

How European is Eastern Europe (and who cares anyway?)

A decolonial method for East European cultural and political discourses

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During the 18th century, philosophers from Western European kingdoms have elaborated a thought system that shifted the position of the North on the traditional knowledge axis. From this process of epistemic change took shape the idea of the West as structural identity, born from the ruins of the Renaissance and founded on knowledge, culture, civilisation, etc. At the same time, the imperialist leanings of the Enlightenment have created a second Europe - Eastern Europe - that has been functioning ever since as its double, similar but different. The birth of Eastern Europe as a result of the Western gaze was an event that has marked profoundly the feelings of identity and belonging of human collectivities living in this region - and continue to affect them. Since those times, we have to face the stigma of belonging to a space conceived alternatively as semi-barbaric, or as a buffer between the West and non-Western worlds. The fall of socialist regimes and extension of capitalism over the borders of the Cold War, and the expansion of the NATO and UE, have brought to a new peak this process of identity definition, a process that has actually preoccupied the ruling classes and intellectuals since the beginning of the modern era: to what extent are we, easterners, European?

One of the leitmotifs of the so-called transition to democracy was the framing of the Eastern European opening to the global capitalist market in terms of a return to Europe, or to normality, after the long communist hiatus. This apparently spontaneous juxtaposition between Europe (meaning the West) and the norm represents the key for understanding the epistemic violence masked under the Western discourse (which conceives of just one form of civilization and one modernity). But it is a surprising proposition coming from Eastern European intellectuals. Why did intellectuals belonging to groups as diverse as the Russian zapadniki, socialists such as Dimitrov in Bulgaria, liberal reformists in Hungary or Polish dissidents have for such a long time claimed belonging to a Europe that actually rejects them?

A whole body of Enlightenment thinking - which subtly still determines the coordinates of our symbolic geography - bears responsibility for the pushing of a large part of human experience at the edges of legitimate knowledge. The project of modernity can be understood as a huge effort of hierarchising and suppressing knowledge produced in communities that found themselves, and still are, in the way of empires. Invoking first blood lines and Christianity, then skin colour, the so-called savage status of the primitive, oriental despotism, etc., the sciences of the Enlightenment have silenced, ridiculed and museified the theoretical expression of the Other, as if this Other was incapable of autonomous reasoning outside the supervision of the white master. Through such tricks, the Western discourse - the discourse of the supremacy of the West in relation to all other regions around the globe - reinforced the privileged position from which it enunciates, or rather its self-aggrandising singularity, reducing racism, slave trade, global asymmetrical resource exploitation, colonialism to mere exceptions from the golden rule of civilizing progress.

Our time: always behind

Among all the instruments of epistemic domination through which the Western gaze operates, Time proved the most efficient. In modernity, Time is not what it seems to be – a method of measuring becoming or passing – but a grid of values, a modality of allotting dominant and subaltern, central or peripheral positions within the imperial power matrix. Our intellectuals have always been obsessed by time, because they have sensed in its structure and fields of applicability the strong grasp of western hegemony. In everyday discussions to this day one can find assertions about Germany being 50, 70, even 100 years ahead of us. As long as we, in the East, do not realise that Time is a trap that we must avoid, the 200 year long battle for a place in the sun – a place at the universal banquet of nations, as Balcescu [1] put it – is lost.

When, in the 19th century, our cultures were taking shape in the mold of the new nation-states, this whole epistemic map with Time as its guiding vector was incorporated in the state apparatus – universities, technical colleges, hospitals, military garrisons, etc. – and internalised by the still-tender collective identity of our peoples. High culture in the East is still profoundly marked by the trauma of this harsh birth. The fact that we have the strength to say together with Babi Minune [2]: *hopa, hopa, am intrat in Europa* (oops, oops, we're in Europe) is the merit of artistic productions situated outside the cannon, for example the so-called *mahala* [3] literature of Anton Pann or the *manele* musical genre. But the majority of the educated elite are too shy to sing along, they would rather scorn and censor.

