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Construction and Legitimation of Political Power in Textbooks: A Case Study

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Abstract

Broadly, a textbook is a fundamental educational resource that supports teaching and learning by organising and presenting instructional content in a systematic, accessible way. In other words, it provides students with information and guides teachers' instructional practice. Furthermore, it is also a curricular material through which governments communicate and implement educational and social priorities. As a result, school textbooks can also serve as a source of research data.

Through their content and structure, textbooks present models of discourse, multiple and sometimes conflicting discourses. However, this perspective is not sufficiently represented in existing literature. This study extends this analytical perspective by examining how textbooks represent and reproduce political power discourse.

We engaged in an extensive analysis of history textbooks in upper secondary schools, published during the communist period in Romania. This allowed us to analyse how the reproduction or contestation of dominant discourses contributes to the (re)construction of social hierarchies and the shaping of intergroup relations, collective memory, social representations, and identity.

From this perspective, it argues for more inclusive and critical approaches to history education.

Keywords: ideology; political power; communism; education; textbooks

Introduction

Textbooks are generally analysed from instructional and educational perspectives, with a primary focus on their didactic and pedagogical dimensions. This approach is expected because textbooks are, by definition, learning tools designed for students. Consequently, learners use them more than teachers do during educational activities. Thus, textbooks are conceived as learning support tools that enrich students' cognitive experiences. But their production represents a more complex process involving more functions, institutions and authors.

Textbooks are not merely educational resources designed to transmit knowledge; they are embedded in broader and complex cultural, social, political, and economic

processes. Their content, structure, and modes of production reflect the values, priorities, and educational policies of the societies in which they are developed.

As educational materials, textbooks may appear neutral, but they reflect specific pedagogical and institutional assumptions. Consequently, textbooks need to be examined in relation to the transformations in education, including changes in educational policies, curricular frameworks, and pedagogical practices, as well as considering scientific research findings.

These observations also apply to history textbooks, which, more than other types of educational materials, are closely connected to social and political contexts.

Because their primary aim is to present the development of societies over time, history textbooks are particularly susceptible to political, ideological, and cultural influences. Consequently, history textbooks are frequently politicised, becoming important sites of contestation over representations, identities, and power relations. Therefore, particular attention must be devoted to examining how the discourse of political power is constructed and represented within these contents.

Rather than merely reflecting and disseminating knowledge, it actively selects and constructs narratives, shaping them into forms that fulfil specific social, cultural, and psychological functions. From this perspective, the history textbook is an important institutional agent of collective memory, contributing to its construction and shaping national/collective identity, and mediating the transmission and interpretation of the past across generations.

Ideological influences may be more or less explicit in textbook content, but they are never entirely absent. Both narrative discourse and visual representations reflect, construct, and transmit society's prevailing values, beliefs, and attitudes, regardless of authorial intention (Cheng & Zhenyi, 2025).

Generally, textbooks can be produced, approved and distributed through centralised mechanisms managed by state authorities, where decisions regarding their content, format, and circulation are closely regulated. Alternatively, their writing, printing and distribution can be partially or fully decentralised, allowing involvement of authors, publishers and other stakeholders.

These models reflect broader educational governance structures and shape the autonomy, diversity, and ideological control embedded in textbook production.

Consequently, academic scholarship has often neglected textbooks, an attitude rooted in the assumption that textbooks are merely derivative works rather than original contributions to knowledge production (Blair *et al*., 2023).

Since textbooks are “designed and constructed” rather than “written” and are produced through the collaborative work of writing teams, editors and curriculum specialists rather than individual authors, their intellectual and scholarly status has frequently been questioned.

Furthermore, there is a growing tendency to argue that locally designed curricula should replace, or at least significantly reduce reliance on, standardised textbooks (Boostrom, 2001).

The subjectivity of history textbooks is also revealed through the selection of their contents, including what is included and omitted, as well as through the ways in which historical knowledge is organised, constructed, and transmitted. The selection and

organisation of textbook contents may reflect an ideological process through which the political and economic interests of the state or dominant groups are reproduced and legitimised.

For these reasons, there are strong theoretical and political grounds for directing greater attention to textbooks, not only because of practical considerations related to educational objectives, but also because of their position within the complex interrelationships among the economy, state authorities, and the production of cultural forms and meanings.

