

NEGOTIATING THE ROMANIAN QUEST FOR CULTURAL IDENTITY AFTER 1989: BETWEEN AUTHENTICITY AND MIMICRY, SELF AND NEO-COLONIZATION

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Abstract

Struggling with a seemingly endless period of transition, of inbetweenness with respect to a possible Western future and its communist past, Romania's ongoing quest for self-definition cannot free itself from the shadow of colonization. This essay aims at presenting the post-communist Romanian attempt to reinvent its cultural identity and will revolve around Homi Bhabha's theories of the Third Space and of the necessity of cultural liminality applied to Gabriel Andreescu's article "Interes national, profil intelectual" (English translation: "National Interest, Intellectual Profile"). Andreescu's dialogue with Octavian Paler and Alexandru Paleologu provides fertile ground for negotiation between the ethnocentrism of conservative intellectuals and the progressive Occidentalism of liberal humanists. Just as postcolonial subjects seek self-definition in shaping myths of authenticity or resorting to mimicry, Romanian intellectuals try to heal a wounded self-esteem either by looking backward to an eulogized past or forward to a civilized and civilizing West, yet only manage to display the scars of subjugation by promoting either self or neo-colonization.

Keywords: Romanian cultural identity, self-colonization, neo-colonization, postcommunism, postcolonialism, Third Space

American writer David Quammen once said "Identity is such a crucial affair that one shouldn't rush into it" ("David Quammen"). Well, Romania is definitely taking its time, since after more than twenty years since the official liberation from the Soviet grip, it still dwells in a period of *transition*, of inbetweenness, struggling to synchronize itself with the Western world, join the "contemporary compulsion to move beyond, to turn the present into the *'post'*" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 18) and distance itself from the past. While common to all nations, the ongoing quest for self-definition is

more painfully felt by societies who have been colonized, in the sense of having being subjugated politically and culturally, robbed of the right to develop at their own pace. Discussions over the similarities and distinctions between postcolonialism and post-communism have been led by critics such as David Chioni Moore, Adrian Ontoiu, Boris Buden and I.B. Lefter, among other Romanian intellectuals, but what is certain is that Romania sorely falls under this category of formerly subjugated countries. Whether conservative or progressive, its people cannot simply erase the stamp of “otherness”, the lesion that forty-five years of communism have marked on their bodies and minds. The lingering after-effects have inevitably darkened Romania’s (self) image and has deeply instilled a sense of traumatic dislocation.

This essay aims at presenting the post-communist Romanian attempt to reinvent its cultural identity, as discussed in Gabriel Andreescu’s article “Interes national, profil intelectual”⁵², published in 1996 in his volume *Nationalisti, antinationalisti*. Andreescu’s dialogue with Octavian Paler and Alexandru Paleologu provides fertile ground for negotiation between the ethnocentrism of conservative intellectuals and the progressive Occidentalism of liberal humanists. The former could lead to a type of self-colonization that instead of deifying the West, (as proposed by Alexander Kiossev in his article “(“Notes on the Self-colonising Cultures”), it puts Romanian past and authenticity on a pedestal, while the latter may mask the path towards Western neo-colonization. Thus, despite fighting to surpass the peripheral condition of “colonial otherness”, Romania seems to be sinking ever deeper into it.

The critical methodology employed in this work is based on the postcolonial theory of Homi Bhabha and his already famous concepts of: ambivalence, liminality, mimicry, difference and hybridity, most of which are tackled in his book “The Location of Culture”. The chosen framework is fitting for the description of post-communist Romanian quest for cultural identity, since it stresses the indeterminacy of the process of identity formation and the (re)invention of cultural difference, as well as the inherent inbetweenness and hybridity of culture itself. Conforming to the classic paradigm of the postcolonial subject, post-communist Romania is situated in a liminal position between the desire for authenticity and the habit or need for what Homi Bhabha calls mimicry, as will be further argued.

The present analysis focuses specifically on Romania’s former communist orientation and subsequent attempts to install a new cultural identity, the apparent incommensurable discrepancies between two intellectual approaches, the effects of confusing cultural diversity with cultural difference, the turn towards essentialism and authenticity, which

⁵² The English translation of the article is “Romanian Interest, Intellectual Profile”

encourages self-colonization (to use Kiossev's coinage) and self-deprecation, as well as the adoption of Western values in the form of mimicry, which leads to neo-colonization and more emphasis on Romania's otherness. Moreover, the essay will tackle the highly significant notion of hybridity, along with the liminal Third Space and unhomely world it implies, which, according to Homi Bhabha, are mandatory in grasping the formation of cultural identity.