The national culture – a manifestly modern one – is a technology of the self fashioned by the intellectual and political classes from the 19th century till our days; it shapes souls, so to say. Through internalisation, it contributed to the mass diffusion of the stigma invented by thinkers from Western Europe, and ever since generation after generation of Romanian intellectuals, to name the clearest case, have been engulfed by the obsessive question: are we really European or not? The answers, at least those promoted by the cannon, are known, but what is surprising is the unanimity with which our intellectuals have accepted their subaltern position, allocated to them by the imperial power structure, as a sort of fatality. This subaltern position, following the argument of Gayatri Spivak [4], consists of a permanent distribution of certain societies in the roles of reproducers of the culture and politics of the centre. From such roles it is impossible to produce political or cultural innovations that would be accepted as progress or achievements of the whole of humanity. Not even the protochronists [5] who, at least apparently, rejected the canonical primacy of the West, have made any inroads; moreover, ironically, they have taken again Time as their ally. In this way they have ended up finding Romanian pioneers in all areas of human activity.

Still, it should not be forgotten that this fissure within Romanian culture is the result of a double morality inherent in the Western gaze. On the one side, this gaze produces and disseminates the image of a backward Eastern Europe, poor and insignificant, and on the other side it promises emancipation if the rules of the game are properly followed. This promise is never fulfilled, and belonging to the much-desired Western modernity is articulated as a permanent aspiration and lure. In its function as a bait, the promise of belonging masks the real, material processes of exploitation and economic marginalization as just intermediary stages and only vaguely unpleasant in the never-ending process of modernisation. The extreme violence of historical periods such as the post-1989 transition becomes legitimate and even honourable when the final step – taking up a dignified place at the universal banquet of nations – seems so close.

Belonging remains though an ever-remote achievement. The Romanian society is kept, within the colonial matrix, in a stage where it is perpetually emerging, perpetually just about to become white enough, capitalist enough, advanced and militarised enough, etc. Our proposition – and we cannot emphasise it enough – affirms that the perpetual state of emergence, the eternally transitional

nature of our collective identity, is already hidden in the seeds of modernity and comes pre-packaged together with forms of modernity exported through coloniality from the metropolises to the periphery. In this sense, the transition period inaugurated by the Iliescu [6] regime is inscribed without any rupture in the cycle of modernity, joining the industrialisation of the 1960s, for example, and going back to the 1848 revolutionaries and maybe to the Organic Statutes – all of them stages of permanent transition, of perpetual emergency.

Therefore emancipation and social progress cannot be understood as a return to normality, in the way neoconservative thinkers such as Liiceanu [7] propose, as long as normality means swallowing up the notion that one has an incomplete selfhood, that one was born of insignificant territories. The liberals have anxiously hoped, like they do today, that the children which we all are will someday emancipate themselves in the eyes of the West; the conservatives have placed themselves in the position of authenticity arbiters, ending up as nations' shepherds, with heavy patriarchal consequences for all of us, women and men. But neither of those have engaged the core of the problem – the foundation of the subaltern condition from which we are constrained to speak.

The hoax of the national project

The taking up of Western codes has unleashed a feeling of dislocation, which is the trauma of our coming out in the light of modernity. In the imperial context, the social engineering tools meant to bring us closer to Europe – the opening of regional markets to capitalism, the bureaucratisation of the state apparatus, industrialisation, urbanisation, the extension of national education – have at the same time provided the tools for (self)denigration. The compounded effect has been the creation of a certain discursive practice typical for most of the intelligentsia alienated from the place and the people it came from. Living within a horizon of expectations projected on the West, permanently comparing themselves with the West, this educated and only occasionally well-off europeanist class has developed in time a double consciousness (meaning a culturally-induced neurosis), with very obvious political consequences. The celebration of the nation by nationalists, on the other side, represents just another facet of the same phenomenon, as long as the nation has been the vector for the internalisation of the imperial matrix and of stigma.

In today's age of globalisation, the scenario of denigration and de-solidarising is sharpened by the violent intervention of neoliberalism, which severs local ties and subsumes them under the logic of corporate capital. We should also remember that, if today the Romanian middle class is leaning on the American-style cosmopolitanism it grew with, before that there was France and the psychosis of Little Paris, or Germanophilia. In the field of theoretical production, on the cultural battlefield, the delocalised subjectivity of the intellectual – meaning oriented towards the centre – has produced a wealth of interpretations, ranging from the festive ontologisation of national specificity, to the opposite, i.e. treating trauma as a divine/historical/existential curse. We need to understand that all of these strategies are the faces of the same Janus and that their root – the periphery epistemic condition – is common.

