

Audit Culture on the Periphery. Anthropology and Ethnology in Post-Socialist Romania¹

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Abstract: The present paper is revisiting what seems to be a shared cliché of Central/Eastern Europe (CEE) Sonderweg and its Western colonization by placing the academic field under scrutiny (anthropology/ethnology) in the global context of “audit culture” rather than in the common center-periphery frame. From this point of view, it is suggested that the problem is not as much the recycled divide between East and West, but much more so the common positioning of anthropology in the power field of audit culture hegemony. In doing so, we take Romania as a case study.

Keywords: anthropology, ethnology, audit culture, nation building, periphery

Presenting their panel on *Anthropologies and ethnologies in post-communist Europe: paradigm change or hoax?* at the 2016 IUAES Inter-Congress in Dubrovnik, Petr Skalník and Bojan Žikić claimed that “colonization of post-communist anthropologies/ethnologies by the Western academia at best produced exoticising Roma studies (= our colonials), at worse mere re-chewing of the Western jargons, especially that of the postmodern kind. Isolated attempts at independent developments were not successful because of inward-looking

¹ This text had been submitted shortly before the author’s untimely death. The result of the blinded peer review was positive with both reviewers recommending the article’s publication after minor revisions. These could not be implemented by the author, but the Editor-in-Chief, having secured the approval of both reviewers and the Editorial Board, took the decision to publish the article in its original form after standard copyediting.

scholarly establishments which did not want to allow creative openings.” (Skalník and Žikić 2016) As any other Central/Eastern European anthropologist, I can see what the two colleagues meant, but I am still wondering if things are not indeed a little bit more complex.

Anthropology in the (Post-socialist) Periphery

The new impetus of globalization that followed the fall of communism in Europe and the determination to build a “*new Europe*” yet reproduced symbolically some *old* borders, and Central and Eastern Europe became “the other Europe” (e.g. Rupnik 1993). This new periphery of “post-socialism” became an object of research in itself, co-produced by a long list of global and local players under asymmetric power relations. (Re)starting anthropology in CEE also became a topic of scrutiny through the looking glass of the same symbolic geography. On the “periphery” of international conferences, scholars were proposing, time and again, panels or working groups on anthropology on the periphery or just on anthropology’s state of affairs in post-socialist countries, while other scholars were engaging in cross-border polemics (e.g. Prica 1995; Baskar 1998; Skalník 2002; Kürti 2008; Kürti and Skalník 2009; Buchowski 2004; 2005; 2012; Hann 2005; Bošković and Hann 2013; Elchinova 2010; Şerban and Dorondel 2014; for more recent reviews, see Čapo 2014; Benovska Sabkova and Krasteva Blagoeva 2014). While most of the writings engaged in this debate had an “important role in co-producing the self-Orientalizing narrative on ‘socialism’ and ‘post-socialism’ in general”, “the challenge to produce a non-Orientalizing narrative about CEE was not without a response” either (Petrovici 2015: 82).

To some extent, this field of debate is rather old wine in new bottles. In anthropology, the “significance of place in the construction of anthropological theory” has been recognized for a long time (e.g. Appadurai 1986); but what should we mean nowadays by *place* or *periphery*? On the other hand, the anthropology *of* (not *on*) the “others” has been incorporated to a large extent in the global picture of the discipline and efforts to imagine “a plural landscape of world anthropologies” (e.g. Restrepo and Escobar 2005; Ribeiro and Escobar 2018) are also underway; but what should we mean today by *anthropology*?

Keeping in mind this general problematic frame, the present paper will follow a much more modest and grassroots approach, looking at the current practices of anthropological knowledge production under the new centre cum periphery power design of “audit culture”, taking for this purpose Romania as a case study.

