http://isuwriting.com/resources/grassroots/>.
7. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Five-year_plan for more information about the five-year economy planning.



Although **Adriana** is from Transylvania, Romania, and consequently flies around at night, she vehemently denies she's a vampire, which obviously raises much suspicion. She hopes to obtain her doctorate in English Studies at Illinois State University soon and then to finish writing all the books that parasitically inhabit her body.