In the political sphere though, the long process of de-solidarising – or of rejection, censorship, suppression – of alternative cultures constitutes one of the failures of our national projects. The national culture is the one that has translated in the language of empire – through processes such as museification, for example – the last vestiges of radical alterity: peasant cultures tied by non-Christian beliefs, cultures based on forms of communal organising and mutual help. The latter have been mummified through the discourses of the museum and silenced, unable to leave behind coherent traces. However, nostalgia and regret for these worlds – in short, the invention of tradition – are traps of the Enlightenment-shaped Western gaze, and belong to the big hoax of the national project. A decolonial thinking and practice molded to the local context must show the violence of those erasures, but it cannot try to resurrect those worlds.

Delocalised and not-so-innocent liberalism

Bourgeois cultural hegemony – liberalism – along with the effort to modernise the country, as hoped by Stefan Zeletin [8], has also opened a horizon of expectation that successively unravels horizontal solidarities and contributes to the erosion of collective dignity. Tactically, this leads to the neutralising of the subversive potential of popular movements, treated, as it happened so often in our recent history, as periphery farce or events manipulated from outside. The chronic incapacity to participate in the issues of the polis feeds on stigma and the feeling of shame the latter engenders. And euphoria in the name of the nation, as exemplified in the marches around the Save Rosia Montana movement, can seem an innocuous patriotic reference, when in reality it carves space for a radical nationalist discourse. This form of liberalism with patriotic flavour cannot replenish a political vocabulary that would address the real challenges of the 21st century.

Forged in the imperial context, the national culture favoured the creation of exchange circuits and information fluxes that tie it (with heavy chains) to the Euro-Atlantic metropolises, at the same time ignoring the similar experiences of its neighbours or overseas comrades. This is the reason for which the decolonial experience of the South-American continent or of India have not penetrated but in the most anemic manner in our local organizational practice. Through deregulation and the implementation of austerity policies, neoliberalism offers an additional reinforcement to the asymmetrical relationship to financial centres (and also cultural, artistic centres), which is specific to modernity. And this situation is made possible by an understanding of Eastern Europe after 1989 as a hollowed out area, a space of political disappointments, as Marina Gržinić [9] would say, a stunted, shameful residue of the 20th century. This is the colonial vision reproduced by the liberal genealogy espoused by intellectuals. In Eastern Europe, the delocalised/displaced position of this type of knowledge producer has facilitated and legitimated the levelling intervention of capitalism and the transforming of the region into an experimental zone, stuck in a perpetual provisional state.

This is the same docile liberalism that has managed to codify the radical experiences of the years 1989-1990 in Eastern Europe as incomplete political events, as belated, violent uprisings which serve only to demonstrate the inferior nature of those societies' political thought and organising efforts. Instead of being understood as radical re-articulations of the ideas of democracy and nation-state – as indicated by Boris Buden [10] – the Eastern European Revolutions have been interpreted as double proof of the political backwardness of those societies, as well as of the deep aspiration and desire to become 'as we should be', meaning identical to the Euro-Atlantic world. In other words, the Revolutions have been labelled by the hegemonic liberal anti-communist discourse as shameful events that attest to the idea that history is important and tragic only if it takes place in the centre, but when it unfolds in the periphery it is just a ridiculous, brutal farce.

The fetish, aspiration and hope

This situation was made possible also because in the subaltern gaze, the triumphalist narration of the West is mirrored as a fetish. The West was and is fetishised in the phases of capitalist production, its image purified and transformed into a model of interpellation, by the structural need of the emergent middle class to clean itself up – to whiten itself, as Franz Fanon would say – from the stigma attached to the Balkanic, or the Easterner. The fetish of the West is in its turn a product of delocalised/displaced liberalism.

More recently, the resuscitation of the myth of the dependable, honest German that contributed to the election of the president Klaus Iohannis is part of this general scheme. Among the many perils that threaten our public life, the aspirational tendencies of the middle class represent a brake in the process of democratisation and emancipation from eurocentrist stereotypes. Claiming to be apolitical, this attitude produced a bunch of political effects, mobilising groups around fake issues

such as the fight against corruption or the better implementation of the rule of law, and legitimising nonchalantly the corporate logic of investments and structural aid coming straight from the IMF and the World Bank.

