

## BOOK REVIEWS

ANCA PÂRVULESCU and MANUELA BOATCĂ, *Creolizing the Modern: Transylvania Across Empires*, Cornell University Press, 270 pages.

Shedding light on “banalized” economic, political and cultural hierarchies that were reproduced either through the coloniality of power, as a persistent institutional and epistemic residue of late imperial structures, or through the “nesting orientalisms” (Bakić-Hayden 1995) projected by different nation-states, could be the “essence” of Anca Pârvulescu and Manuela Boatcă’s *Creolizing the Modern: Transylvania Across Empires*. Arguably, the authors pay no heed to essences but to macropolitical and macrohistorical global processes of power that have “naturalized” inequality, racial and gender relations in an inter-imperial setting like Transylvania.

*Creolizing the Modern* was written by a “literary critic and a sociologist” (p. 2). Anca Pârvulescu is Liselotte Dieckman Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Minnesota. Manuela Boatcă works as a Professor of Sociology at the Freiburg University, with an expertise in world-systems analysis, decolonial perspectives and geopolitics of knowledge in Eastern Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean. At the same time, Manuela Boatcă was one of the most important – if not the most important – Romanian scholars that continued the local tradition of subaltern thinking that emerged at the end of the 19th century. *Creolizing the Modern* relies on an interdisciplinary approach which brings together “comparative literary studies” and “macrosociology, world history, and political economy”. The dialogue between these domains is rare, as humanists “are skeptical of the oneness of the world-system” (p. 16), while social scientists work from the premise that the world is much more than a “flow of information and culture”.

Arguably, I have read *Creolizing the Modern* with the intent to engage it critically and, as a consequence, to produce a substantial review of this important academic work. In my case, two aspects made *Creolizing the Modern* slightly difficult to read. First, the field that I come from, that is, international relations, which tends to be dominated by “captive minds” (Mälksoo 2021). And, second, a clear lack of training – both theoretical and methodological – regarding postcolonial theory and decolonial thought. Therefore, I have abandoned the initial project – of writing a substantial review of *Creolizing the Modern* – and opted for a rather technical review. Besides these two flows that are imputable to the reader,

Rom. Jour. of Sociological Studies, New Series, No. 2, pp. 113–118, Bucharest, 2022



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*Creolizing the Modern* meets the highest academic standards, has all the concepts and methodological novelties clearly explained in the *Introduction*, is well-written and thought-provoking.

The pivotal concept that *Creolizing the Modern* draws on is Laura Doyle's "inter-imperiality". Applied to Transylvania's "exemplary positioning across empires" (p. 2) this concept reveals not only the region's "multiethnic, multilingual, and multiconfessional character" but also its coloniality. Transylvania's coloniality, which derives from "global arrangements of power" that have shaped this region institutionally for many centuries, is difficult to capture with either postcolonial theory or decolonial thought, argue A. Pârvulescu and M. Boatcă. Besides the fact that standard postcolonial theory has not covered semiperipheral areas with an inter-imperial history, like Transylvania, this perspective has reproduced aspects of Western poststructuralist thought. Moreover, as Latin American decolonial thought has already demonstrated, postcolonial theory has focused mainly upon Anglophone colonialism while paying little – or no – heed to the different institutional hierarchies that Iberian, French, and Dutch colonialism had created – and reproduced – in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Southeast Asia (p. 6). Furthermore, applying post-colonial theory to the case of Transylvania – or to any other region that standard post-colonial theory had left uncharted – may not have been fruitful, heuristically speaking (Kušić et al. 2019, 19). An important conceptual development that Latin American decolonial thought has come up with is the "coloniality of power", which brings into discussion the processes that have reproduced social, political, economic and cultural hierarchies – or "historical-structural dependence" (Quijano 2000) – that former colonial projects had created. The trouble with the Latin American decolonial thought is that it has discounted the socio-economic and epistemic colonial relation that has emerged between the core and the noncore in other parts of the world both before and during the Atlantic expansion of Western Europe. In other words, just as in the case of standard postcolonial theory, decolonial thought has completely missed the case of Transylvania in the case of which "inter-imperiality both precedes coloniality and coexists with it" (p. 23). Therefore, in order to make Transylvania intelligible for both postcolonial theory and decolonial thought, *Creolizing the Modern* combines three "disconnected critical conversations" (p. 5), that is, postcolonial theory, decolonial thought and inter-imperiality. Laura Doyle's "inter-imperial method" rejects the basic assumption of both postcolonial theory and world-system analysis, according to which "either a region is a postcolony of the West or it has not been colonized" (p. 9). Doyle argues that a particular region may have been shaped institutionally by different empires before the emergence of European hegemony. Thus, not only that imperial differences among a particular region and different non-European cores may have appeared before colonial differences, but the former may coexist with the latter during the European hegemony. What is really interesting about the inter-imperial method is that it

pretends to capture the connection between macropolitics, as it appears in world-system analysis, and microlevel interactions, the latter being revealed by the local cultural production.