The Disciplinary Heritage

“Ethnology” was a term used only incidentally in Romanian professional jargon before 1990, whereas the term “anthropology” found use only in the field of physical anthropology promoted mainly by the anatomist Francisc Rainer, founder of a Laboratory of Anthropology in 1939. Otherwise, as in many other small countries, “ethnography” and “folklore” were disciplines with a well-established academic and institutional background since the dawn of the nation. Following the recommendation of the international conference of European “folk ethnographers” held in 1955 in Arnhem, we may use in their case the general term of “national ethnology” (see Hofer 1968). Thereafter, we probably should open up its field beyond ethnography and folklore in order to include all the historians, geographers, psychologists, philosophers or poets who also contributed *sui generis* to the study of “the being of the people” (Pârvan 1920) by collecting and interpreting “documents of popular mentality” (Bîrlea 1969: 7)². All in all, Romanian “national ethnology” in both its limited and extended meanings can be better described as a “nation-building” ethnology (Stocking 1982) rather than as a “Romanian experience in doing anthropology at home” (Geană 1999). Classical social/cultural anthropology never existed in Romania not only for the trivial reason that Romania had no colonies to engage in a western type of “empire-building anthropology”, but also because the “rational choice” of the very nation-building strategy had to – and actually did – bet on the large peasant society (82.4% of population in 1899) in order to build the indispensable unity, continuity, and specificity of the people. The professional aim of national ethnology thus followed the political stakes of nation-building and made the autochthonous peasant its primary object of research.

This autochthonism was not without contestations by some enlightenment-oriented scholars, but romantic ideology had the last word. Public polemics on cosmopolite “synchronism” versus local “nationalism” covered mainly the “high culture” scene. A kind of constitutive schizophrenia emerged, opposing an eternal and inspirational traditional peasant to the vocational modernizing elite.

With the coming of communism, autochthonism was removed for a while by the Soviet-inspired internationalism, but was recovered and emphasized soon after by the national-communism turn of the 1980s. An ideologically selected folk culture was staged by the national festival “Cîntarea României”, and produced a large category of cultural activists that spread all over the country where they

² I have suggested elsewhere to cover this overarching disciplinary field by the term “diffuse ethnology” (Mihăilescu 2007).

were put in charge of the organization, selection and promotion of “our popular culture”. Professional folklorists were part of the game, but while some of them just followed the rules, many others tried to keep the “true folklore” away from the ideological machinery and/or to turn the nationalistic impetus into a legitimizing frame of their empiric field researches (Mihăilescu 2008)³. The monumental Ethnographic Atlas, for instance, still is – and will remain – an excellent resource for further ethnological researches. This way of preserving the past could also be seen as a form of resistance to the ideology of the present.

Under the initiative of Vasile Caramelea, a handful of scholars coming from different disciplines engaged in the 1970s in a small research group of “social and cultural anthropology” in Rainer’s former Centre of Anthropology, but their minimal institutionalization did not entail an equivalent professionalisation of the field.

(Ethnological) Restoration and (Anthropological) Deconstruction

After the fall of communism, the *longue durée* divide between autochthonism and synchronism was academically updated as a competition between (autochthonous) *ethnology* and (cosmopolitan) *anthropology*. The two disciplines hardly communicate, having rather opposed aims and values.

Being compromised to some extent by their implication in national communism, folk studies kept their institutions and people, recovered a part of the “cultural activists” but had to change status and re-brand as “ethnology”. Its national association was (re)launched only in 2005, stating as its official aims “the research and interpretation of Romanian *folk culture* in Balkan and European context” in order to “manage and promote the *real traditional values*”. Academic training is offered in different faculties and under a variety of labels, from “Romanian literature, literary theory and ethnology”, to “Cultural studies and ethnology”, or just “Ethnology”. A few individuals opened up their research interests to urban ethnology and/or anthropology, and some university ethnological training includes anthropology (e.g. “Ethnography and Anthropology” or even an all-embracing training in “Ethnology, cultural anthropology and folklore”).

