AVANT-GARDISM AND LATINITY

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Abstract:
The effects the *Avant-garde* had on the way of thinking of people belonging to various cultures and professions were bigger than expected. The fact that there were *Dada* promoters who belonged to nations of Latin origin, such as Tr. Tzara and G. M. Teles, led future theoreticians to advocate the idea of a Latin union which - through joint cultural actions - could change the entire political, economic, and spiritual life.

Keywords:
Avant-garde, Latinity, Latin union, economic progress, cultural reforms.

The *Dada* extravagances and its permanent denial of any social conventions were expected to cause the rapid disintegration of an art movement whose central figures claimed they simply did not believe in progress. Nevertheless, according to the world history of this art movement[1], their ideas decisively contributed to progress within some cultures that had never before experimented innovations in art.

It is a fact that the ending signs of the *Dada* movement appeared just four years after its debut[2], in spring 1920, when *The First International Dada Fair*, organized in Berlin, ended in a law suit which scattered its participants[3]. The misunderstandings continued later in Paris, although a

[1]This very fact, *i.e.* „the rapid international expansion", was one of the characteristic features of the Avant-garde.
[2]Literary historians registered the debut of the *Dada* movement in Zürich, on February 2, 1916, *cf.* Marc Dachy, *Archives dada – Chroniques*, Éditions Hazan, Paris 2005, p. 20.
[3] Roselee Goldberg, 2001, chapter 3.

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general enthusiasm acted as a background. Practically, it was the period when the "old" Dadaists from Zürich, who had rejected any positive tendencies in art, began to differentiate themselves from *Surrealism*, a new movement built around André Breton as its leader.

Their attempt to organize some atypical excursions (in order to invalidate suspect guides) was also a *fiasco*, see the lack of audience for the *Dada* excursion to the church of *Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre*.[4] Staging law suits was their third attempt to organize public acts. In the famous *Trial and Sentencing of Maurice Barrès for offences against the security of the mind*, 1921, led by A. Breton, Tr. Tzara was playing the role of an inconvenient witness. After a flamboyant deposition, the latter exited the room,being followed by Francis Picabia and his friend, while L. Aragon was already beginning a plea against the entire court.[5]

From that point forward, the movement split into several directions:

a) "Old", "loyal" Dadaists (Tr. Tzara)[6];

b) Surrealists (A. Breton, Philippe Soupault);

c) Anti-Dadaists and Anti-Surrealists (Fr. Picabia).

A Congress, dedicated to spirituality, announced by *Dada* members to be held in Paris, in January 1922, resulted in a planning failure which - nevertheless - proved to be spiritually fertile, just like many other *Dada* scandals. The full title of the manifestation was, of course, marked by Dadaist characteristics: *Congrès International pour la détérmination des directives et la défense de l'esprit moderne*. Yet, Tristan Tzara, who disliked concepts like "directive" as a principle, opposed vehemently. As already mentioned, the fracture between them already had occurred almost a year

[4] *Ibidem*, chapter 4.
[5] Marc Dachy, 1994, *Dada et les dadaïsmes*, Paris : Gallimard.
[6] The scandal of the *Dada* soirée held at the *Théâtre Michel - organized by* Tr. Tzara, on July 6, 1923 - ended in violence and police intervention and it represents the actual manifestation of the split. The *Manifesto of Surrealism* published by A. Breton in 1924 is regarded as the official end of the *Dada* movement of Swiss-German-Romanian origin.

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before ("The Barrès Trial", May 1922).[7]

All the preparations for the congress and implicitly all the misunderstandings among *Dada* members were incidentally witnessed by groups of young students who had come to the Capital of Lights from all over the world in order to be closer to the *Avant-garde* and to its spectacular and groundbreaking spirit. Among them, a small group of Brazilian students who had at the time revolved round the Parisian *Avant-garde* took over the idea of organizing a cultural event and, ignoring their masters' failure, succeeded in putting it into practice in Brazil. It is obvious, though, that the original event was regarded *a posteriori* by the written history as having other dimensions and circumstances.