This article calls for a holistic approach to the study of history textbooks. Specifically, we show that a holistic approach enables textbook researchers to further contest the often uncritical embrace of history textbooks and expand our understanding of the textbook as an artefact of our societies. In this article, we significantly extend the yet-to-be-taken-up call for a holistic approach to textbook studies.

Materials and methods

To identify political intrusions in the educational system, we analysed the contents of history textbooks published in the 20th century during Romania's communist regime[1]. By comparing how these textbooks represent the past, we can identify the instruments and mechanisms that political ideology used to control people and consolidate its hold on power.

In order to further develop these perspectives, we propose to pursue the following research objectives:

- to provide a brief description of the historical context;
- to examine, through a comparative analysis, the historical discourse addressed to the younger generation, as adapted and incorporated into textbooks;
- to argue that the textbook functions as a vehicle for the transmission of dominant ideology within the educational process.

[1]V. Maciu, G. Georgescu, T. Dumitru, M.Roller, *Istoria României. Manual pentru clasa a VIII-a.* Ed. de Stat: București, 1947 (reedited in 1956); L.Georgian, V. Neagu, C. Nutu, *Istoria Evului Mediu. Manual pentru clasa a VI-a* (History of Middle Age.Textbook for 6 level). Bucuresti: E.D.P., 1978 (revised and reedited in 1983); D. Almas, I. Nicoara, A. Vianu, *Istoria Universala Moderna si Contemporana. Manual pentru clasa a VII*-a. (Modern and Contemporary Universal History. Textbook for 7 level). Bucuresti: E.D.P., 1985, (revised and reedited in 1989); H. Daicoviciu, P. Teodo, I. Cimpeanu, *Istoria Antica si Medie a Romaniei. Manual pentru clasa a VIII-a* (Antique and medieval Romanian History. Textbook for 8 level). Bucuresti: E.D.P., 1982 (revised and reedited 1984); E. Hurezeanu, Gh. Smarandache, M. Totu, *Istoria Moderna a Romaniei. Manual pentru clasa a IX-a* (Modern History of Romania. Textbook for 9 level). Bucuresti: E.D.P., 1988; A. Petric, Gh. I. Ionita, *Istoria Contemporana a Romaniei. Manual pentru clasa a X-a* (Contemporary History of Romania. Textbook for 10 level). Bucuresti: E.D.P., 1983; *Istoria contemporana a Romaniei, a miscarii muncitoresti democratice si revolutionare, a Partidului Comunist Roman. Manual pentru clasa a X-a* (Contemporary History of Romania, of democratically and revolutionary workers movement, of Romanian Communist Party). Textbook for 10 level). Bucuresti: E.D.P., 1980; St. Pascu, A. Bodor, V. Boşcăneanu, *Probleme fundamentale ale Istoriei lumii antice şi medieval. Manual pentru clasa a XI-a* (Fundamental problems of antique and medieval world history. Textbook for 11 level). Bucuresti: E.D.P., 1985 (revised and reedited 1989); D. Almaş, E. Fotescu, *Istoria patriei. Manual pentru clasa a IV-a* (History of country. Textbook for 4 level). Bucuresti :E.D.P., 1971 (revised and reedited in 1986).

These lines of inquiry are necessary not only from a scholarly perspective but also from an educational one.

The study results demonstrate the value of comparatively analysing history textbooks for advancing research on textbooks as sources of historical documentation, and for informing modern educational practices grounded in autonomy, individuality and equal opportunities.

Results and discussion

1. Social and political dimension of textbooks

The assertion that teaching is a political act, rather than a technical one, has been a recurring and divisive issue among educators and the public at large. Also, it has been argued in the scholarly literature that textbook knowledge is socially constructed, and that textbooks offer implicit and explicit values (Marinković & Erić 128, 2014; Doncheva, 2016). It is precisely this formative social dimension that allows textbooks to be understood as instruments of socialisation and as sites of ideological discourse, participating in the construction of meanings, identities, and shared understandings within society.

Textbooks can also serve as valuable sources for scientific inquiry in the human and social sciences. As educational instruments, they reflect the historical context in which they are produced, including the social expectations, political ideologies, and economic principles that characterise a particular period. This line of research has attracted scholarly attention in recent years.

A substantial body of literature treats the textbook as more than a learning tool; it analyses it as a social, political, and cultural product that reflects a particular understanding of reality and how society interprets and responds to contemporary challenges.