To begin with, one should consider the similarity between colonialism and communism in order to grasp the applicability of postcolonial studies to the post-communist reality and place the Romanian need for a reconstructed cultural identity in the proper context. Just as the colonizers perceived "the societal as a domain amenable to normalization and regulation through the exercise of power" (Venn, 2000, p. 61), the Soviet Union made use of terror and collective fear to construct its truth and its reality, used violence to impose its norms and rules on Eastern Europe. Therefore, in succumbing to the USSR, Romania's political, economic and social systems became mere copies of the Russian model. Political leadership is assumed entirely by only one party (creatively entitled the Romanian Communist Party), private property gives in to forced collectivity, the Romanian Securitate takes after the Soviet KGB in using "up to half a million official collaborators whose mission [is] to spy on their professional, associative and even familial acquaintances" (Soulet, 2008, p. 70) and Nicolae Ceausescu's cult of personality is molded after Joseph Stalin's figure of a protective, yet authoritarian father.

Adding to the above-mentioned evidence of colonial control, the Soviets' goal was to "replace the bourgeois culture with a socialist culture" (Soulet, 2008, p. 74) and just as the civilizing mission of the colonizers had "a decidedly one-sided and paternalistic aim" (Venn, 2000, p. 63), the socialist mission to *reeducate* people by manipulating their language, history, literature, elites and religion was conducted by force. Consequently, Russian language was given priority in the studying of foreign languages in pre-university curriculum and Romanian history rewritten so as to undermine the West and underline the link with the USSR, its literature censored and turned into propaganda, its cultural elites imprisoned and its religion overthrown. What is more, the "Pitesti Phenomenon" is a painful example of "breaking down the subjects' personality and cultural identity" (Surdulescu, 2006) and the imposition of the "New Man" only managed to mutilate and traumatize Romanian consciousness. How, then, could one *not* recognize the classic colonizing measures used by the Soviet Union in order to assert its power over the Eastern Block and create a Romania without Romanians (in the words of historian Neagu Djuvara)? However, after the liberating revolution of December 1989, Romania realized that it cannot take off the

mask of communism without relinquishing a part of itself in the process. So what is left is an emptiness that needs to be filled, an identity that needs to be reshaped.

In his article, “Interes national, profil intelectual”, Gabriel Andreescu starts by clearly distinguishing between two types of discourse: one that is “nationalist” (autochthonous) and another one that is “antinationalist” (occidental). According to the Romanian critic, these ideological categories are not compatible and, what is more, the future of the society depends on the choice between the two. Yet, instead of focusing on cultural polarity, Homi Bhabha mentions that it is precisely this “time of cultural uncertainty, and, most crucially, of significatory or representational undecidability” (Bhabha, 1995, p. 206) that opens up a space of negotiation from which culture emerges. Thus, building Romanian cultural identity is not so much a choice between two incommensurable sides, as an understanding of their interdependence and appreciation of the dialectical perspective they offer.

The first apparent clash between the nationalist Octavian Paler and the “antinationalist” Gabriel Andreescu rests on their respective attitudes towards minorities. Whereas the former maintains that “Our [identity] deserves more attention than the rights . . . of homosexuals” (Andreescu, 1996, p. 93), the pro-Western critic asserts that he “cannot conceive of any national specificity as having priority over human dignity and individuality” (Andreescu, 1996, p. 93). This type of disagreement can be further elucidated if one turns to the useful distinction Bhabha makes between *cultural diversity* and *cultural difference*. As a response to Paler’s remark, Andreescu pushes for the awareness of cultural diversity in Romania. But in order to start developing a sense of identity, the society should go beyond cultural diversity and find a liminal position that acknowledges cultural difference.

Cultural diversity is the recognition of pre-given cultural ‘contents’ and customs, held in a time-frame of relativism; it gives rise to anodyne liberal notions of multiculturalism, cultural exchange or the culture of humanity. (Bhabha, 1995, p. 206)

A transparent norm is constituted, a norm given by the host society or dominant culture, which says that ‘these cultures are fine, but we must be able to locate them within our own grid’. This is what I mean by a creation of cultural diversity and a containment of cultural difference. (Rutherford, 1990)

Hence, the creation of cultural diversity will allow for multiculturalism to exist, but it is not sufficient for the building of cultural identity because it can decisively separate the margins from the center by placing minorities in a hierarchical system created by the dominant culture. In establishing an antagonistic relation between “our” identity and “the rights

of homosexuals”, Paler dismisses the possibility of being Romanian and homosexual at the same time. On the other hand, Gabriel Andreescu talks about individual rights and calls upon the Romanian Constitution to defend “the right to life, freedom and opinion . . . but also to [the] intimacy and privacy” (Andreescu, 1996, p. 95) of homosexuals. But this liberal step can prove quite superficial, since the “universalism that paradoxically permits diversity makes ethnocentric norms, values and interests” (Rutherford, 1990). So, recognizing (and celebrating) homosexual diversity can have the effect of stressing the eccentricity (or ex-centricity) of minorities and reinforce discrimination. In order to pave the way to a truly inclusive perspective and acknowledge the right of homosexuals to be Romanians, one must go further than Gabriel Andreescu and stop collaring the articulation of cultural difference by making room for its various systems of representation.

