Photography and remembrance. Questioning the visual legacy of Communist Albania

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Countless photographs were produced during the communist period in Albania. Many of them were designed to create archives and to preserve the memory of places, people and times in which and by which the new type of society wanted by the authorities was realized. The task of the photographers was indeed to record and document the transformations of the country or, in the words of the time, the "construction of socialism". It was also, for some of them, to offer everyone the opportunity to create photographic memories. In any case, one can hypothesize that the feeling of living in a time of profound transformations in which ancient places and lifestyles disappeared in favor of more "modern" forms gave a particular importance to photography. As a technical process related to industrialization, photography has a significant relationship to modernization. It also has the property to fix particular moments (in Albanian, as in other languages, the verb *fiksoj* is frequently used to describe the activity of the photographers) whose serialization gives an idea, an "evidence", of the time passing by and, in this case, of the progress made. The juxtaposition, in the layout of the journals of the communist era, of two images with the caption "before" and "after", or "yesterday" and "today", is thus particularly frequent to mark both the change and its orientation.

By their style as well as by the motives they repeat, these images belong to the visual world of communism: through **them** the communist period in Albania is close to other communist experiences and can be compared to **them**. By **them**, any recollection of the communist period can be based on visual models or, on the contrary, oppose and reject **them**. Whether it arouses nostalgia or rejection, photography rarely means "apathy". The images of the communist period are, probably for this reason, frequently reproduced today: in the press, where they illustrate the supposed revelations drawn from archives; in autobiographical works, where they accompany the stories and testimonies; in social networks and on the walls of houses, where they recall the stages of individual trajectories. As suggested by Rob Kroes more generally, "our contemporary sense of history is replete with photographic memories" (Kroes 2007: 4). Whether we have had direct experience or not, our mental images of the communist period in Albania do not escape this hold of photography.

However, it is striking that there is no or extremely rare reflection on the link between these photographs and the memory of communism. To what extent do these images constitute a memory of communism? How do they participate today in the remembrance of this period? It is difficult to find answers to these questions in the existing literature. First, as the history of photography in Albania becomes more known, we see that the communist period occupies a marginal and neglected place: photography is said to have had an instrumental status in the hands of political power and thus to be of little value compared to that which had been produced during the previous period. "*Kufizimet e rrepta politiko-ekonomike dalëngadalë e ngushtuan kështu edhe hapësirën e artit të fotografisë*", writes one of the few historians of Albanian photography (Vrioni 2009: 44). This also explains why the rare publications devoted to photography in the communist period do not address the issue of memory. This is true of academic studies when they are interested in how propaganda worked (Vorpsi 2014), as of photographic albums illustrating the production of this or that photographer (Kumi 2013). It is therefore difficult to have an overview of the production methods and uses of photography during the communist period. On the other hand, studies on the memory of communism in Albania have little interest in the role of photography in the formation and transmission of this memory, even when they make explicit reference to visual anthropology (Kati 2015). In this, they are similar to some classic works of sociology and philosophy of memory in which photography is barely mentioned (Halbwachs 1994, Ricœur 2000).

However, there has been a continuous interest in the social sciences for the last twenty years in the relationship between photography and memory, and studies from a variety of disciplinary horizons

make it possible to go beyond the mere affirmation of a particularly strong link between photography and memory (Hirsch 1997, Kuhn, McAllister 2006, Kroes 2007, Shevchenko 2014). This body of research, however, favors western and postcolonial contexts and, with a few exceptions (Sarkisova, Shevchenko 2014, Skopin 2015), hardly concerns the communist world. In what follows, I will seek, on the basis of these works, to show why and how taking photography into account can enrich our knowledge and our understanding of the memory of communism in Albania.

1. Why consider photography?

It is not necessary to assume an essential link between memory and photography to recognize that the latter is a medium for recollection and that it is an extremely common mnemonic tool. Photography makes us remember. This is one of the reasons behind family photography, whose diffusion during the communist period is unprecedented in Albania. Largely reserved for the urban middle and upper classes until the Second World War, the family function of photography became accessible to a very large part of the population, including in remote rural areas, with the establishment of the so-called "public service" photography in the 1960s (de Rapper, Durand 2017a). As a result, there are few families who do not possess at least a few photographs, often of diverse origins: photographic souvenirs taken by "nature" photographers (*fotografët e natyrës*), wedding photographs, identity photographs, school photographs or "emulation" photographs (*fotografi e emulacionit*). Many of these photographs expressly respond to a need to keep "souvenirs" (*kujtim*) as evidenced by the frequency of the mention, printed or handwritten, of the word "souvenir" on the prints (fig. 1-4). Both the frequency of the term and the insistence of its association with the image, however, seem to show, like locks of hair or other personal relics that accompany, in other contexts, personal photographs (Batchen 2004), that the image alone is not enough to hold the memory and thus testify to "a persistent anxiety and fear of being forgotten, rather than a comfortable taken-for-granted assumption that a photograph ensures lasting personal memory" (Shevchenko 2015: 273).