The inter-imperial approach that Manuela Boatcă and Anca Pîrvulescu have employed brings to the fore the consequences created by the Empire's political, economic and cultural legacy in Eastern Europe in terms of the self-conceptualization of the subjects and socio-economic organization. The abovementioned consequences, put the East European subjects of Empire in a different relationship to the Western core in comparison to their counterparts in Latin America. Whereas in the latter case the colonial difference consisted especially in racial, ethnic and class hierarchies created by the core in the colonies, in the former case the imperial difference gave birth and reproduced mainly ethnic and class divisions, but not as pronounced racial hierarchies as in Latin America. The "critical conversations" that *Creolizing the Modern* rests on conceptually intersect world-system analysis. Therefore, Transylvania, as a region of a semiperipheral Eastern Europe and, thus, as an incomplete Self of the core, has had a certain voice in the realm of knowledge production. The novel *Ion*, which is considered to be the first modern novel in Romanian language, was written by a Transylvanian writer, that is, Liviu Rebreanu, and published in 1920 in interwar Romania. Interestingly, Boatcă and Pîrvulescu have chosen to engage *Ion* as a "product of interimperiality and as its chronicle". One of the reasons *Creolizing the Modern* combines the novel *Ion* with the abovementioned "critical conversations" is to get over "sanctioned and asymmetric ignorance". More exactly, by resorting to primary texts, history and theory written in languages from a semiperipheral area, the authors seek to make their "perspective about semiperiphery from the semiperiphery" as "emic" as possible. This perspective contrasts with rather "etic" postcolonial views which allegedly have "the concepts, the science, the methods, and the literary canon" (p. 13) but end up treating peripheral areas as just another source of data. At the same time, by paying heed to the novel *Ion* and also to history and theory written in different Transylvanian languages, *Creolizing the Modern* does not fall into the trap of a Transylvanian standpoint. On the contrary, by looking at Transylvania through an inter-imperial lens, *Creolizing the Modern* comes up with a comparative perspective that leaves behind the methodological nationalism that is still paramount in humanities and social sciences. One final remark on inter-imperiality, which, as already stated, is the main concept of *Creolizing the Modern*. Inter-imperiality refers to an enduring macropolitical process of Transylvania, as an estate-based principality, being located at the crossroads of different empires, such as the Habsburg Empire, the Ottoman Empire, and Poland-Lithuania, who sought to impose their religious-political model in Central and Eastern Europe. 1848 was a paradigmatic year for Transylvania's inter-imperiality. At that time, Transylvanian Hungarians demanded the union of Hungary with Transylvania. This political project was shortly

supported by the Transylvanian Saxons, as they realized that a potential political union between Transylvania and Hungary was to fall short from providing rights, especially linguistic rights, for Transylvania's minorities. In 1848, Transylvanian Romanians opposed the union of Hungary with Transylvania.

*Creolizing the Modern* comes up with different conceptual and methodological novelties. First, it seeks to read the global processes of power that have shaped Transylvania institutionally with the help of "world literature, world history, and world-systems analysis" (p. 2). Second, Transylvania's inter-imperiality allows for the emergence of a comparative perspective that could examine other regions that have also been forced to deal with an inter-imperial conundrum, "Taiwan to the Philippines and from South Sudan to the Caribbean" (p. 3). Third, and directly related to its inter-imperial position, an – for the time being – rather undertheorized Transylvania could bring its contribution to the project of creolization, which consists in "thinking through and with invisible, peripheral, and subaltern formations" (p. 4). The case of Transylvania, which reveals that "inter-imperiality both precedes coloniality and coexist with it" (p. 23), defies politically-laden Eurocentric categorizations that have drawn artificial lines between premodern and modern empires, and, at the same time, between non-Christian, nonwhite, non-Western modernity, and the West. In essence, the project of creolizing Transylvania turns minor into theory at least at three levels. First, the world is viewed from one of its peripheries. Second, capitalism gets scrutinized from a village perspective, while Western modernity is looked at from the vantage point of Eastern rurality. Third, "by engaging the literary production of a «minor literature» in the region" (Boatcă and Pârvulescu 2020, 19). In the end, the project of creolizing Transylvania reveals that the peripheral condition has been manufactured and reproduced in relation to not one center, but many other centers.

