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College of Communication and Public Relations – NSPSPA

6 Povernei St., Sector 1, Bucharest
Tel.: 201 318 0889; Fax: 021 318 0882
elena.negrea@comunicare.ro; www.journalofcommunication.ro; www.comunicare.ro

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Alexandru CÂRLAN*
Mălina CIOCEA**
Grigore GEORGIU***

Overcoming Centre-Periphery Approaches in Intercultural Communication. Mythological Commitments and Aspirational Identities in Three Romanian Narratives for Western Audiences****

Abstract: The cultural journeys of Romanian thinking are recurrent meditations on the relationship between the Enlightened West and this *island of Latinity in the Slav sea*. While confirming the mythological allegiances of Romanian historiography, this metaphor carries another inherent constant in its aspirational identity, the relationship of a peripheral culture with the locus of the centrality of the world-system (cf. Dussel, 2004). The antonymic vein in Romanian reflexive consciousness, fed by permanent self-critical measurement against Europe, is constantly amended by a relativist conjunctive paradigm attempting to structurally integrate ruptures in meaning (cf. Alexandrescu, 2000). Our analysis of three such attempts to present Romanian culture to an Academic Western audience will follow the construction of a narrative about Romanian identity which employs various degrees of reflexivity in order to define a relational paradigm. We are going to illustrate this mythological commitment in relation with the centre-periphery paradigm and its subsequent influence on identity construction by treating this type of narrative as a rhetorical genre in its own right, governed by a typical exigence (cf. Bitzer, 1968) and generic constraints (cf. Jamieson, 1973). We will show that although dichotomic concepts for discussing identities can hardly be avoided (as is the case of myth in historiography), an evolution from a disjunctive to a conjunctive paradigm is possible through reflexivity.

Keywords: foundation myth; centre-periphery paradigms; conjunctive paradigm; aspirational identity; reflexivity.

1. Foundation Myths and the Management of Periphery

Questions of identity do not necessarily pertain to the childhood of nations; indeed, in the age of complex interdependencies, identity is put to use in any other way but innocently. The freight of cultural goods is laden with connotations, some of which (be they political or economic) are far from the emotional or cognitive significance usually associated with such goods. Insularity is not the proper (culturally adaptive) response to the assault of global flows of cultural symbols and meanings; cosmopolitanism has come to characterize cultures, albeit in various degrees and with quite different consequences. This apparently infinite variabili-

* Faculty of Communication and Public Relations, National School of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania, alex.carlan@comunicare.ro.

** Faculty of Communication and Public Relations, National School of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania, malina.ciocea@comunicare.ro.

*** Faculty of Communication and Public Relations, National School of Political Studies and Public Administreation, Bucharest, Romania, grigore.georgiu@comunicare.ro.

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ty might seem discouraging to the analyst, in its homogeneous wrath – which might explain the abundant attempts at pinning down *universalia* or local specificities.

When such constant playing against the strings of global culture for finding the unique tune of one's own culture is accompanied by the loud, constant drumbeat of one's traditional counterpart, one might find it extremely painful to tune in such various accounts of identity and avoid cacophony. While Western culture is seemingly emancipated from two-fold approaches, the cultural journeys of an Eastern European nation must always comprise the scenery of both the eternal other, the enlightened West, and the newer, but not less luring, reality of global cultural scenery.

The repository of symbols in Romanian cultural historiography constantly includes references to the privileged, yet tearing position as *the island of Latinity in the Slav sea*. This metaphor came into being during the period of the *Organic Statutes* (1829-1834) when Romanian Principalities came under the joint ruling of Russia, the Austrian Empire and France. In history, the *Slav sea* turned into a *Slav and Turkish, Slav and Germanic, Slav and Hungarian sea,* depending on the geopolitical pressures of the moment. The last iteration of this metaphor belonged to the historiography of nationalist communism, when the recourse to it marked the quest for political independence from Moscow. The metaphor turned into a cliché soon after its appearance, initially as part of the political discourse, but nowadays turned banal and recurrent in various types of discourse (scientific, didactic, journalistic). It is frequently invoked in school textbooks and tourist guides alike, and it was even a subject of bitter, ironic reflection for Emil Cioran, in the 1930's. Yet, it is symptomatic for the identitarian strength of this metaphor that even a critical historian like Lucian Boia, very careful about the mythological allegiances of national historiography, entitles his chapter on Romanian identity, in an introductory textbook on Romanian culture, 'an island of Latinity' (see Boia, 2001, p. 28-58). The metaphor carries significant connotations: the purity of the language, the isolation from the continent to which it belongs (Western Europe), the distance of this peripheral setting from the continent generating difficulties in communication and a certain nostalgia and longing, all of which amounting to a good illustration of aspirational identity. Yet, the metaphor is misleading to the point where it does away with the mixture of influences which usually explains a culture – and this is evidently the case for Romanian Culture as well; a fallacy one may easily forgive, given that this exclusive, 'particular logic of *foundation myths*' ('endlessly re-actualizing' moments in history that serve the interests of the present) (Boia, 2001, p. 33) falls in step with the traditional Western attachment to the inheritance of the Roman Empire.