The memorial function of photography is, on the other hand, not limited to the family sphere, and much of the official or institutional photography (that which was designated as "propaganda photography") is also part of the desire to fix and preserve memories. The activity of the members of the Central Committee of the Party of Labor was thus the object each year of photographic albums whose relationship with the family albums can easily be shown, as on these images of the reception of a Bulgarian delegation to Tirana in 1957 (fig. 5): group photographs in front of the house, commensal and dance scenes are among the most frequent images of family photography. It is also revealing that the death of Enver Hoxha in April 1985 resulted in the publication of photographs called "souvenirs", such as the one published and commented in *Ylli* magazine in May of that year (fig. 6). In the image, the Hoxha couple appears in the middle of smiling photographers and journalists and the photograph is captioned: "unforgettable memory" (*kujtim i paharruar*). The death of the leader thus arouses in the public sphere the same type of reaction as, in the private sphere, the death of a loved one: the photographs of the deceased are sought for and looked at in an attempt not to lose him or her completely. We know that such an experiment is at the origin of one of the most cited books in photography studies Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, written after the death of the author's mother (Barthes 1980).

The function of memory can lead to the preservation as well as the destruction of photographs. During the communist period, many photographs were destroyed because they were likely to recall unwanted memories (even if mutilation seems to be a very common mode of action). However, it was at the fall of the single party rule, in 1991, and later during the troubles of the year 1997 that much of the destruction of photographs seems to have taken place. Nevertheless, a large number of photographs survived, whether in institutional or in private archives. These images are still available as a medium of memory and it is likely that they will remain when the last direct witnesses of the communist period are gone. One can see, therefore, a certain urgency to preserve and document the photographs of the communist period as long as their authors or the persons represented in them can still talk about these remaining photographs.

It is necessary to point out a widely recognized property of photography in the social sciences, which is that of stimulating speech. Photography calls for commentary and storytelling: for this reason, it has long been used in interview situations because it frees the voice of those interviewed and provokes a story different from that produced by only oral questions. This is called "photo elicitation" (Collier and Collier 1986; Harper 2012). It should be added that this work of recollection and producing a narrative based on photography is often a collective one. Through it individual memories come together and contribute to a shared elaboration of memory. As Anne Muxel writes about family photographs, "photographs always convey a proposal for a narrative, a version, more or less official and consensual, of the common history" (Muxel 1996: 175). Photography can therefore be used to help the voicing of a memory, or rather, the voicing of the more or less shared and more or less conflicting memories of the communist period.

The second reason why it is important to take photography into account is that the images that we have inherited do not only facilitate the remembrance, in the present, of the communist past, they also reveal the way individuals and institutions have fabricated representations of Communist Albania, its present, past and future. The interest in the photographs of the communist period is thus also an interest in the politics of memory and representation in use at that time. And one can think that the way in which the memory of the communist period is transmitted today is partly determined by the way in which memories have been fixed or constructed at that time. Photography is both the object and the agent of this "stranglehold on memory" (*mainmise sur la mémoire*), to use an expression of Tzvetan Todorov (Todorov 2000: 167). If many photographs have been destroyed or falsified as traces of an undesirable past (this is the case of photographs taken before the end of the Second World War and testifying to "bourgeois" frequentations or ways of life, but also of many others during the political crises during which new "enemies" were designated), then individuals and institutions were building a photographic archive that would become the memory of the communist period in the future. Photography is thus a concrete example of how the present recollection of communism is based on the making of memory during the communist period. Unlike other objects or places that today serve as memorabilia (objects of everyday consumption, camps and prisons) but were not designed as such, photography has had, from its conception, a memorial function.