It is beyond the scope of this review to delve into each chapter of the book. But each chapter brings into discussion the interplay between inter-imperiality and Transylvania's political, cultural, economic and social hierarchies. Chapter 1, for instance, offers both a sociological and literary analysis of Ion's desire for land. Which is framed by placing Transylvania's agrarian economy at the intersection of colonial and imperial interests, strategies of control and different hierarchies. According to this chapter, the Habsburg Empire has turned Transylvania into one of its internal peripheries, alongside Bukovina and Galicia. These internal peripheries were exploited by the core in its economic competition with Great Britain, especially in the realm of agricultural export economy (p. 46). The upshot of the imperial exploitation of the local labor was a combination of already existing systems of bondage with prebendary economy in Bukovina and serfdom in Galicia. The Habsburg Empire abolished serfdom in 1788 but this reform had limited effects in Transylvania, where a "second serfdom" emerged shortly after 1848, mainly due to the fact that even the peasants who had received land could not make a living out of it. In this macro-historical and macro-political framework is placed the novel *Ion*, with its imagination of anti-imperialism

that works even in an inter-imperial setting. Chapter 2 examines *in extenso* four processes – trade, finance, bureaucracy, and mobility – that fully integrated Transylvania into the global capitalist economy at the turn of the twentieth century. Unsurprisingly, however, Transylvania’s modernization went hand in hand with a process of peripheralization across empires. This accounts for the fact that Transylvania’s modernity coexisted with premodern or even feudal aspects at the turn of the twentieth century. Chapter 2 also delves into Transylvania’s complicated racial and ethnic field, another aspect of the region’s inter-imperial character. Chapter 2 also brings into discussion the issue of antisemitism in Transylvania and how this was mirrored by the novel *Ion*. In Chapter 7, M. Boatcă and A. Pârvulescu bring under scrutiny Transylvania’s intricate religious question also through the method of inter-imperiality. Transylvania’s uniqueness lies in the fact that three different Christian churches – Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox – have coexisted for many centuries in the region. Whereas the Ottoman Empire protected Protestantism in Transylvania out of geocultural and geopolitical reasons, the civilization process supported by both the Habsburg Empire and the Hungarian state supported either secularism or the Greek Catholic Church. The Habsburg Empire pushed the largely majoritarian Orthodox subjects to convert to Catholicism in order to get a semblance of equality with the Empire’s citizens, whereas the Hungarian state tried to secularize public schools, with the most Christian Orthodox subjects of the Empire continuing to attend religious schools. Historically, it would have been interesting to see if Romania’s Old Kingdom sought to get political influence in Transylvania through the Orthodox church. Academically though, such a research avenue would have made no sense, as the Old Kingdom, a peripheral region of both Eastern and Western Empires, had never projected imperial influence onto Transylvania. At the same time, the chapter convincingly demonstrates that the interplay between the religious and secular processes in Transylvania is another manifestation of inter-imperiality, either juxtaposed or overridden by global coloniality. By drawing on the novel *Ion*, chapter 5 reads the ritual of the dowry plot also through an inter-imperial lens. In essence, the dowry plot refers to marriage negotiations among men through which women are turned into means of transacting land. Land-ownership is another manifestation of Transylvania’s inter-imperial history, as Hungarians and German nobles were the most important land owners. At the same time, Transylvanian Romanians, the largest, yet mostly rural, ethnic group of the region, and also Jews and Roma were excluded from ownership. Consequently, land-ownership as a condition of citizenship has become one of the most important reasons of Transylvanian Romanians’ anti-imperial struggle. The important novelty that Chapter 5 comes up with, is that it extricates the debate on citizenship from an ethnic frame while placing it in a world historical analysis. This perspective examines how ethnicity and gender conditioned Transylvanian Romanian women’s access to citizenship, and builds a gendered, inter-imperial, multi-dimensional typology for silencing women, that ranges from the silencing of the female character’s speech to the naturalization/banalization of female suicide as fate.

As already argued, *Creolizing the Modern* meets all the conditions to be well received academically, as it represents an important update to both decolonial thought and the inter-imperial method. Notwithstanding a crisp style and high academic standard, some Romanian readers may find this book difficult to read mainly because of a potential lack of familiarity with the “critical conversations” (p. 5) that *Creolizing the Modern* rests on. This comes as no surprise, for racial and hierarchical cognitive schemas are not only wide-spread in Central and Eastern Europe. Such schemas “occupy a highly marked, indeed quite cultic location” (Böröcz 2001, 29). Paradoxically, institutional conditions were more conducive for the emergence of a coherent subaltern thinking in Romania at the end of the 19th century than nowadays (Boatcă 2019, 94), as a stabilitocratic system appears to have little to gain from different “critical conversations”. Clearly, Romanian researchers who are still interested in social theory, and especially in the Romanian tradition of subaltern thinking, have a lot to gain academically by reading *Creolizing the Modern*. At the same time, as István Bibó puts it (2015, 150), Central and Eastern European countries may still experience an “existential anxiety for the community”, which means that for certain social segments in these countries the overnight “death of the nation” is still probable, in stark contrast to what happens in Western Europe. Potential readers of *Creolizing the Modern*, who might belong to the abovementioned category of citizens, could find this book a little bit puzzling. Such collective anxieties, however, may be the manifestation of some of the inter-imperial “naturalized” hierarchies that *Creolizing the Modern* brings into analysis.

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