ANTI-ELITIST CHALLENGES

Abstract: The present study takes into consideration issues raised by the elaboration of possible answers (both universal and local) to a series of questions such as: “What does elite still mean nowadays?”, “Is literary canon an expression of the elite or elitism?”, “How can anti-elitism and elitism be reconciled within the academic space?”, etc. A special case is that of the Romanian prestige groups that are seen as networks of values and social relations that provide identity as “intellectual class” influencing the whole society (Max Weber, Politik als Beruf). But, primarily, the masses access the intellectual debates indirectly, via the educational system, where we find a mixture of high culture and pop culture. Therefore, the high culture partisans must adjust to a referential system equivalent to “the civilisation of the image” (strongly based on mass-media and Internet). Today, it is possible to have a negotiation between high culture and popular culture.

Keywords: elitism, mass culture, canon, society, civil society

At first sight, two dominant phenomena can be identified diachronically in the Western context: the elite (including elite itself, elitism – even its negative connotations –, and literary canon, from the perspective of literature readers); on the other hand, the elevation of subordinate classes generates mass culture, defined by both “the integrated” and “the apocalyptic” (to use Umberto Eco’s words). The dialogue inside a rhetorical community that brings together representatives of the masses and of the elites indicates the possibility for the mass culture to coexist with the elite culture. This is the third phenomenon that can be distinguished in Western culture.

Today, elitism works as a curious system of “apocalyptic criticism” against cultural industry: film industry, book market (including best-seller Romanian authors), and musical industry (with its best-selling performer awards) are harshly examined. Considering these, Roger Scruton’s observation that culture – both high and the mass culture – ceases to represent an aristocratic, solitary act (as Nietzsche or Ortega Y Gasset regarded it) is worth being iterated.

At the same time, the assertion “elitism means intelligence” is inadequate. By definition, elitism promotes class division and the belief that elites know what is best for non-elites. Or, it is simply the representation of false superiority with the purpose of preserving a number of advantages (“abusive elitism”). However, intelligence is not class-conditioned, this being an argument used and illustrated by anti-elitist discourses everywhere.

The academic environment, once envisaged as a system of spreading knowledge under the form of high culture, presently illustrates compromise, non-elitist intelligence and original methods of negotiating between the two types of culture: a young student in Letters (first year) decided to study canonical literature only because “I cannot study rock percussion at this University, I’m in a band (called “Alternate”)…”

It is interesting how elitism and the dialogue involved by the two types of culture generally absorbs intellectual elites, “the integrated” rarely expressing their position. Non-elites do not even feel excluded: they announce that “the great culture is boring”. Also true, to consider as equal non-elites and masses is inadequate, both terminologically and conceptually. In the real world, the fate of elitist cultural products may stand under the sign of the unusual:

This is how, in everyday life, the bored intellectual, in a concert hall, does not decode the

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symphony, but receives it as a simple fetish; whereas the ordinary person, who whistles the notes of the same symphony while at work, recovers an aspect and responds better than the other to the expectations of the composer. (Eco, 117)

What are elites, after all? H.R. Patapievici makes the distinction between sociological and intellectual elites. The sociological ones are defined by their professional performance, no matter the moral standard. The elite status involves recognition and social function: “The elites have the function of storing practices and knowledge indispensable in the development of a society” (“Wall Street Journal” live debate). By and large, we can say elites represent a progress and social cohesion factor, but in our country they are related to access to financial resources.