Critics who plead in favour of Romanian culture pretend that Romanians Tristan Tzara and Marcel Iancu were the ones who started and led this intellectual movement in Europe[8]. Equally exaggerated is the assumption that *Dadaism* was not only the most radical cultural movement of the 19th and 20th centuries, but that in terms of intensity and aesthetic dimensions it exceeded other movements about pessimism and rupture, *id est*: *Sturm und Drang*, *Le Mal du Siècle*, and the Decadent movement at the end of the 20th century[9]. Dadaism was soon exported from Swiss to Germany, France, Romania, Serbia, etc., and reached the American continent rapidly, too. For instance, an *Avant-garde* exhibition was held in New York as early as the spring of 1916. Some echoes of this cultural movement were also heard as far as Japan.

The most spectacular acclimatisation was made in South-America, especially in Brazil. The afore-mentioned students claimed they got inspired by Breton and Tzara to organize the *Modern Art Week*, a complex event which ran in São Paulo and other Brazilian cities from February 11 to February 18, 1922. One of its three young initiators, the future renowned

[7] Cf. *Lettre à Tristan Tzara*, April 4 and 5, in: Daix, 1993, p. 57; A. Breton, *Lettre à Simone Breton*, ibid.
[8] J. Mascarado, 2003, p. 66.
[9] *Ibidem*.

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writer Gilberto Mendonça Teles, commented on that event as follows:

„*The idea of our Modern Art Week was inspired by the idea of a Congress for Modern Spirit which was planned to be held a year ago in March 1922 [in Paris], at the initiative of André Breton and which caused the dispute between him and Tr. Tzara and, eventually, the dissolution of the Dada movement* (translation mine)."[10]

Naturally, contemporary literary historians are now aware of the fact that the situation was slightly different. As previously shown, the preparations for the Congress were not the cause, but only the continuation and the result of older misunderstandings between Breton and Tzara. On the ather hand, it was not then, but only three years later that the *Dada* movement was considered as coming to its end (see the *Surrealist* manifesto published in 1924). In addition, we cannot even speak about a movement "dissolution" (and, in fact, not even about its definite and actual "end"): as seen retrospectively, *Dadaist* actions and appearances - whether individual or in groups, whether official or particular - still continued for a long time[11].

What was G.M. Telles perfectly right about was the effect the imported idea had in Brazil:

„*Although this Congress of Modern Spirit did not take place anymore, our (Brazilian) Week has achieved all the results, predictable or not, which the entire Brazilian literature of our century [the 20th, Author's note] benefited from to the present day* (translation mine)."[12]

The future great writer Graça Aranha was the one who was the most drawn to the *Dada* intellectuals grouped around the Parisian magazine *L'Esprit Nouveau*. Being heavily impressed by the group's preparations, he carried their spirit to Brazil and chose the title of the São Paulo manifestation under their influence.

The role Tristan Tzara played in the events in Brazil was again

[10] G. M. Teles, în: *Europe*, March 1979.
[11] The facts are not correctly reconstituted by Teles - not even as far as their chronology is concerned, as it is easily noticeable.
[12] G.M. Teles, *loc. cit.*

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emphasized by another writer (of the time), Otto Maria Carpeaux. This role, undoubtedly involuntary, was an *a contrario* example, since the Romanian *Dada* member did not agree on the idea of a congress. In fact, he did not agree on the way A. Breton conceived that congress and, consequently, the young Brazilian students were rather in favour of Tr. Tzara's ideas.

The *Modern Art Week*, just like any other *Dada* public manifestation, did not receive favourable reactions at the beginning. Non-conformist art exhibitions, theatre shows, or reading sessions held in the first days of the *Week* received a hostile reception from the audience who booed or even left theatre halls or lecture rooms. The *Dada* aesthetics based on socio-political reality had a sudden impact upon its receivers, and very few of them were able to digest it from the very beginning. However, their attitude changed relatively fast. Adepts of scepticism, traditionalism, and conformism who were very vocal in the first days of the *Week* have been outnumbered during the second half of the manifestation by young people - and not only - who were very open to receiving innovatory ideas. Theatre halls in São Paulo and in the neighbouring towns became overcrowded, and recitals, exhibitions, concerts, theatre shows, conferences, and meetings with journalists and writers began to be enthusiastically received.