Nonetheless, to the Western eye, it was the peculiarity of our Latin descent that finally granted us a place on the mental maps of the civilized world. It is as late as the XVIIIth century that we are placed within imaginary empires, as far as 'Turkey-Europea' or too close to the Habsburg Empire. 'Europe's cartographers acknowledged another truth of images and associations, which sometimes took over the alleged truths of the state system' – a map of distorted cultural memories, where we were just a stretch of barbarian land (Wolff, 2000, p. 219, *our translation*).

Rewriting cultural history from the angle of contextual expectations and imperatives, along with 'reinventing traditions' (cf. Anderson, 1991), have mainstreamed Romanians' social energies towards modernization and Europeanization. The Romanian conscience has lived with acute awareness the contradiction between this mythical projection (prestigious 'origins' nostalgia') and the state of affairs in Romanian society (deficiencies in modernization and de-

velopment gaps). Consequently, the myth of origins has always been combined with a long-lasting inferiority complex, fed by permanent, self-critical measurement against Europe, which has been the model for Romanians' aspirational identity.

Political and cultural elites in Romania have taken the marginal, peripheral setting of the country as an unsurpassable geographical fatality, which has resulted in imbuing the terms of national identity with mythological significance. Narrations on the myth of origin and self-projections have equally served as compensation. Romanians portray themselves as protagonists of a mythical fight between the good and the evil, between the West and the East, or, more commonly, as victims of this confrontation. Romanian identity has often been defined as a synthesis of contradictory traits – a source of incessant ideological and cultural disputes between modernist/pro-European and traditionalist/autochtonist trends throughout modern history, with this opposition at the heart of the reference system (Spiridon, 2004, p. 16, *our translation*). The very bipolar pattern expresses the problematic character of Romanian identity, marked out by disjunctive, antonymic logic (cf. Durandin, 1995).

Identity as an atemporal given permanence can at best feed linear horizontal narratives; yet it is incongruities that characterize processes of becoming. However, discontinuities between European and Romanian culture in terms of structural coherence could be understood, from a conjunctive point of view, rather as structural differences between complementary types of culture. A convincing argument is put forward by Sorin Alexandrescu when he discusses Romanians' 'identity in rupture': while ruptures of meaning are inherent in the construction of Romanian identity, they are part and parcel of a particular mode in the propagation of cultural influences – not a seismic, irrational shock wave (as in Huntington's perspective), but a conflictless dispersion of various European influences in integrative trends (Alexandrescu, 2000, p. 37). In this reading, a marginal/provincial culture such as Romanians' is not to be judged axiologically, but structurally, and the relation between central and provincial cultures thus understood, might become illustrative for a conjunctive paradigm.

Irrespective of the paradigms employed in explaining the modernization process (the 'Eurocentric', claiming that modernity was the product of rational Europe, and 'the planetary', which understands modernity as the 'result of the *management* of this <centrality> of Europe, within an integrated world-system – Dussel, 2004, 4), Europe still preserves its position as the 'reflexive consciousness' of this particular time in history (notwithstanding that it came into it as a result of the displacement of former centers of power). However morally unacceptable this dominance of Europe appears to the modern eye (especially in its pretence for the universality of values such as human rights), one might reasonably claim that the kind of universalism that dominates today's world is of European descent. This reading of civilization, acknowledging Europe as 'the locus of enunciation' and the rest of the world as 'the locus of the enunciated' (Mignolo, 2004, p. 33), still permitted the periphery of Europe to feel as part of the world-center. Eurocentric histories of the world, with their trust in the linearity of progress and development starting in the West, find a counterpart in alternative histories by the colonized. Although culturally mediated as well, these representations will eventually amount to a coherent vision that will enable a 'critique of the epistemological foundations of modernity' (Bush, 2006, p. 98), confirming the reality of 'multiple centers of modernity'. In this respect, 'provincialising Europe' (in the terms of Chakrabarty, 2001) with alternative narratives of Western influence from non-Western territories might be a valid process.

One might reasonably argue that the same expectation is encouraged by the architecture of the European Union, which allows the periphery to take part in the decision process (the

core being quite fluid, 'not a *place*, but a *stratum*', because of the 'functional rather than the usual structural, absolute, and monist mode of distribution of power' – Gravier, 2009, p. 632). Depending on the power under consideration (be it economic, industrial, demographic, cultural), the core and periphery will change composition; meanwhile, the communication between various peripheries of Europe gives them a chance to select from a variety of relations with the core. In the imperial logic, the empire will not enforce a particular identity at national/regional level, as long as the communities within the empire partake in the larger, supranational identity deriving its force from 'a universalistic ideology' (such as the peaceful, bountiful polity) that will imbue the civilizing mission of the empire (Gravier, 2009, p. 642)[1]. The cultural vehicle of this ideology is of interest here – indeed, the cultural hegemony of empires has often survived the more traditional traits of imperialism: we are witnessing it in the American content of the emerging global culture, representing the 'Hellenistic phase of Anglo-American civilization' (Veliz *apud* Berger, 2002, p. 3).