One of the most pertinent and refined rhetorical stands in favor of high culture belongs to George Steiner, who wondered “Why do we compose lyric verse or critiques of pure judgment?” and suggested that the answer “for pleasure” means nothing. Other pleasures, such as sex, food, wealth, power are easier to acquire. In fact, as early as Empedocles, a small group of people sacrificed their life in the pursuit and making of a mathematical demonstration or philosophical argument. A group of people who, despite hostile history, stand out creatively by “compelling splendour of the useless (the Socratic daimonion)”. (Steiner, 22) The expansion of the community having access to ideas, arts, and literature based on easier access to education and cultural illumination represents a liberal Enlightenment pedagogical ideal practiced by Jefferson, Matthew Arnold and F.R. Leavis. “High Culture” receptive understanding and commitment to quality and excellence reached a level that other historical stages could not approach. However, the same means can trivialize knowledge and experience, content and shape. (Steiner, 22-24) Adopting Goethe’s words, “Truth is on the side of the few”, Steiner defines the elite – in the spirit of the most exclusivist meritocracy – as the group that knows the truth, proclaims some things are better than others and, more than others, deserves to know and love the truth. And, as a wise man, Steiner comes up with the most predictable answer to the question: “What justification have I, outside personal taste or vanity, to oppose popular culture and what it so manifestly contributes to lives otherwise drab or crippled?”: None. (Steiner, 23) A purist, yet objective position to which, consequent to the present study, a comment can be added:

“Mass society is so rich in determination and possibilities, that a game of mediation and reference emerges, between discovery culture, consume culture, popularization and mediation culture, hard to define as beautiful or kitsch”. (Eco, 95) It is obvious that good taste and bad taste become mutable categories.

In the matter of intellectuals belonging to the elite, Morton P. Levitt (professor at the Temple University, editor of the prestigious magazine Journal of Modern Literature and author of numerous volumes on Joyce’s novel or on the modern novel) used himself as an example, confessing his disfavour for such labels, emphasizing that being able to read Joyce’s Finnegans Wake or Ulysses does not make one an intellectual elite, as it was not Joyce’s intention to write only for the elites, but to create a new type of reader, a universal reader, like Dickens’, only with new interests and abilities, capable of assimilating and savouring new forms of fiction, interesting and amusing. From this perspective, Levitt points out: we could speak about inherent anti-elitist activity. (Levitt, 534) Similarly, the accusation according to which the intellectuals’ logic is authoritarian and circular can be discussed: they dominate “the free market of thinking” and also assume the part of instructors. The implication is that everyone should have to conform to their standards, professionally and not only – illustration of how prestige groups work.

In Romanian society, intellectual and media elites are characterized by dysfunctional features. Authors such as Sorin Adam Matei, Caius Dobrescu, and Ciprian Şiulea advocate professional elites, based on certified intellectual performance and competence, as opposed to the Romanian essentialist vision on the elites. From this dominant perspective, following Sorin Adam Matei, Caius Dobrescu points to the fact that:

The elite is seen as a community of those who show, by means of precious personal example, how to make the most of our lives. Years ago, in a perceptive and influential review published in Politica on a number of volumes of global interpretation of issues of the Romanian society throughout centuries belonging to Mr. Horia-Roman Patapievici and Mrs. Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, the philosopher Mircea Boari made a clear distinction between normative and
functional elites for the first time within our intellectual environment. (*Observator cultural*, no. 248/2008)

In fact, Sorin Adam Matei’s entire undertaking in *Boierii minții* refers to elitism ideologies and the part they play in Romanian society. Referring to the context of public education, Caius Dobrescu denounces the pathos in praising international mathematics or chemistry competitions results “without even the attempt to elevate or, at least, evaluate the average level of performance in the public education system.”

Equally, Sorin Adam Matei pertinently investigates the particular case of Romanian elites in East-European context (the so-called “prestige groups” including members caught in a network of values and social relations that provide identity through analogy with the society). The prestige group counters the “intellectual class” group (the author uses Max Weber’s delimitation). As external source of “intellectual monopolies”, the author identifies a deficit of productive means and resources, which includes the production of ideas and capital. The internal source of prestige groups is represented by the spiritual structure based on the idea of charisma:

Charisma is an elementary form of social relationship essentially irrational. It divides the group into «chosen» and «supporters», the former endowed with superhuman qualities and talents (wisdom, holiness, charm, bravery), supposedly innate, an inspiration and a stimulus for others. [...] Prestige groups revolve around charisma to preserve the idea of art as an extraordinary act. In cultures dominated by prestige groups, education itself is channelled so it complies with this belief, especially because (official or not) random education might ruin the part charisma plays in turning social hierarchies legitimate, spreading the gifts of the «chosen» to the crowds. (Matei, 18)