The photographic collections that have come to us then raise a number of questions, of which I present only an overview. In addition to what has been photographed and whose image has been preserved, we must look at what was not photographed or at what the images do not show. Contrary to a popular belief, photography is not a faithful or exhaustive image of reality: it is the result of cutting, selection and construction. It must be remembered here that the doctrine of socialist realism was applied to photography as to other visual or written productions, and that it remained in force until the end of the communist period. To the photographers' testimony, this meant above all showing "happy people at work" and avoiding any divergent representation (poverty, inequalities, conflicts, misfortune). It is thus easy to see from the photography of the press what the "obsessions of the regime" were at that time (Durand, de Rapper 2012: 15-37): industrialization, abundance of harvests, people in arms for the defense of the fatherland, cult of the leader and heroes. On the other hand, one might wonder what the role of censorship, and even more so of self-censorship, was in the production and preservation of photographs. The realization of photographs did not depend solely on technical constraints and aesthetic choices. It was also subject to a political evaluation of what could be photographed and was actually photographed: hence the many restrictions imposed on photographers, professionals or amateurs, and the destruction or mutilation of photographs (Nathanaili 2017). The study of photography is thus a way to observe and explain the functioning of censorship and self-censorship in that context.

In connection with the delimitation of what could be photographed, one can also wonder if photography only gave the image of a memorable present, or if it also gave that of a desired future. Such ambivalence has been shown with family photography in other contexts (Hirsch 1997, Kroes 2007) and is undoubtedly found in some family photographs of communist Albania depicting marital and family happiness as a promise or expectation. The raison d'être of the photography of the press,

however, seems to be also to bring through the image of a desired world, that of a harmonious and orderly socialist society. One can thus make the hypothesis of an overrepresentation, in these images, of the city and of the urban lifestyles in a country still largely rural.

The question of the visual fabrication of the memory of the construction of socialism finally raises the question of the status of photography in the politics of representation: what was the role of photography vis-à-vis other media or forms of representation? What were the expectations of photography and to what extent were they satisfied or not? These questions take on particular importance when we look at the changes that have taken place since 1991, particularly with the omnipresence of television and the digital revolution. The images of communist Albania thus provide an opportunity to reconstitute a "regional moment of photography" (Beaugé, Pelen 1995: 10), that is the adaptation or domestication of the technology of photography in a particular historical context.

2. How to consider photography?

A complex phenomenon, photography can be approached from various points of view and it is not my intention to impose an approach to the detriment of others. I would like here only to give some hints inspired by my experience as an anthropologist working with photography produced during the communist period in Albania as an object of research. To make photography an object of research means at the same time to go beyond its use as a tool or technique of research (either to record facts observed on the ground, or to make people talk about their lives) and its use as a simple source granting access to various aspects of social life at the time the picture was taken. In recent years, a growing number of anthropological works have thus taken photography as an object of research in different contexts. The concept of "ethnography of photography", or "photographic practices", defines them relatively well and I will first focus on what this approach consists of. In the case of communist Albania, photography must also be considered simultaneously as a historical object, produced from a certain period, and in its present state, as an image of the past in the present. This requires deepening the way in which the study of photography is articulated with that of memory, which I will try to do in the next step.

The ethnography of photography can be defined as the observation and analysis of relationships between people and photographs (Wright 2013: 17). This assumes first of all not to limit the photographic act to the relation between a photographer and his model, nor to that between an image and a spectator, but to open it to all the people involved in the production and consumption of an image or set of images. Faced with a photograph of the communist period, it is first of all necessary to ask what the places, the people and the events represented are. It is also necessary to ask what relationship the subjects had with the photographer and with those who commissioned, possessed, transmitted, watched, commented and possibly modified or destroyed the photograph. In the case of Albania, this determination of the "context" or, to use James Hevia's expression, the "photography complex" (Hevia 2009), is all the more necessary since photographic practice was rarely a private and harmless activity. On the contrary, photography from that period implied a plurality of agents and institutions and took place within political, ideological, moral and technical constraints that must be reconstructed to explain how a particular photograph was produced at a given moment, and how it reached us.

Photography then should be considered as an object as much as an image, that is, in its materiality. Such an approach can make use of the notions of "social life" or "cultural biography" (Kopytoff 1986) to trace the different interactions that a photograph has with different agents from its conception to its disappearance. This means that, in the presence of a photograph of the communist period, whether it belongs to private or public funds, we should ask about its trajectory as a material object, the expectations to which it responds as well as the uses of which it is the object. The "material turn" has affected the anthropological study of photography as other fields of social research, and the physical presence of photographs is now considered along with their iconic content (Edwards, Hart 2004). Deborah Poole's notion of "visual economy" about the flow of images between Andean America and

Europe has also allowed to revisit the older notion of "visual culture" by emphasizing both the circulation and the changing value of photographs according to the context of their reception (Poole 1997).