Complementing this perspective, some scholarly analyses link textbooks to ideological education that can remove inherent "prejudice" and "political favouritism" (Zhang, 2021; Nasser & Nasser, 2008; Jost et al., 2009; Arvisais et al., 2021; Apple, 2004; Crawford, 2000).

Despite these assumptions, one of the most challenging avenues of scholarly inquiry is the examination of the textbook in relation to political realities. This approach examines the interplay between government policy and education policy as reflected in the textbook. However, a more challenging, and therefore less frequently explored, line of inquiry in scholarly literature concerns the ways in which government policy influences the education of young people through textbooks. For example, one may examine the strategies employed by government policy to influence the intellectual development of young people and to cultivate the forms of social behaviour it considers desirable. Another may examine the textbook narrative as political discourse adapted to learners' age-specific characteristics. Despite the greater difficulty involved, these two main analytical approaches should be integrated in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the intersection between politics and education.

Consequently, textbooks are now analysed not only for their pedagogical purpose but also for the social, political, and cultural realities they represent to varying degrees.

2. **Textbooks and Communist Education**

Despite the differences between the communist regimes established across Europe, the existing scholarly literature (Nicolescu, 2022; Ney, 2008; Alain, 2007; Mitchievici & Stanomir,

2016; Tismăneanu, 2011; Soulet, 2008; Priestland, 2012. Courtois, 1998) points to several common features in the organisation and practice of education under these governments. A brief examination of these commonalities provides a useful basis for understanding the broader context within which the textbook acquired its particular role and position in the education of young people.

Starting from the common principles and characteristics of communist regimes, the table below illustrates how these were translated into the organisation and practice of education.

Table 1. Communist political principles and education process

Principle / Characteristic of the Communist Regime	Educational Implications
Extensive state control over society	School curricula and textbooks were determined by the authorities. Education was subject to state organisation and oversight. The appointment of teachers and the admission of students were subject to control and restrictions. Access to foreign literature was restricted.
Ideological monopoly (Marxism-Leninism) and the superiority of the socialist system	The school curriculum was grounded in the principles of dialectical and historical materialism. The content of school subjects was framed through the concepts of class struggle, and the cult of personality surrounding the supreme leader.
Broader access to education	Epansion of literacy and mass education, including in rural areas, thereby facilitating the dissemination of ideological teachings.
The prioritisation of technical education	Mathematics, engineering, and vocational training were accorded particular importance as they were considered essential to advancing industrialisation. The humanities and social sciences, including philosophy, sociology, and psychology, were subjected to stringent censorship or excluded from the curriculum.

Beyond these observations, it is important to acknowledge that education in the European communist states was neither uniform across countries nor consistent throughout the duration of the respective regimes. Significant differences existed not only between the various communist states, but also between different historical periods.

Romania was no exception. Following the establishment of the communist regime, the country experienced several changes in its educational system, particularly in the context of shifts in its relationship with the USSR (Berindei *et al*., 2009; Petrescu, 2020).

In order to highlight the relationship between the school textbook and state policy, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the changes that took place in the field of education after 1947. This is also essential for understanding the role of the history textbook, particularly as history increasingly became a means of providing an interpretation of the national past from the perspective of the state's ideological interests.

These changes can be traced through a few distinct stages, as outlined below:

a. 1947–1958: *The Sovietisation of Romania.* In this period the following changes were introduced:

- Decision No. 197.991/1947[2] , established institutional control over the education system and over the selection and production of textbooks. In the case of history, civic instruction, and geography, the use of single, officially approved textbooks was stipulated (Article 1).
- Under Decree No. 175/1948[3] public education was centralised (Article 1). A single textbook was introduced for elementary education (Article VI), while "compulsory and uniform" curricula were established for each field of study at higher-education level (Article XX). Education thus was increasingly aligned with the objectives of the political regime, as it was required to "meet the needs of consolidating the people's democracy and building socialist society" (Article 2).
- Decree No. 171/1953[4] vested the state, through its institutions, with responsibility for establishing "the instructions and regulations governing the organisation and operation [of education], curricula and educational programmes, school textbooks, and teaching methodologies" (Article 12).

b. 1958-1970 - *The early national-communist* period, when a distinctly national perspective on communism became increasingly prominent, although Marxist elements continued to be retained (Velimirovici, 2015).

[2] Ministerul Educatiei Nationale, Decizia nr. 197.991/1947. *Monitorul Oficial al României*, I, 172/30.07.1947,p. . 6703. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/bc/Monitorul_Oficial_al_Rom%C3%A2niei._Partea_1_1947-07-30%2C_nr._172.pdf).