³ The same was true in other Eastern European countries. “Ethnography actually constituted a safe haven from ideological pressures (...). There is compelling evidence to claim that Polish ethnologists practiced everything but Marxism, even in the period of Stalinism tyranny” (Buchowski and Cervinkova 2015: 6). In Romania, “even if formal affiliation to Marxism-Leninism was a must”, “Marxism mattered mostly as an empty slot” (Cotoi 2011: 144–146)

The majority of researchers, however, are now located in the Romanian Academy's institutes, regional archives and ethnographic museums - institutions which turned into ethnological strongholds. With recent populist-nationalist revival movements, the prestige of "true" experts in national identity and patrimony also grew.

Lacking a former local model, anthropology in Romania adopted the western status and brand. However, while a national association was established in 1990, it lacks institutional backing and followers. Via both the Anglo-Saxon and French connections, anthropology initially entered Romania on the white horse of post-modern de-constructivism, for which there was an important political demand: (communist) nationalist myths and representations about specificity had to be dismantled, hidden communist realities had to be uncovered, and the scale had to be reversed from macro to micro through a genuine trans-disciplinary effort at bridging anthropology, sociology, history, oral history, and political sciences (Butoi 2016). Anthropology in Romania developed as a discipline mainly via the western (or a local, but western-inspired) training of a new generation, while only very few of the elder social scholars joined the movement. For this "young anthropology", the Western mainstream post-colonial, post-structural and deconstructivist approaches were taken over as a professional prerequisite; but in doing so, the local anthropologists were also using them to solve their own post-communist adversities. The relativist touch of the deconstructivist fashion was used to deconstruct communist and nationalist grand narratives as well as traditional folk study's autochthonism. Additionally, the focus on agency versus structure was a welcomed method to uncover the everyday life of people and local social facts covered over by communist homogenization. Later on, Romanian anthropologists shifted from the mainly anti-communist reactive approaches to anti-capitalist/liberalist ones (e.g. the Cluj-based group of socio-anthropologists), placing the "Romanian case" on a global map of socio-economic and political developments. "Put briefly, Romanian researchers seem to have common interests, at least at the topic level, with international academia" – two Romanian reviewers recently concluded (Serban and Dorondel 2014: 211). In doing so, they also professionally fuelled a much-needed social critique of contemporary Romanian society⁴. Western anthropology became indeed a frame of mind, a model that was imported, but also as *poiesis*, not only as *mimesis*. Followers on the global stage of anthropology, these local post-communist anthropologists were thus also *pioneer* discoverers of their own society.

⁴ Only a few anthropologists managed to engage in fieldwork beyond Romania thanks to Western grants (Chelcea 2009).

In time, anthropology gained strongholds in only several established universities focusing on cooperation within international academic research networks: most of the anthropologists are active members in international rather than national scholarly associations.

Audit Culture is Coming to Romania

European integration, in general, and the Bologna process, in particular, brought “quality standards” to Romania. New institutions have been built and new rules of resource redistribution and professional promotion have been implemented in order to comply with European regulations in education and research. But these “rational” and “global” standards did not always fit into the national landscape of more subjective and local conflicting interests. Staging the whole range of internationally accredited “rationalized myths” (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Schriewer 2009) and “rituals of verification” (Power 1997), the state is actually taking them apart by “adjusting” them according to its own contextual interests. While putting a growing pressure on academia to align with Western “good practices”, the “quality standards” promoted by the state are changing with the change of governments, ministers and administrative cohorts. The “audit culture” (Strathern 2000; Shore 2008) gained ground, but it is used rather as a competition kit in a struggle for legitimacy between generations and/or interest groups. Presented as a means of transparent accountability and meritocracy, audit culture is also instrumented as a tool of hidden political and/or academic clienteles.

As noted by Meyer forty years ago, this kind of rationalized myths “provides *legitimacy* rather than improves *performance*” (Meyer and Rowan op.cit.: 352). Or it was precisely legitimacy that proved to be one of the most puzzling issues of the post-communist transition: who is legitimated to take over power of one kind or another? In this context, “audit culture”, legitimized by Western prestige, was legitimizing in its turn a local “audit cleansing” (Mihăilescu 2016) of the academia.