In fact, the Brazilian *Avant-garde* bears the same paradoxical characteristic as many other elements of the material and spiritual structure belonging to this immense human community: the modernity advanced by the aesthetic Platform of the *Modern Art Week* was based on traditional values. Mário de Andrade, a representative of the cultural movement called "Rătăcirism", wrote programmatic works with eloquent titles such as: *A Very Interesting Preface; The Slave who is not Isaura*, etc. We have shown somewhere else[13] that the philosophical and practical positivism which the Brazilian society used as an engine towards progress manifested itself within its typical framework: the evolution happens only by recovering traditional values which are already verified by older practices and in which

[13] P. Gh. Bârlea, 2016, p. 111.

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new experiments have to be inserted.

In accordance with the positivist ideas of August Comte, the program of the new art movement focused on asserting the national identity and the total independence of Brazil, a country who was for many years a subject nation to the Portuguese Empire. Oswald de Andrade, the first great initiator of the event officially asserted that the *Modern Week* was part of a group actions meant to celebrate the centennial since the separation of Brazil from Portugal, a separation which also needed a cultural and spiritual component:

„*The independence is not only political. It is, above all, a mental and a moral independence*." (Oswald de Andrade, translation mine).

The theories of positivism in Brazil are also obvious in the way the problem of modernizing Brazilian culture was approached, *i.e.* through the spirit of scientism. According to that, the following directions have been suggested: the orientation of the art toward the national realities; the systematic analysis of the real, everyday life; the capitalization of the local folklore; the nurturing of Luso-Brazilian virtues of the language to the detriment of classical Portuguese spoken in Europe. We have already mentioned in the above cited study that there is a theory of transgression that is here easily recognizable, a transgression from the phase called "the analysis of feelings", characteristic for the first stage of positivism, to the phase of "logical and linguistic analysis", characteristic for its third stage[14].

Consequently, the avant-garde manifestation of February 1922 grew beyond its aesthetic objectives as they were expected by the organizers on the cultural level and affected - in a very short time and on a very wide scale - both the entire mentality and the socio-political and economic evolution of Brazil. It seems that the *Modern Art Week* happened at the exact moment when circumstances allowed for a decisive turn within the history of a country which is as large as a continent and as diverse in terms of both ethno-linguistics and mentalities. Brazilian historians ascertained a direct

[14] *Ibidem*.

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relation between the cultural manifestations of February 1922 and the political, military events of July 1922[15]. The creativeness of the young intellectuals of São Paulo extended to and sharpened the young lieutenants' rebellion at Copacabana Fort in Rio de Janeiro. "The 18 of the Fort revolt", although defeated by the presidential administration of Epitacio Pessoa, generated a period of confusion and unrest on the political and socio-economic scene. The general crisis continued for two decades and was defined by a long row of both *tenente* revolts and civil, anarchist, or mystical uprisings.

Meanwhile, the intellectuals of the *Week* moved ideologically forward along three different directions:

a) Toward the left (*The Pau Brazil Movement*; *The* Antropofagia *Movement* – founded by Oswald de Andrade, Jorge Amado, Astrojildo Pereira a.o.);

b) Toward the right (*The Green and Yellow Group* – sustained by Menotti Del Picchia, Plínio Salgado a.o. In 1924, the group changed its name into *The Tapir Group,* while its ideological direction took a turn toward absoluteness and became quite similar to B. Mussolini's movement;

c) A Christian direction – represented by Dom Hélder Cãmara, Alceu Amoroso Lima a.o.

All of the above mentioned people created artistic workings (in literature, visual arts, music, architecture, etc.), but they also wrote scientific studies, successfully combining thus theory and practice.

By all means, nothing remained the same in the minds and lives of Brazilians since that avant-garde *Week*.