It is then hardly intriguing why Romanian culture is still obsessively asking questions on its identity and specificity. Rather than a sign of insufficiency (as taken by Boia, 2001, 220), it might well prove to be an exercise in maturity.

2. From Opposition to Conjunction – Consecrating Relational Identity

The history of European thinking has a long tradition of confrontation and dialogue on the relationship between unity and diversity. The paradigms interpreting this relationship vary vastly depending on the ontological and cognitive, tacit or explicit suppositions and the axiological attitudes regarding cultural identities and differences. A bird's eye view of modern thinking will confirm that the disjunctive paradigm, operating with 'hard' oppositions (cf. Vattimo, 1993) as employed by classical rationalism, has been heavily employed. While acknowledging cultures' internal legitimacy (values' autonomy, political pluralism and so on), this paradigm has also overstated unity over diversity of cultures under the influence of monolinear evolutionism and has furnished evidence and justification for Western-centric visions and attitudes.

On the other hand, the relativist conjunctive paradigm, associated with the idea of 'new alliances' between cultures, values and knowledge strategies, renders cultural diversity valuable, legitimizes the pluralism of evolution tracks and promotes intercultural dialogue. The contemporary world itself encourages conjunction over disjunction. This elicits a new interpretive framework for the relationship between unity and diversity. A new mental map would enable the adequate understanding of the new global context, shaped by complementary forces. Europe stands out because of its 'dialogical' vocation, in Edgar Morin's view. Europe should be built as *unitas multiplex*, since 'the unity of European culture resides in the vitality of its antagonisms', and its communitarian structures are the proper frames for preserving cultural differences and intensifying dialogue (Morin, 2002, p. 139 – *our translation*). European integration and the powerful case made by cultural identities are conjunctive, rather than disjunctive aspects. 'Cohabitation', defined by Dominique Wolton as the coexistence of cultural differences and 'relational' identities within a common framework, might well be the key to 'another globalization.' 'The whole problem – which is central in relation to tomorrow's political challenges – is to know in which circumstances we might build *a relational cultural identity* and avoid *the refuge-cultural identity*' (Wolton, 2003, p. 69 – *our translation*).

Most theoretical models constructed by Romanian authors and developing the relationship between Romanian and European identity are clearly marked by disjunctive visions in discussing culture's internal workings, betraying such 'refuge-cultural identity'. The structural opposition is between the premodern (popular, traditional) stratum and the modern (written, specialized, bookish) cultural stratum, an opposition clearly outlined ever since Dimitrie Cantemir, at the beginning of the XVIIIth century.

These oppositions have been obsessively brought to the fore by many trends, schools of thought and personalities in the Romanian cultural landscape in the last two centuries. They have been projected outwards, to acquire significant geopolitical meanings (in terms of contrasts between the West and the East, centre and periphery, European and national). Although such schematic oppositions clearly simplify the complexities of historic processes, they may offer a clearer image of divergent orientations that have both animated and torn apart the Romanian spirit throughout the modern times, when Europe became a landmark for national illumination and revival – a model worth imitating and a centre of cultural legitimization (Hitchins, 1996, pp. 251-254). In a timespan of several centuries, the reference system switched from Byzantium to Rome, and scholars enthusiastically highlighted the Latin (*id est* Western) vein of our cultural and spiritual identity. The illuminist movement, prefigured by Cantemir and represented by the Transylvanian School, is the pivotal event leading towards this significant geopolitical overturn resulting in Romanian culture orbiting Europe. This previous accumulation allows the historical orientation axis of Romanians to 'switch from East to West' (cf. Lovinescu, 1997) in the first part of the XIXth century, which will later lead to the formation of the unitary national Romanian state, to increased modernization and (after dramatic syncope and historical detours – the Communist time) Romania's integration in the EU.

Under the pressure of cascading changes triggered by modernization and synchronization processes, Romanian thinkers have veered towards a 'relational' reading of identity and a conjunctive paradigm, which requires critical self-evaluation and permanent comparisons between complementary national and European aspects. It is the duplicitous nature of cultural allegiances that cuts quite a tragic figure of Eastern European communities as 'doubly socialized' (Marino & Antohi, 2001). A synthesis between autochthonism (isolationism) and Europeanism would mark the rupture from the state of 'cultural self-colonization' (namely, the appropriation of Western cultural models). This synthesis would take the form of a culture of interference, forced to acknowledge several centers of influence (and, subsequently, conflicting sets of norms). Permanently trying to 'strike a balance' between the West and the East, Romanians have searched to harmonize the terms of differences and disjunctions. Many foreign observers and Romanian analysts alike have defined our culture as one of interference and synthesis, negotiating between opposite civilizations. Confronted with the binary terms of tradition and modernity, on the one hand, and Western and Eastern models, on the other, Romanian thinking found the conjunctive paradigm to be the meeting point of European and autochthonous traits.

3. Three Narratives on Romanian Identity

In order to reveal a certain type of 'mythological' commitment in relation with the centre-periphery paradigm, we intend to analyze the presentation of Romanian culture to an audience representative for this centre (Western Europe) as a critical case study. We are going