The narcissism evident in the way these groups have celebrated their civic spirit, youth, knowledge, beauty, etc. in the context of the latest street protests [11] demonstrate the necessity of opening towards a popular mode of thinking that would include the experience of displacement and exploitation of the last couple of decades and the urgency of reflecting upon them. A popular culture, centered around the disenchantment with the Western core, as lived by the precariously employed workers from the East and reflected here only in the manele cultural phenomenon. The disenchantment, disappointment and precaution which are becoming more and more specific to the working class – if we can call it that – must replace the illusory hope typical of the Iohannis supporters; a hope of being occidental and white, a hope toxic through its function of legitimising racism and hatred towards the poor. This will be the historical challenge for the Romanian society in the era of multipolar globalisation.

We are not traditional, even if we live in villages; and we are not provincial, even if instead of Berlin or Singapore we live in Zlatna. Through everything we do, we participate to the present – or the plurimodernity as Partha Chatterjee [12] puts it – in synch with the world-system. There is no way out, and our task is to detect structural disadvantages and to overcome them. In the process of this transformation, the role and place of theory is changed. Delocalised knowledge – which here is the mark and misery of liberalism and conservatism – leaves slowly space for a type of knowledge that is open towards the (symbolic) margins and discourses that, at any rate, have been circulating for a long time in the underground. Feminism, poverty, dignity of the Roma in their fight against Romanian institutionalised racism, the struggle for the right to housing, migration and the fight against social racism that confronts us in the West – us and above all the refugees from Africa, Syria and Iraq – are all starting points, fields of action. Reclaiming marginality would make us lose the perfumed dream of Europe, but in exchange would give us back to the community, in a position where we could pick up the threads of our decolonial subjectivity, and establish new, more solid partnerships, including with the West.

In our case, as Easterners, the falling of the socialist regimes has undermined the position from which to speak and has silenced our political solutions. The neoliberal expansion has achieved the rest. By liquidating, privatising, changing work relations, transforming the big cities into small islands of capital, pushing millions of people to work outside the borders of their communities, propagating a discourse of competition on a background of poverty and precariousness, by creating new social classes and new social cleavages, and so on. The political class, formed in the pilfering period of recapitalisation, seems to be exclusively preoccupied today with buttressing the privileges it has acquired (acquired in the fight – or cooperation – with multinational corporations, with Brussels, with international monitoring and penalising bodies). When people chanted in the streets ‘PDL and USL, the same garbage’ [13], they referenced this very alliance. Ideologically speaking, the political class claims legitimacy from the myth of the joining the EU and from the nation. Both serve to hide group interests and neoliberal exploitation. Still, aside from the hegemonic discourse, in the past years various autonomous movements have taken shape – collectives, fronts, political theatres, political communes, circles, etc. – that combat this modality of understanding and engaging in politics.

Islamophobia as unconscious strategy of de-solidarising

‘We don’t want foreigners in our midst’ – the xenophobic and islamophobic slogan that has saturated the social media during the so-called refugee crisis is not an aversion towards foreigners. It is not a manifestation of what the European political structures deem a ‘Balkanic’ lack of understanding of

pluralism and multiculturalism. It is actually an expression of the internalisation of the gaze of the master, which reproduces and multiplies the aversion towards the Other. Coloniality functions through the desire to become Western-like, thus the subaltern colonial subject looks for occasions to mimic this transformation. The question 'should we accept or not refugees' thus becomes an occasion to manifest the decisional authority specific to the Euro-Atlantic world, the power to decide over the life or death of others. Flattered by this position, a periphery society can respond with a generous and paternalistic 'yes' or with a harsh 'no'. The refusal of welcoming refugees is the choice which ensures the unequivocal dissociation from a non-European population, which in the colonial logics is perceived as a civilisational menace.

In the Romanian context the 'no' dominated, showing amnesia in relation to the very harsh experiences of migration of the local population. This amnesia is joined by the hope of recognition from the European West, according to whom - in line with colonial logics - the teenage societies from Eastern Europe have finally matured and become sufficiently white, civilised and stable. And it looks like we finally have a united Europe, a fortress-Europe that shows its true face: that of the irritable, racist master, its placid comfort upset. It is a measure of the efficiency of coloniality when we feel soothed by knowing others are even more undesirable than ourselves, that there are out there subjectivities even more non-European than ours: if only we could mimic a contrast and forget what ties us to these 'wretched of the earth', maybe, just maybe we could pass as European. That is because the logic of coloniality tricks us by telling us: the more undesirable they are, the more desirable we are. Therefore the subaltern, by showing solidarity with those that, in the geo-political global order, are in similar positions, would betray her/his imposture. And then the Master would know without a doubt that she/he is as much of a 'foreigner' as the one that crosses the Mediterranean.