Finally, the ethnography of photography is attentive to the articulation between images and narratives. It is a question of making people talk from photographs, as in photo elicitation, but more specifically by looking at the way in which a particular image gives rise to a particular story. It is also possible to reconstruct a narrative in the absence of oral commentary, by the mere arrangement of the photographs, as in the case of family albums (Langford 2001).

Such an approach is the condition for going beyond the hasty interpretations of the photographs of the communist period (e.g. as carrying a simple political message) and understanding their emotional value. It also helps to better understand the role and effects of photography on the remembrance of communism.

Several recent works have focused on the relationship between photography and memory by attempting to go beyond the common-sense assumption that photography is a form of memory, that it creates and preserves "memories" in a manner similar to human memory. In a context of questioning the memory of communism in Albania, it seems indeed important to understand the role and the effects of photography on the emergence and reception of discourses and memorial practices. In other words, it is necessary to place photography in memory studies, as Olga Shevchenko invites us to do (2015).

Within these works, we can distinguish two orientations: one that highlights a particular link to time that distinguishes photography from other forms of representation and the other that is interested in the way photography is used in memorial practices. This distinction more generally overlaps that between essentialist and contextualist approaches to photography, the former focusing on the particularities and irreducibility of the photographic medium and the latter on the determination of photographic practices and their meaning by the context in which they occur (Strassler 2010: 19, Shevchenko 2015: 278). However, these two approaches should not be viewed as conflicting or incompatible, but rather as the two poles of a continuum. In one case, the photograph is a trace of what has been: it authenticates, or certifies, that something had previously existed within the view of the camera, something which is no longer there. It makes visible the passage of time; it evokes death; and is intrinsically linked to nostalgia (Sontag 1979, Barthes 1980). In the other case, each photograph is the result of a device that imposes a vision; this vision is not transparent or passively recorded by the camera, rather it is produced by an apparatus (Tagg 1988).

The current reception of photographs from the communist era generally combines these two conceptions: the constrained and limited nature of the photographic act is often evoked (for example in the case of identity photographs or the prohibition of "foreign appearances"; see also the testimony of Ylli Demneri in Demneri 2011: 9-10), but this is not enough to reject any idea of authenticity or emotional value. This ambivalence invites us to relativize the approaches which are limited to seeing communist-era photography as an instrument of domination in the hands of power, thus privileging the institutional aspect of photography. It also invites us to relativize those approaches which favor the private dimension of photography by seeing the testimony of individual experience which can now be recalled via a nostalgic mode.

In fact, the very distinction between institutional (or public) and private memory is blurred by the visual economy of communist Albania first because the majority of private photographs were made in the framework of a public organization, that of "public service photography". This means that their authors were photographers who were trained and employed by the state and who used state-provided material. These photographers could work at home, but, in most cases, they operated within the public space: hence the relative rarity of representations of the private space in these photographs. On the contrary, public activities (official ceremonies, festivals, schooling and work in general) were very

widely represented. Most of the images kept in families thus have a public origin, even if their uses are also private. There is also, as we have noted above, a proximity of the models used in family photography and institutional photography, especially when they solemnize the group around a figure of authority. Finally, images circulate and take on new meanings in this circulation: identity photographs, of institutional origin, become funerary photographs; family photographs can be exhibited in local museums for their exemplary nature, or on the contrary, pose a threat to families in the event of arrest (de Rapper, Durand 2011).

The following image is an example of this entanglement of the public and private (fig. 7). At first glance, it is a family photograph. People who are standing or sitting around the table laden with food are smiling and at least some of them are probably linked by family relationships. It is indeed preserved today in a family, among other family memories, by people who recognize themselves and recall the event fixed on the image. However, it is a very official image; its author is a state photographer from the nearby city (the only one with a flash for shooting indoors) and the occasion is an institutional activity. Several of the guests at the table are members of a delegation from the party's regional structure who came to visit the cooperative farm and stayed overnight with families from village. Photographs made on such occasions were printed in multiple copies and sent to the various participants.

Such examples also show that the current interpretation of photographs is open and that the reasons for taking a photograph may be secondary when viewed in another context. The notion of the "optical unconscious" proposed by Walter Benjamin, like the distinction between *studium* and *punctum* introduced by Roland Barthes, can be recalled here. For Walter Benjamin, photography has the characteristic of being able to record aspects of reality that we do not perceive consciously and that only appear to us when we are viewing a photograph (2012: 18). Similarly, Roland Barthes proposes two levels of interpretation of a photograph (Barthes 1980: 48-49). The first, the *studium*, is based on the knowledge that one has of the conditions of the photograph's production and those that one can be drawn from it.