Initially, a western-oriented group of reformists, motivated by an honest or just an opportunistic anti-communist commitment, instrumented quality standards (in fact templates of pure metrics)⁵, with the almost explicit aim to get rid of the

⁵ Official promoters of audit culture have over-reacted time and again in implementing “Western standards” largely exceeding the standards in the West. In this respect, Liviu Chelcea remembers that “the first time I ever heard of ISI indexed journals was not while I carried out my doctoral studies at the University of Michigan, but only after I returned to Romania in 2004, where it was quickly becoming the new gold standard. Books published in Romania are taken into account, according to the existing legislation, only if they are to be found in 12 university libraries from the “civilized world”, i.e. member states of the

large category of “old communist” *irremovable personalities*. Later on, old and new establishment scholars tried to reverse the rules of quality control in order to silence the new generation of *emerging experts*, considered to be just “young wolves” disconnected from national realities and values. In between, a few are trying to appease this “tyranny of excellence” (Smith 2015) by matching the impact agenda with the real needs of social knowledge. Regardless of these different trends, national and institutional committees keep changing the rules of the game by recalculating the share of national and international publications and conferences in the final score of scholars’ publication records: the alleged shared ethics of audit culture turns into an idiosyncratic power game.

Anthropologists and ethnologists alike had to cope with audit culture standards, but their academic background and interests were different from the very beginning. Focused on *folk culture*, ethnologists were rooting both their knowledge production and legitimacy in the promotion of the *real traditional values*, resorting to national literature and sharing their research in national or even regional professional networks. Adapting to international abstract criteria of performance was both an objective and subjective challenge they tried to avoid in time by an *esprit de corps* hosted by strong national institutions such as the Romanian Academy. On the other hand, for younger anthropologists, trained as they were in and by international networks, adapting to international quality standards was at hand from the very beginning. Both knowledge production and legitimacy were for them rather individual than institutional, mediated rather by their personal trans-national networks than by any sense of national institutional belonging.

In institutional terms (e.g. Meyer and Rowan 1977; Hannan and Freeman 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Scott 1995; Boxenbaum and Jonsson 2008; D’Ascanio 2014), the state is trying to impose a “coercive isomorphism” on academia in order to join the European scientific market. While ethnologists respond rather by a “mimetic isomorphism”, anthropologists are seeking mainly “normative isomorphism”, trying to “establish a cognitive base and legitimation for their occupational autonomy” (DiMaggio and Powell op. cit.: 152). Nevertheless, this (self)imposed *global isomorphism*, striving for an international market, goes hand in hand with *idiosyncratic decoupling*, claims of national, institutional or professional exceptionalism that entails measures of *exemptionalism*, seeking thus to

Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (i.e. European Union, Russia, US, Canada). Such dogmatisms do not spring from American anthropology, not even from the US at all. In Romania, the [main] promoter of this reform was a Romanian-born, French-trained chemist, who prior to turning to domestic politics [as minister of education] held research positions in Germany” (Chelcea 2012: 4)

ensure access to alternative markets. In the meantime, Romanian academia is launching Thomson Reuters or Scopus indexed *national* journals open to every Romanian scholar (even with zero impact factor) or peer reviewed *international* journals (even if most of the contributors are Romanians).

In this context, ethnologists struggle mainly for national(ist) legitimated resources and publish their research mainly in Romanian (or possibly regional) journals, while anthropologists are looking mainly for internationally legitimated publication outlets, seeking to enter the professional global market. Regional and institutional competitions further produce *sui generis* rules of legitimacy. Institutional and individual reactive “agency” takes over, to some extent, structural isomorphism (Nigro et al. 2013).