During the Cold War, we used to belong to the Red Other - the despotic and inhuman political enemy of democracy. Today, the War on Terror has replaced the Cold War. And we are offered the - yes, historical! - chance of decisively choosing our camp. The stigma of belonging to the wrong camp before 1989 is still weighing on us, therefore the stronger we demonstrate our whiteness through hatred - hatred towards the migrants and refugees, towards the Roma and towards non-normative sexual and gender subjectivities - the greater the chances of finally belonging (to the west). But the path of hatred is also the path of oppression and exploitation, and freedom and autonomy are incompatible with it. The War of Terror is not about terrorism, but, as mentioned by Arundhati Roy [14], the destructive impulse of superpowers on their way to supremacy, coercion and global hegemony. That is why, according to Roy, the annihilation of the Iraqi society is compatible with Argentinian austerity, or, more recently, the Eastern-European austerity: they are all situations of siege by neoliberal imperialism, just that some have air raids, others IMF-checkbooks. But above all, beyond being sad and horrible, the motto 'we do not want strangers here' is also comical, when the 'we' is made of foreigners too.

The desire not to be a foreigner any more is, after all, understandable. So is the desire to have economic stability and security, and to know you belong to history from the position of the ones that decide. But today this desire is overlapping with belonging to a colonial Europe, therefore satisfying it depends on the creation of new 'foreigners', new subalterns, on the transfer of injustice toward another periphery - in other words, a dignified collective life seems to depend on the creation of new humiliations, inflicted on others, somewhere else.

The decolonial method shows us ways in which we could untie this desire from a glorious and grandiose Europe, and how to reattach it to real histories (although lost through colonial amnesia) of resistance before imperial cooption. These histories are local and also they are the histories of many peripheries that, together with underground Euro-Atlantic politics and cultures, have created in their turn resistance against the colonial logics of their own societies. Let's see Europe as just an

enmeshing of illusions that, through deception, produces unbearable injustices, and let's re-launch the idea of the collectivity as trans-border, decolonial solidarity, to the detriment of the ideas of the nation and Europeanisation.

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P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] Nicolae Balcescu (1819-1852), revolutionary, writer and political figure of the Wallachian 1848 movement.

[2] Babi Minune, popular manele singer. Lyrics are from the 2008 song *Made in Romania*.

[3] Ottoman term designating a neighbourhood; in Romanian it came to refer to a poor district or to the outskirts of a town

[4] See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, „Can the Subaltern Speak?”, in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, University of Illinois Press, 1988.

[5] Protochronism, nationalist anti-colonialist cultural and historical trend of the Ceausescu regime that postulates the ignorance of Western modernity towards other societies. The protochronists celebrated the pioneer activity of Romanian ethnics in various domains, e.g. the first Baroque piece of literature allegedly written by a Romanian boyar and so on.

[6] Ion Iliescu, first president of Romania after the 1989 Revolution.

[7] Gabriel Liiceanu, anti-communist philosopher and writer, public figure of the post-89 europeanist intelligentsia, self-proclaimed dissident of the Ceausescu regime.

[8] Stefan Zeletin (1883-1934), liberal sociologist and political thinker, influential figure of the political debates of the beginning of the 20th century who promoted the modernising historical role of the bourgeoisie and of capitalism. See *Burghezia română*, 1925

[9] See Marina Gržinić, *Fiction Reconstructed: Eastern Europe, PostSocialism and the Retro-Avant-Garde*, Selene edition Vienna + Springerin, 2000.

[10] See Boris Buden, *Zone des Übergangs: Vom Ende des Postkommunismus*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2009.

[11] We are referring to the anti-corruption mass protests of November 2015, generated by the tragedy at the Colectiv Club on the 30th of October.

[12] See Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton University Press, 1993.

[13] Very popular slogan chanted at the anti-austerity mass protests of January 2012. PDL- Liberal Democrat Party; USL- Liberal Social Union.

[14] See Arundhati Roy, *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire*, Penguin Books India, 2006.