There are historians and theoreticians who exacerbate the role the Romanian *Avant-garde* played in this radical shift in Brazilian culture and society; they consider that the respective cultural event which placed Brazil among other modern countries in the world was prefaced by a kind of "pre-history" which consists in the theoretical works of Mihail Manoilescu, a

[15] H. Donato, 2000, pp. 100-105.

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Romanian economist and politician. His book analysing the sources of inequities between countries supplying raw materials and countries producing processed goods became the Bible of the entire South-American continent in implementing their national programs of industrial and agricultural reorganization on scientific bases[16]. "The Manoilescu Argument" became the ideological foundation of the political regime in Brazil, a country that was the first to translate the works of the Romanian economist. Some African and Asian countries also benefited from M. Manoilescu's books, and the ideas comprised in those books have also been recently analyzed by theoreticians in the USA.[17]

For some theoreticians, these two facts sufficed to develop a *theory of Latinism in the two countries* which are very similar in many aspects, though they are situated at a great distance from one another both geographically and historically.

The theory involves an active Latinist spirit which would change the entire world. Starting from the ideas of Edmund Husserl, who claimed in 1935 that Europe did not count as much as a geographical space but as a spiritual entity, Jerônimo Moscardo considered Romania as being the leading player in the process of defining a new economic and cultural order on the continent and even in the entire world:

"*In the name of the Latinist spirit and as a devout supporter of this spirit, Romania should propose, in my opinion, a humanist cultural project which would aim at cultural harmony and world development. It should go beyond any material or economic concept and offer Europe another dimension, a greater one, a complement of the soul; it should also play a great part within the world drama, since it is entitled to it* (translation mine)."[18]

On the other hand, Brazil itself is considered to be "a country representative for the idea of *Latinitas/Romanitas"*. Darcy Ribeiro, one of the greatest minds educated on Brazilian soil, wrote:

[16] Mihai Manolescu, 1929.
[17] J. Love, 1996.
[18] J. Moscardo, 2003, p. 157.

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„*The New Rome is us, after all. It is a late and tropical Rome. Since Brazil is the most important of the neo-Latin nations, as it is the most numerous, it tends to be at the forefront of the Neo-Roman world because of its artistic and cultural creativity* (translation mine)."[19]

A common project between the two countries representing the marginal but fertile areas of Latinity would nevertheless be a better alternative. Beyond any conventionalities articulated over time by ministers of foreign affairs or ambassadors like Andrei Pleşu, Luiz Felipe Lamprera and other officials, it was a work of Jean-François Mattei that provided the justificatory background for such a project. J.-F. Mattei considered that, although the term *barbarus* was a Greek loan, the opposition between civilisation and barbarism was invented by the Romans. The world dominated by *Romanitas* set an impregnable borderline against the world called *Barbaria*, which - at its turn - was divided into destructive barbarism, characterized by *ferocitas* and *feritas*, violence and *belli furor*, on the one hand, and *barbaria vanitatis* (from *vanitas* = Eng. "vacuum", "void"), which equated the oriental ostentation of forms without content, sensuality, weakness, and corruption, on the other hand. The barbaric vanity is a world of illusions and inconsistencies, which is today called the "mild" *barbarism*.

Orbis Romanus established itself as a promoter of an active *humanism* within the barbaric world, yet this process needs to be continued. The idea was appropriated by Heidegger in his *Letter on Humanism*. The human essence lies beyond humanism. It is about cultivating the sense of reason and redemption in everything that is being done. A spiritual Europe should be imposed against a mercantile, political, or military Europe and the innovatory role should be played by Latin peoples, who are to revive the virtues of the ancient Roman world.

Many attempts to coalesce political-economic and military forces under the flag of Latinity have been registered by the world history, but not many of them were successful. It is now the cultural level that should act as

[19] *Apud* J. Moscardo, *loc. cit.*, p. 68.

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a background for a new economic, political and spiritual world order:

"Countries who claim their affiliation to the Latin culture have the duty to reignite the spirit of the Roman world, who, placed between a barbarism of weakness and a barbarism of ferocity, had the inspiration to establish a culture of moderation and balance. A culture of Humanism."[20]

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[20] J. Moscardo, 2003, p. 53.

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