Whether education – be it only humanistic – is shaped in the same spirit or not in our country (as anywhere else), is still debatable. Elites are often condemned for their formalism and sectarianism as dominant features. Formalism implies résumés, diplomas, and other forms of academic and bureaucratic certifications of the intellectual. Sectarianism refers to the closed character and self-sufficiency of elitist communities. It is the case of “prestige groups”, who confer identity and recognition, identity that matters not inside the group, but outside: “According to Bourdieu's model for para-modern cultural life, group participation is based on the establishment of a certain type of symbolic monopoly”. (Matei, 19)

I think the authors and, at the same time, recipients of the debate regarding the elite and non-elite, elitism and anti-elitism are intellectuals themselves, meaning those who claim to belong to the elite: an elite defined by mental projects and intellectual solutions to issues that do not concern masses directly. Masses access this debate indirectly, via the school, via the educational system through which the canon perpetuates high values. Once into contact and intellectual competition, challenged by the values presented by the canon (viewed in its broadest sense), individuals are forced to stand on the elitism-nonelitism axis. Statistically and empirically, we can observe that the Romanian student's intellectual background rather belongs to the pop culture. Therefore the high culture partisans have to adjust to a reference system shaped primarily by the mass-media. The reference system is “the civilization of the image”, which characterizes a society where the chosen elites are “the irresponsible elites”, “the stars” – “owners of a certain type of power, whose decisions and behavior influence the life of the community”. Moreover, they are endowed with “charismatic features”, having the possibility to “deeply alter the sense of values and ethical decisions of the crowds who identify themselves with them”. (Eco, 349)

Consequently, it would be beneficial to adopt Sorin Matei Adam subtitle to the volume *Idei de schimb* (2011): “*What if the concern of the intellectuals were pedagogy* [emphasis added], not theology, the concern of the politicians were providing villages with running water and not the completion of a PhD research, the concern of the clergy were the love of the neighbour and not of the past”.

University curricula rarely succeed in spreading knowledge plus the ability to think critically. The main accusations against the actual results of the school are as follows: on the one hand, the graduates of the university have no abilities and no knowledge to earn their living (they can answer the question
“What can you do?” only occasionally), on the other hand, they do not carry on the standard of high culture (they can answer the question “What do you know?” only occasionally).

As Harold Bloom pointed out, trying to produce critical spirit through high culture is the most interesting, but also non-quantifiable challenge:

Reading deeply in the Canon will not make one a better or a worse person, a more useful or harmful citizen. The mind’s dialogue with itself is not primarily a social reality. All that the Western Canon can bring one is the proper use of one’s own solitude, that solitude whose final form is one’s confrontation with one’s own mortality. (Bloom, 30)

And yet, as Levitt (son of emigrants, house painters from generation to generation) reminded anecdotally, the education of a nation’s youth should be one of its most praised social values: “I suppose that educating a nation’s children should be worth more on the scale of social values than painting its houses. (Society, of course, does not always agree.)”. (Levitt, 535)

The present investigation was motivated by the pressure coming from vacillating between academic discourse and public discourse which the humanist intellectual (and not only) is forced into. Assuming his position of defender and propagator of high culture (as holder of a lecture on canonicity), the comparative literature professor is often prompted to adopt and account for positions outside the academic space, hence the challenge to use a non-specialized language and a code for imparting ideas shaped by the popularizing discourse.

The question is simpler: how to institute an intellectual option by means of popular culture (the preference for Cervantes’ *Don Quijote* accounted for in the time of *Avatar* and *Da Vinci’s Code*)? How to convince the supporters of popular culture that it can coexist together with high culture? The professor has a privilege: his lectures. Unfortunately though, in our country, most of the times, the authority argument is used in the simplified, yet extreme form of the famous line: “Because I said so…” (When asked on BBC Radio 4 why he advocated the elitism of the English culture, Roger Scruton replied in a similar manner: “Because I am an elitist.”). Fortunately, nowadays, in a context characterized by the circulation of information on all possible channels, it is possible to start a dialogue, a negotiation between high culture and popular culture. This negotiation, however, depends on the intelligence, open-mindedness and will of the “elitists disguised as academics”.

References