Ethnological and Anthropological Professional Fields

The following figures are based on random samples of 50 members of the two main professional associations (SASC for anthropologists and ASER for ethnologists⁶) and a selection of their publications. By this, I do not intend to add more “sociometrics” but to offer a kind of *inspirational statistics* that may suggest comparative particularities of the two professional fields:

	Members	Mean age	References Rom. authors	Mean delay*	Publications		
					In Rom.	Foreignlang/Ro	Abroad
SASC	96	36	20%	14 years	36 %	23 %	41 %
ASER	107	56	80%	38 years	84 %	10 %	8 %

* “Mean delay” is an ad hoc index of the time frame of the references used by anthropologists and ethnologists, computed by subtracting the mean year of the references quoted in the publication from the year of publication.

As a general trend, anthropologists seem to be much younger than ethnologists⁷. They publish mainly abroad (41% versus 8% in the case of ethnologists) or, if in Romanian journals, then more frequently in English (23% versus 10%), in their publications they quote Romanian authors four times less frequently than ethnologists (20% versus 80%) and they use much more recent references.

⁶ SASC stands for Societatea de Antropologie Socială și Culturală din România [Romanian Society of Cultural and Social Anthropology], ASER for Asociația de Științe Etnologice din Romania [Romanian Association of Ethnological Sciences].

⁷ As a matter of fact, according to the ASER statute, only scholars over 35 years of age may be considered “full members”. Age seems thus to be also a question of strategy...

To summarize – anthropologists are younger, more western and present oriented, while ethnologists are older, past and nationally inner oriented. To some extent, this may be just natural: ethnology is a much older discipline than anthropology and it is historically focused mainly on the *longue durée* of the national culture. Nevertheless, these data suggest also a different positioning of the two disciplines. Though doing fieldwork in Romania, anthropologists are connected rather to the global literature on the topic of their research than to national references on its context; the historical dimension is also frequently lost. What seems to matter is mainly legitimacy on the global market. On the other hand, ethnologists seem to be oriented toward the national past and rather reluctant to enter comparative “European ethnology”. Legitimacy on the local market seems of primary importance, while the number of scholars practicing modern comparative ethnology is marginal.

Anthropological Knowledge on the Periphery?

In 2008 László Kürti published his radiography on the East-West divide in anthropology, deploring “the perplexing vast academic hiatus existing between us – ‘Eastern European Anthropologists’ – and our foreign colleagues. What we face within anthropology today can be described by two words: indifference and misunderstanding” (Kürti 2008: 26). Some facts are undeniable. When turning to CEE, for instance, Western experts, most of them former sovietologists, do not seem to credit much of the local knowledge and in their collective work include just a few local authors – and sometimes none. “The spectre of Orientalism”, as labelled by Michal Buchowski (2006), is indeed haunting Eastern Europe. But isn’t it a very old story? As reminded by Tomasz Zarycki – and as we all know – “a deep-rooted stereotype of the ‘East’ (defined both as the Eastern part of Europe as well as the Eastern confines of a country) as a backward social world lagging behind European ‘normalcy’ still persists” (Zarycki 2010: 73–74). Recent academic orientalism seems thus to be deeply rooted in European history and political power relations. In this context, the main problem is not as much the persisting symbolic geography, but rather the already mentioned fact that this space is turned into an “epistemic oasis” that needs a “different epistemic outlook”. Beyond this grounding difference, the “stigmatized brother” syndrome (Buchowski 2006), which most CEE anthropologists seem to suffer from, should be nuanced.

In the early 1990s, native anthropologists were indeed to a large extent marginalized. But this was due, in part, to the fact that national anthropology in these countries was just (re)emerging. In time, East-West networks developed and local

anthropologists started to be more visible and vocal. Michal Buchowski and Hana Cervinkova even consider their 2015 volume as “the ‘tip of an iceberg’ of a new wave of writings in Central European anthropological scholarship” (Buchowski and Cervinkova 2015: 1).

On the other hand, local anthropologists (at least in the Romanian case) also neglect their co-nationals: Romanian anthropologists working on Romanian issues include only about 20% Romanian colleagues in their works, the same percentage as Western editors do in their books on CEE topics⁸. It seems that at least a part of those accusing Western colleagues of metropolitan colonialism are practicing in their turn what Alexander Kiossev (2004) called “self-colonization”. Complementary to it, the *inner* divide between anthropology and ethnology is much higher and stronger than the *external* one between Western and Eastern anthropologists. Under these circumstances, it is hard to (re)build a genuine updated “national social knowledge” worth being taken into consideration both nationally and internationally.