[3]Ministerul Educatiei Nationale, Decret nr. 175/1948. *Monitorul Oficial* , 177 / 03.08.1948 (pp. 6322–6324.https://lege6.ro/app/document/g42domzq/decretul-nr-175-1948-pentru-reforma-invatamantului?_fl=1).

[4] Marea Adunare Nationala, Decret nr. 171/1953. *Buletinul Oficial*, 12/18.04.1953. (https://www.monitoruljuridic.ro/acte/decret/an-1953/2.

- Under Law No. 11/1968[5], education was assigned an explicitly political and ideological function, as it was required to "contribute to the development and flourishing of the socialist order and nation, to the comprehensive development of the human personality [...], to the formation of a dialectical-materialist conception of nature and society [...], and to the cultivation of their love for the homeland and the people, as well as for the ideals of peace and social progress" (Article 1). Teaching staff were likewise entrusted with the task of contributing to the fulfilment of the social mission of educating and instructing citizens (Article 2). The state's control over education was further reinforced: "curricula and syllabuses" were to be drawn up by the Ministry of Education (Article 44), which was also responsible for "the preparation of the textbooks required for compulsory general education and secondary education" (Article 45).

c. 1970-1989 - The *nationalist and ethnocentric* period, as reflected in education:

- Decree No. 207/1977 [6] stipulated that secondary education was to be "conducted in accordance with the directions of development established by the Programme of the Romanian Communist Party" and was to "ensure the preparation of young people for work and life, their education in the spirit of love for the socialist homeland and for the ideals of peace and social progress, and contribute to raising the cultural level of the entire population" (Article 1). The state retained authority over the development of curricula, syllabuses, and school textbooks (Article 2). Under Article 70, the Ministry was required to re-examine, by the beginning of the 1978–1979 school year, all curricula and school textbooks, with a view, among other objectives, to improving their scientific and political-educational content.
- Under Law No. 28/1978[7], the politicisation of education was reaffirmed, with education being defined as a "principal factor [...] in educating the 'new man'", responsible for implementing the Party's and state's policy concerning the training of personnel for all areas of economic and social activity, on the basis of the latest achievements in science and technology and advances in human knowledge. It was also tasked with forming and developing the socialist consciousness of young people and with preparing generations thoroughly equipped for work and life, devoted to the homeland, the Party and the people, and to the cause of socialism and communism (Article 1). Among its functions, education was expected to ensure: "the acquisition by pupils and students of the policies and ideology of the Romanian Communist Party, scientific socialism, and the dialectical-materialist and historical conception of the world and of life", thereby preparing them to become active builders of socialism and communism; "the cultivation of love for the homeland, the Party and the people, and for the Romanian people's past struggle for social and national freedom"

[5] Marea Adunare Nationala, Legea nr.11/1968. *Buletinul Oficial*, 62/13.05.1968. https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/46715. ,
[6] Consiliul de Stat, Decret nr. 207/1977. *Buletinul Oficial*, 67/12.07.1977. https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/22156.
[7] Marea Adunare Națională, Legea nr. 28/1978. *Buletinul Oficial*, 113/26.12.1978. https://legislatie.just.ro/public/DetaliiDocument/466),

(Article 12 b.; d.).The school was required to educate young people in the spirit of "love of work" and of a determination to engage in activities useful to society. Any form of evasion of work was regarded as contrary to the principles of socialist ethics and equity and as incompatible with the essence and aims of socialist society (Article 13). Responsibility for the organisation, guidance and supervision of education was assigned to the Superior Council of Education and Teaching and to the Ministry of Education and Teaching (Article 18). Curricula, syllabuses and school textbooks were to be uniform and were to be developed and provided by the Ministry of Education and Teaching (Articles 32; 43). The Ministry was also responsible for directing and coordinating the continuing professional development of the workforce, thereby ensuring the uniform implementation of Party and state policy in this field (Article 88). Education at all levels was required to ensure the communist and revolutionary education of young people, preparing them to become conscious and devoted builders of socialism and communism. Every educational institution was required to function as a strong centre of socialist and communist education for children and young people (Articles 115; 117). The communist education of young people was defined as a fundamental social and ethical duty of all teaching staff (Article 121).

Within the framework of these regulations, which transformed education into an instrument of Party and state policy, the textbook itself became an integral part of the centralised system of instruction.