Although Andreescu continues to emphasize the disparity between his progressive perspective and the conservatory, reactionary and even “outdated” views of Alexandru Paleologu and Octavian Paler, all three of them are ultimately making an attempt to recuperate what has been lost or destroyed during communism. This crisis of identity is notably similar to the characteristic ambivalence of postcolonial peoples that are pushed and pulled between the hope of finding strength in *authenticity* and the need to resort to *mimicry* in their relation with the former colonizers.

It appears that conservative intellectuals are prone towards engaging in ethnic nationalism that is rooted in an essentialist attitude towards the nation. When Alexandru Paleologu points out that “the Maastricht Treaty is . . . the making of individuals who despise Europe” (qtd. in Andreescu, 1996, p. 99) or that this type of organization “cancels the right to call oneself French, Romanian, Hungarian or Russian” (qtd. In Andreescu, 1996, p. 107), he overtly rejects outside influence as a threat to the specificity of cultural/national identity. The feeling that Romanianness has been violated during the heyday of Soviet communism sway justifies the need for compensation and recuperation of the uncontaminated identity it had once built. Remembering “the glorious, epic history” (Andreescu, 1996, p. 99) of Romania or nostalgically turning towards the “national church” and Romanian “rural origins” (Andreescu, 1996, p. 114) further charges the desire to recapture its authenticity. Such an attitude is typical of postcolonial subjects who argue for “a recuperation of authentic pre-colonial traditions and customs” (Ashcroft, 1998, p. 21). How constructive can such an approach be? Indian critic Homi Bhabha contends that relying solely on this attitude is a trap, since “hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or purity of cultures is untenable” (Bhabha, 1995, p. 208). This is the reason why he challenges the “sense of historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force,

authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People” (Bhabha, 1995, p. 208).

Furthermore, “the danger that the Maastricht integration could lead to an anonymous society” [my translation] (Andreescu, 1996, p. 108) is doubled in the case of Paleologu by a pressing and persistent concern that Europe imposes on Romanians “a set of standards that we have no way of reaching after fifty years of communism” (Andreescu, 1996, p. 107). This dark self-image and inferiority complex, which is undoubtedly a side effect of having been culturally forced into submission, leads to what Alexander Kiossev called “self-colonization”. To the nationalist critic, the feeling of being “European, although perhaps not to a real extent” (Kiossev, n.d.) does not lead to an over-appreciation of the West, but to a critique of the present in favor of a celebrated past. This form of “self-colonization” still implies that Romanians “traumatize themselves . . . and adopt their own inferiority” (Kiossev, n.d.) since, by envisioning a better past, they shamefully, yet ceaselessly display the stigma of the “colonial other” imprinted by communism. In addition, self-oppression encourages stagnation and isolation, as it is focused on presumably fixed, immutable values and does not allow for outside “contamination”. Unable to “cope with certain forms of uncertainty and unfixity in the construction of . . . identity” (Rutherford, 1990), the conservative stance needs a counterpart in order to create a productive space of negotiation.

Gabriel Andreescu’s encouragement to import “movements that revolve around objectives such as ecology, feminism [and] human rights” (Andreescu, 1996, p. 104) is regarded with apprehension because Romania has not developed a strong sense of democracy and is thus forced to take these values as such and progressively make them to match its reality. Valuing individual liberty over collective wellbeing and “civic consciousness [over] peasant mentality” (Andreescu, 1996, p. 114) is far from being considered something “typically Romanian”, so critics such as Titu Maiorescu have warned against the danger of implementing what is merely “forms without substance”. This type of imitation that is closer to parody than to mimesis finds its correspondent into what Bhabha calls “mimicry”.

Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. (Bhabha, 1994, p. 86)

Although the typical colonial subject directs its mimicry towards the former colonizer, in the case of post-communist spaces “postcolonial desire . . . fixates not on the fallen master Russia, but on the glittering Euramerican . . . beast that broke it”. (Moore, 2004, p. 118) Since the Oriental colonizer is

perceived as inferior, the new civilizational model becomes the West, which emerges as a neo-colonizer. Emphasis is placed by Bhabha on the ambivalence of mimicry, which is “a sign of double articulation” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 86) since adopting “the colonizer’s cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values . . . is never a simple reproduction of those traits. Rather, the result is a ‘blurred copy’” (Ashcroft, 1998, p. 139) that can be both empowering and threatening. Therefore, mimicry can prove to be “one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 85), but also a threat its perceived superiority. For the colonial subject, mimicry may be of help in moving forward, yet regardless of whether or not the imperfect copy manages to bring a certain degree of originality to the empty forms, it will still remain under the *protection and control* of the original.