But could it be otherwise? In a globalizing audit culture, CEE anthropologists have to comply with the general requests of this “economy of citationality” (Berliner 2014), and “to be here and to publish there” (Prica 1995). Especially if there is a low market and political demand for anthropology in their countries, professional legitimacy *has* to come via Western publications and networks. On the ethnological side, a growing popular/populist demand will *inevitably* fuel an institutional “decoupling”, with its own national(ist) sensitive quality standards.

The initial questions about anthropologies and ethnologies in post-communist Europe, East-West divide in anthropology, and centre and periphery should then be reframed in the global context of the audit culture hegemony we all live in.

In his overview, László Kürti is well aware of this, when he says: “being cited, or having a recognition of one’s work by others may have serious repercussions in terms of academic advancement, hiring or scholarliness as defined in various national settings. This is even more serious as the impact factor or citation index are fast becoming the standard of measurement of scholarly work in most countries by now.” (Kürti op. cit.: 33). But he considers this new framework to be just amplifying old divides: “The ‘publish or perish’ slogan so well-known in the US higher-education has a special, rather distorted, meaning in European academia as well. Scholarly works printed in local languages, say Romanian, Hungarian or Croatian, do not necessarily reach the right academic circles in the West and those published in English (cf. Naumescu 2007; Sántha and Safonova

⁸ The mean number of local anthropologists included in 24 collective anthropological books on CEE edited in the West during the last twenty years is just about 20%.

2007) may take many years before they are recognized - if at all. One never really knows if studies appearing in national journals such as the Romanian *Martor*, the Croatian *Narodna Umjetnost*, the Polish *Lud*, the Slovak *Slovenský národopis*, the *Anthropological Notebooks* published in Slovenia, or the Hungarian *Ethnographia* are ever read by our Western colleagues” (idem: 32). Again, facts are undeniable. But what do they really mean and how should one react to them?

One may turn around regarding some of these complains. Indeed, even if it is paid ever more attention, CEE anthropological production is still second class in EU academia. But a first range national knowledge is also important and could prove even more productive. Actually, anthropologists in CEE have to make their way into the global market and have indeed to seek legitimacy from abroad, but they could also regroup, come to peace with ethnologists and force the state to re-evaluate their knowledge production as a national “common good”. In the same line, why should an anthropologist be ashamed of being an expert in just one culture and known (mainly) by the members of this culture? Italian anthropologists, for instance, are rather a part of the Periphery, even if Italy is placed at the Centre, but they had (and, to some extent, still have) no problems in writing and publishing in Italian. The difference from the Romanian case is then rather that Italians seem to read each other while Romanians rarely do.

Post-communist anthropologies did indeed not develop many innovative methods and research initiatives, but why should day-long innovation be the supreme dream of an honest anthropologist? In fact, audit culture is producing mainly parade innovation all over the world, just a “production of words” (*production de langage*) as some French critics love to say. On the other hand, as already mentioned, many CEE anthropologists have been creative-while-imitating: it is rather relevance than innovation that knowledge really needs.

Do we have to feel marginal, on the periphery of the mighty world? Yes, actually we are marginal, but in a new, post-modern way. Knowledge follows economy in being displaced, and “peripheral” knowledge producers may be next-door. To a large extent, “periphery” is thus a matter of national, institutional and personal positioning and choice. It has become less important where and by whom (anthropological) knowledge is produced; instead, it is still important where and by whom it is capitalized. Consequently, the problem is not so much that of the recycled divide between East and West, but much more of the positioning of anthropology in the power field of audit culture hegemony.

The main concern of anthropologists should thus be less the misfortune of the anthropological knowledge on the periphery rather than the scary peripheralization of the very anthropological knowledge by the new academic market, governed as it is through hegemonic audit rules.

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