3. History textbook as a political instrument of Individual and Collective Education

It has been emphasized in the literature that history textbooks often distort, misrepresent, or ignore the histories and perspectives of marginalized groups, while presenting a "heroic" image of dominant groups (Zinn, 2003**;** Nieuwenhuyse *et al*., 2026; Wagner *et al*., 2018; Vickers, 2002). Such selection may also reflect broader ideological, political, and cultural assumptions about whose history is considered relevant and whose voices are granted legitimacy (Korostelina, 2013).

For a regime that vested the state with extensive powers, it is unsurprising that textbooks were assigned not only an educational function, but also an ideological and political one (Cristian, 2004; Momanu, 2005).

The analysis above indicates that the politicisation of the textbook was established at the legislative level, as evidenced by state institutions' control over the production and distribution of textbooks, which became standardised and uniform, as well as over their content, which was required to reflect and reinforce the prevailing ideology. Research into communist historiography documents this transition from late Stalinism towards an increasingly nationalist and ethnocentric discourse.

An analysis of the textbooks published during this period allows us to draw several general observations regarding the changes that occurred in the content of history textbooks.

During the period 1947–1958, previously identified as the period of sovietisation in Romania, the content of school history contained substantially historical distortions. In Romania, for example, a single authorised history textbook was used, now commonly referred to as the

Roller Textbook[8]. It was based on a Marxist interpretation of the past and consequently incorporated substantial reinterpretations of historical events and developments (Pleșa, 2006). The textbook was reedited in 1956.

During the 1958–1965 period, some of the excesses associated with the "Roller period" were gradually reduced, while a more distinctly national interpretation of the past began to emerge.

During the 1965–1977 period, the emphasis on Romania's independence, sovereignty, historical continuity, and distinctive national character within the socialist system became increasingly pronounced. Consequently, historical discourse became progressively more national communist in orientation. Emphasis was placed on themes such as the antiquity and continuity of the Romanian people; the unity of the Romanian territories; independence; resistance to foreign domination; and the role of the Romanian people as active agents in their own history. This was also the period in which legislation explicitly established the Ministry's responsibility for approving textbooks and for overseeing the content of the instructional and educational process.

The conditions governing the publication and selection of textbooks remained unchanged during the 1980s, there was nevertheless a growing concern with adapting the content of history textbooks in order to legitimise the political present by presenting it as the outcome of a long historical development.

State control over the history textbook remained evident and was, moreover, explicitly reflected in the legislation discussed above.

Consequently, the history textbook remained a pedagogical instrument, but one placed at the service of propaganda and ideological education. Within the Romanian communist system, it was the product of a centralised educational system, which enabled changes in the official historiographical discourse to be incorporated into educational materials intended for pupils.

In this way, the history textbook became one of the means through which the official interpretation of the past was transmitted to pupils within a centralised educational system. The teaching of history thus became part of a broader political discourse.

Conclusion

The history textbook, as an official form of narrative about the past, adapted to the age-specific characteristics of its intended learners, is inevitably shaped by the dominant ideology of the period in which it is produced.

It constitutes an instrument for constructing social and political meaning, irrespective of the historical period in which it is conceived. To a certain extent, this is to be expected, as dominant ideologies, whether democratic or totalitarian, seek to promote and, in some contexts, impose the values and norms that underpin them.

[8] V. Maciu, G. Georgescu, T. Dumitru, M.Roller, *Istoria României. Manual pentru clasa a VIII-a*. Ed. de Stat: București, 1947. https://biblioteca-digitala.ro/?pub=7530-istoria-romaniei-manual-unic-pentru-clasa-a-viii-a-secundara&fbclid=IwY2xjawUslLhleHRuA2FlbQIxMABwZG9mAWJyaWQRMFdTUzhFeWdxc3haNzVPYWRzcnRjBmFwcF9pZBAyMjIwMzkxNzg4MjAwODkyAAEe7YezbGcYvzJo_ENj7basHsZ14Z_o0mx4u-Wghe0BbhlHJ9UcNijFUPX3nd4_aem_uYU0E4PJ95A3BnMNP3KMww

For scholarly research, the school textbook is particularly valuable, not least because it can be regarded as a reflection of the political and cultural evolution of a society. At the same time, it represents one of the most significant means through which a society transmits its values, constructs its collective identity, and legitimises its political order.

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