Moreover, Andreescu’s pro-Western approach and his suggestion to replace ethnic nationalism with a form of civic nationalism which thrives “in the United States and in all of the civilized world” (Andreescu, 1996, p. 100) has been depicted by Octavian Paler as servility to the Occident, which is “not more honorable than servility to Moscow” (Andreescu, 1996, p. 105). This shows an awareness of the fact that “the danger . . . of a neo-colonial relation is always present” (Moore, 2004, p. 112) in the case of formally oppressed subjects. Adopting the neo-colonizer’s frame of normality through mimicry categorically undermines the much longed-for sense of liberty and self-determination. As Bhabha indicated, “the desire to emerge as ‘authentic’ through mimicry - through a process of writing and repetition - is the final irony of partial representation.” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 88) Thus, not only is the option of mimicry not sufficient in forming a stable foundation for the development of cultural identity, but it only offers an illusory solution to escaping a peripheral position.

Since considered separately, neither one of the two stances presented in Gabriel Andreescu’s article offers a satisfactory response to the quest for identity, perhaps one should return to Bhabha’s image of culture as hybridity, as something that is not fixed in place, but is instable and fluid, never on one side or the other, but always in-between, moving constantly along the borderlines of different constructions. The chosen symbol for representing this condition is the stairwell.

The stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white. (Bhabha, 1994, p. 4)

Cultural hybridity is best represented by the stairwell because the latter implies a space of transition between two poles, a bridge that brings two perspectives together instead of separating them into incompatible

realities. This “hither and thither” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 4) is representative of Romania’s hybrid identity that incorporates authenticity and mimicry, Orient and Occident. In Bhabha’s perspective, going beyond polarities and embracing the *instability of culture* are crucial to the formation of cultural identity.

What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity. (Bhabha, 1994, p. 1)

Therefore, what Homi Bhabha urges his readers to do, is to acknowledge the hybridity of culture that should not be thought of as homogenous and pure, but as a process of ongoing, dialectic negotiation, always open to ambivalence and interpretation.

Moreover, the notion of hybridity describes “the construction of cultural authority within conditions of political antagonism or inequity . . . [which is] neither assimilation nor collaboration” (Bhabha, 1998, p. 34), but simply makes possible the emergence of a Third Space. While in the case of postcolonial subjects, this position stresses the interdependence of the colonized and colonizer, in post- communist Romania, the same relationship is established between the self-colonized and the neo-colonizer. Admittedly antagonistic in prospect, yet similar in establishing Romania’s subalternity, Gabriel Andreescu and Octavian Paler/Alexandu Paleologu depict two complementary approaches to the reinvention of Romanian cultural identity. Without either assimilating or fully collaborating, they prove that identity can be shaped “through a dialectic model of ambivalence . . . along the clash of two discursive fields” (Ramos, n.d.). The postcolonial liminality between “the desire for autonomy and a history of dependence . . . between resistance and complicity, between imitation (mimicry) and originality” (Moore, 2004, p. 112) applies to post-1989 Romania’ hybridity of autochthony and Occidentalism and justifies a feeling of perpetual transition, displacement and “unhomeliness”, in which home and world are continuously relocated.

To conclude, more than forty years of communist “normalization” of Romania’s cultural identity have disoriented its people and traumatized them into assuming a position of inferiority. It has been ascertained that postcolonial subjects seek self-definition in shaping myths of authenticity or resorting to mimicry. It comes as little wonder, then, that Romanians too, through the written or heard voice of their intellectuals try to heal a wounded self-esteem by looking backward to an eulogized past or forward to a civilized and civilizing West, yet only manage to display the scars of subjugation by promoting either self or neo-colonization.

Furthermore, instead of focusing on expressing Romanian cultural difference, Gabriel Andreescu only longs for a ghostly advancement of cultural diversity. As both of the approaches discussed in the article “Interes national, profil intelectual” seem futile in themselves, Homi Bhabha offers a fresh perspective, as shown throughout the critical argument of this article. Because cultural identity is never fixed, one should better “focus on the faultlines themselves, on border situations and thresholds as the sites where identities are performed and contested” (Perloff, n.d.). What results from the dialogue between nationalists and anti-nationalists, between pro-autochthonous and pro-occidental critics, between conservative and progressive intellectuals, between Gabriel Andreescu and Octavian Paler or Alexandru Paleologu is not political polarity, but *the between itself*. It is Romania’s *negotiation* of its “betweens” that underscores the liminal Third Space out of which its own identity is invented and sheds light on the hybrid nature of its culture and on the indelible “unhomeliness” of postcoloniality.

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