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Markers and Shifters of Romanian Identity

This paper aims to discuss some of the most paradoxical aspects of Romanian identity by adapting the linguistic concepts of markers and shifters for the purposes of cultural studies. The author focuses on the negative connotations of Balkanism, makes use of binary pairs (such as lack and excess, isolation and openness, East and West), distinguishes between the various types of heritage contributing in the course of time to the emergence of Romanian national identity and analyses the three major coordinates of geography, history and culture in an attempt to define the idea of uniqueness in a specifically Romanian context.

Key words*: Balkanism, heritage, identity, influence, uniqueness*

In what follows, I will use the terms *markers* and *shifters* in a sense reminiscent of, but not quite identical to, their linguistic use, thus trying to forge an alternative conceptual instrument meant to deal with a certain aspect of identity construction. While I understand by *identity markers* those mythological, historical or cultural formations constitutive of Romanian identity and serving to differentiate (and oftentimes isolate) it from its Balkan neighbors, the concept of *shifters* will stress out the pernicious consequences of such a perspective, measured against a more dynamic understanding of the complex process of identity formation. What I will try to advance below is not a change in the inventory of identity marks, but a different way to consider and analyze them, i.e. in close relationship with the larger context they are embedded in. My point is to unfold a constitutive tension within the Romanian identity project and eventually to provide a possible explanation for it.

Romanians are not very keen to be reminded of their Balkanism. There are quite a few explanations for it, but I will keep myself to the most powerful and – only apparently – the simplest. It has to do with the fact that such words as Balkans, Balkan, Balkanism, to balkanize, are usually perceived not as value-free terms, but, for most people, they have strong negative implications.

These implications are organized into two distinct, although intertwining semantic fields: that of *excess* and that of *lack*. In other words, anything Balkan is perceived and described as either primitive, disrupted/disruptive, pre- or even anti-modern, or wild, violent, and fiercely attached to a certain set of values and beliefs.

Paradoxically enough, most Romanians, the stronger they resist being included in the Balkan paradigm, the more they are inclined to identify and discard various aspects of the historical, political, economical, social, cultural, and even personal life by designating them as typically Balkan outbursts. This result of the internalization of Balkanist discourses, also nurtured by historically embedded complexes and atavisms, is a symptom of an identity tension that runs way back to the very dawn of the forging of a national – or rather communitarian – consciousness.

The complementary *topoi* of isolation (Romanians are a Latin island in a Slavic sea, Romanians are the safe-keepers of the Byzantine legacy threatened by the influence of both the Hungarian and Polish Catholic kingdoms and the Muslim Ottoman Empire) and openness (Romania is at the crossroads of "worlds" and world-views) melt into one another in the idea of Romanian uniqueness.

It is not in the least surprising that such an idea got to be refined and turned not into a mere marker, but a framework of Romanian identity during the 19th century, in close relationship with the coming into being of the nation-state. However, its conditions of possibility were created long before that, as I will try to prove below.

The awareness of the fact that people speaking the same language, performing the same rituals and having a common origin, but belonging to different, oftentimes hostile, administrative and political entities, made it an important task for early historiographers to point out an illustrious past, thus trying to compensate for the shortcomings of the present.

The idea of uniqueness is developed on three major coordinates: geographic, historical and cultural. From the geographic point of view, there is a strong emphasis on Romania's strategic position as a "turning point" between the Orient and the Occident, and, when necessary, as a defense line against all invasions.

Imagined geography locates the (ideal) territory of Romania between the natural borders of the Dniester, the Theiss, the Danube and the Black Sea, with the Carpathian range as its spine, a unifying, rather than separating, area between the provinces (I have brought together a series of widely spread clichés of Romanian collective imagery). Romania is repeatedly singled out by underlining the diversity of its relief and the abundance of its natural resources. Most often, the insufficiently exploited tourist potential triggers the people's feeling of smothered discontent and the melancholic envy towards the successes in this field of countries presumably less endowed, but more skilled when it comes to promoting such opportunities.

In its turn, the illustrious origin of the Romanians is obsessively recurrent in historiographic writings. The double descent, heroic and civilizing, is called to claim superiority over the closest neighbors and to legitimate Romania's position as a rightful member of the European choir of nations.

Most often historically and existentially justified by the need to resist foreign pressure, this kind of rhetoric has sometimes led to painful exaggerations, a symptom of identity uncertainty overemphasized by the looseness of frontiers, regimes and rules. The positioning in an area of interference where different, often conflicting sets of values and attitudes meet and mix, has caused the collective imagery to build the historical past according to a mostly agonic model, of perpetual resistance against the expansionist impulses of the neighboring empires (or states).

Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that, although the Latin origin of Romanians and the genealogic, linguistic and spiritual identity of the inhabitants of former Dacia were a constant of the historiographic discourse, their individualizing function became a fact only at the beginning of the 19th century, increasing evermore afterwards.

The common Byzantine heritage of the area, the ever present Ottoman threat, even in the calmer periods of peace, and the extensive use of Latin and Greek as cultural idioms, and of Church Slavonic as worship language all over the Balkan Peninsula worked, if not as cohesion factors, at least as a way of leveling the differences. In the 16th and 17th centuries, historiographic writings convey a feeling of relative identity comfort, historic shortcomings

were distributed by the hand of fate, and the middle position in the regional hierarchy (between economically and politically superior Poland and Russia, with its alleged rudeness and unexplainable excesses) as natural, without causing any complexes.

The sharpening of the feeling of isolation and turning the idea of uniqueness into a true framework of Romanian identity took place as a reaction against competing identity projects, nourished by the new national ideologies. The hypothetic threat of pan-Slavism was answered with a powerful reassertion of Latinity seen as a legitimate way into a Europe that actually had never been left.

If Eastern Europe is a construction of the West, this also works the other way around. Invested with all the attributes of a model, the Occident becomes an ideal, and the attempts to reach it are marked by a specific pathos. European identity is projected as a positive utopia, a flawless identity, generating a tragic sensation of inadequacy, actually a mere perspective effect that dims all discontinuities and fills all gaps.

By contrasting itself to an imagined Europe, the Romanian identity (re)discovers, anguished, its constitutive tensions. Under the eye of the Centre, it self-orientalizes itself. The refusal of Balkanism is only a complex process of othering of some traits felt as potentially destructive. If the ethnic, religious and cultural diversity of south-eastern Europe is perceived as distressing, this is also due to the tendency to be regarded by both parties rather as a destabilizing than a productive factor.

Yet, the two identity options are not necessarily in conflict. Local (a specifically Romanian sense of being-in-the-world), regional and trans-national identities do not exclude each other; on the contrary, they complete and balance each other.

The half-a-century of communist totalitarianism which brought about its set of pre-modern structures did not help solve the crisis, but made it deeper, increasing the sensation of temporal gap and the temptation of victimization. Under these circumstances, the often-mentioned process of "return to normality" might as well be described using the more adequate phrase "reinvention of normality". A reinvention that should not favor the reification of the mythical components of the identity project into an equally useless and damaging monolithic construction, in the name of a homogeneity that finally distorts perceptions, but will promote their critical understanding, their unbiased acceptance and their constructive use.

Perpetuating the denegation of the Balkan elements in the Romanian identity does not bring about, as its practitioners seem to consider, the miracle cleansing of embarrassing elements, but a neurotic behavior. Only understanding that Balkanism (like all equivalent type of belonging) is not a curse, but a fact, will we become free from the compulsoriness of repudiating or praising it and will we become again what we truly are: Europeans.

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