There is *studium* in this image taken at a border village in southern Albania and dating from the early 1980s (fig. 8). It shows the members of the "defense brigade" (*brigada e mbrojtjes*) of the cooperative farm, who were responsible for the maintenance of bunkers and defensive works, receiving the instructions of the day from the brigadier, who is standing to the right of the image. Taken by a public service photographer who came to document the activities of the cooperative farm, this image provides information on the life in a border area as well as on the function of photography (a public service photographer asks workers to pose as a propaganda photographer would do). However, when I showed this picture to a friend in the neighboring town, his first reaction was to point out a detail that had remained unnoticed by me and others, but that struck him: only the brigadier wore shoes; the other men were wearing boots. He saw this as a mark of the brigadier's privileged position, as someone who would not take part in physical work with the brigade members. This is the *punctum*, as Roland Barthes understands it, which is something that touches us, or draws us to a photograph, regardless of the knowledge it can bring us.

A last point allows us to introduce a possible specificity of the photography of Communist Albania. In the history of photography, and more specifically in the history of the relationship between photography and memory, the snapshot represents an important step. As Olga Shevchenko writes, "In an era of anxiety over memory, the snapshot (...) is offered as an insurance against memory's inherent failings, and an antidote to the passage of time" (Shevchenko 2015: 275). Yet it seems that instant photography was rare in communist Albania, both in family photography and in propaganda photography. The pose dominates, but only a technical explanation is not enough as the cameras and film used especially by propaganda photographers had the ability to capture moving objects. Technical knowledge also existed, as evidenced by an article published in the magazine *Ylli* in July 1970 for amateurs who wanted to photograph moving objects. In fact, the attraction for the snapshot is found among amateur photographers; it is even a distinctive feature of this category of photographers (de Rapper, Durand 2017b). The depreciation of the snapshot in favor of the pose could support the

hypothesis that what is sought in photography is not the memory of the moment lived, that of a personal history, but rather the memory of a normative history, or a history of conformity to certain models, an inherently collective history.

This peculiarity allows us to highlight several levels of memory and to wonder about the extent to which photographic memory can be a "shared memory". We can indeed see the effect of a "metamemory", or a conscious memory, as defined by Joël Candau. "Metamemory is a memory claimed, ostensive. (...) in its collective form, it is the shared claim of a memory supposed to be shared" (Candau 2005: 78-79). The predominant and collective nature of photography in communist Albania would thus respond to the desire to create and affirm a shared memory of the "construction of socialism". As Denis Skopin recalls, group photography was a popular genre in the Soviet Union during the Stalinist era, and the same might well be true in Enver Hoxha's Albania (Skopin 2015).

But the pose also reveals another level of memory, that of the "protomemory", an incorporated, unconscious memory visible, for example, in the postures adopted in front of the camera (Candau 2005: 77-78). The following two photographs show how the norms of self-presentation and those of the representation of others can be incorporated (fig. 9-10). They represent the same young man, one year apart and in two different places. They were taken by two different photographers. The similarities are nonetheless striking: in the posture of the subject, the way he faces the camera as well as in the framing and viewing angle adopted by the two photographers. Moreover, in both cases, the background is occupied by a political symbol: the seat of the Tirana Party Committee, and a poster supporting *aksion*, or the volunteer work campaigns. The examination of the different corpuses, both of family photography and of propaganda photography, would also reveal other constants of this type. The question, then, is how, in the communist era as today, individual memory is articulated with protomemory and metamemory as produced by the photographic conditions of communist Albania.

I have sought here to show the interest of a greater consideration of photography in the reflection on remembrance of the communist period in Albania and to indicate some directions of research. The work remaining to be done in this field is immense: it is at the same time a work of collection, documentation and preservation of the photographic funds, public or private, and a work of technical, iconographic, historical and anthropological analysis. This is all the more necessary as these funds are, in a certain way, still alive and always "active". In today's Albania, following the fall of communism, these photographs are involved in heritagization processes as well as in memory conflicts. These photographs are also involved in what Harald Wydra calls the "democratization of memory" in post-communist societies (Wydra 2015: 202): these images are always re-interpretable and can support multiple histories and conflicting narratives. Like memory, photography is not fixed once and for all, it is continuously built in the present.

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