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Two cultures, two agents of knowledge, one dispute: The making of the Făgăraș Mountains natural park

Simona ŞOICA[1]

The Fagaras Mountains have become high on the agenda of two agents of knowledge that define their perspectives on the controversial issue of transforming these mountains into a natural park. The foundation "Conservation Carpathia" promotes the Western-oriented restoration and conservation discourse, while the landowners and "Nostra Silva", the Romanian association of forests and pastures owners highlight the Romanian-oriented property discourse. I propose a semiotic analysis on the way the two conflicting discourses intersect in a meeting between the representatives of the two organizations. Investigating some of the meanings behind knowledge formation around the Fagaras Mountains may raise awareness about the uncertainties of both sides and may favor more constructive dialogues between the two combative parties.

Key-words: *agents of knowledge, the Fagaras Mountains, natural park, semiotics, knowledge*

1. Introduction and background

Placed at the intersection between cultures, environment and linguistics, this paper is written within the framework of environmental communication theories on account of the fact that I am primarily interested in gaining insight into communication practices related to the environment. My research adds to the broad research agenda on environmental communication (see Milstein, 2009 for an overall picture of environmental communication theories), more precisely on the ways people communicate about the natural world. Understanding the meanings people attach to the environment around them may open new paths to improving communication among various groups that have developed contrasting perspectives on the natural world.

[1] Transilvania University of Braşov, s.bucsa@unitbv.ro

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The interest I have developed in the polemic arisen around the Fagaras Mountains natural park has been nurtured by the emotional meetings between two groups, that is the foundation "*Conservation Carpathia"* (FCC) and the Romanian landowners, represented by the mayors of villages situated in the area of Fagaras Mountains and by "*Nostra Silva"* (NS), the Romanian association of forests and pastures owners. The heated confrontations between the two groupings unveil clashes between two microcultures that promote different discourses on the making of the Fagaras Moutains natural park.

Both groupings claim the role of agents of knowledge and take what Prichard (2002, 269) names a position to "define and elaborate legitimate knowledge and perspectives". The various discursive practices, such as interviews, website publishing, presentations, conferences, allow both FCC and NS representatives to articulate knowledge on the Fagaras Mountains.

FCC builds up knowledge by promoting a Western-oriented restoration and conservation discourse with the goal of acquiring land in order to turn it into a natural park. On the other hand, "*Nostra Silva*", the Romanian association of forests and pastures owners, highlights the Romanian-oriented property discourse in order to create and share knowledge related to the environment, with the goal of preserving the property right.

A semiotic analysis of the confrontations between FCC and landowners (represented by NS) is performed to reveal meanings behind the knowledge on the Fagaras Mountains expressed by the two combative parties.

I extract parts from the literature on knowledge formation at the point that interests me. For example, one line of thought is informed by the socio-cultural and the cognitive perspectives. Billet (1998) and Scribner (1985) bring to the fore the idea that knowledge is socially and culturally determined (see Daniels, Cole and Wertsch, 2007 for a complete picture of the relationship between knowledge and social and cultural sources of knowledge). Specifically, experiences co-occur in patterned ways within a socio-cultural environment and influence the construction of knowledge (Billet 1998, 26). I also regard Hannerz's (1992) definition of microcultures, that is "shared meanings directly tied to specific, likewise shared, experiences of people, settings, and events" (p.77), as the framework for knowledge formation.

My aim is to unveil the meanings that landowners and FCC representatives attach to the Fagaras Mountains, which underlies what they appear to name authorized position, and, implicitly, knowledge, in their discourse oriented towards either property ownership or land conservation.

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2. Research background

The cultural turn in geography provides the conceptual lenses to turn our attention "away from the 'morphology' of landscape towards the "experience' of landscape" (Cosgrove 2003, 271), to be concerned "not with the elements but with the essence, with the organizing ideas we use to make sense out of what we see" (Meinig 1979, 34). Many cultural geographers (Tuan 1979; Gregory 1994, Duncan and Duncan 1990, Wylie 2007, to name just a few) have thus been preoccupied with experiencing landscape and with exploring its symbolic aspects.

Semiotics provides the framework that "enables us to see how meaning emerges from our interaction with the elements of landscape we come into contact with" (Soica 2016, 97). In their seminal paper, Duncan and Duncan (1990) introduce the notion of reading the landscape as a text and appeal to Roland Barthes's (1972) signifying systems to make their point. In a recent study, Cole (2016) conceptualizes the word 'refugee' as a sign according to Barthes' model of semiotics in order to open ways for various organizations involved in the refugee politics to understand and better deal with this issue. This is one of my intentions as well. I also choose the signifying system created by Barthes (1972) to understand how the landowners and the representatives of the foundation *"Conservation Carpathia"* build their knowledge around the Fagaras Mountains. I believe such an analysis could open new ways for understanding and dealing with the hot issue, the making of the Fagaras Mountains national park.

Peircean (1994) semiotics has also been applied to inquire into the way people make sense of the objects they come into contact with (for example Metro-Roland, 2009, 2011, Knudsen and Rickly-Boyd 2012; Soica, 2016, to name just a few; see also Linsdrom et al. 2018 for a complete literature review on landscape semiotics).

In looking at the landscape of the Fagaras Mountains, FCC and the landowners (represented by NS) have a different version of the same scene. Timms (2008) (see also Knudsen 2008) examines the insider/outsider view of landscape originating in Tuan's (1974, 1979) thinking. He studies the formation of the Celaque National Park in Honduras and discusses the different perspectives of landscape by locals and by other organizations involved in the making of the park. He advances the concept of *parallax* to address the human/nature dichotomy that occurs in all the national parks, including the one in the Fagaras Mountains. For the purpose of this paper I take a heuristic approach to the formation of knowledge by the landowners and FCC representatives around the Fagaras Mountains.

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3. Data

Foundation *"Conservation Carpathia"* declares its aim to "contribute to the conservation and restoration of the natural Carpathian ecosystem, for the benefit of biodiversity and local communities, by acquiring, protecting and administrating forests and natural grasslands" and to "ultimately return our landholdings to the public domain for permanent protection in the form of a National Park" (www.carpathia.org, n.d.).

"Conservation Carpathia" is a multicultural organization. Beside the multinational structure of the board of directors (Romanian, English, Danish, Swiss), the Brasov-based management team is also culturally diverse. The two executive directors are of Austrian origin, while the rest of the members are Romanian. In addition to the national culture, microcultures also become visible. One example is the professional culture. Most of the employees share environmental-related professions, which underscores that professional interest may transcend the national borders (Gibson 2010).

On the other hand, *Nostra Silva*, the Romanian association of forests and pastures owners, states its aim to contribute to strengthening, protecting and defending forest and pasture ownership in close collaboration with forest and pasture owners. (www.nostrasilva.ro, n.d.). I assume the members are all Romanian landowners; however, I remarked that one member of the managing board belongs to the Hungarian ethnic group.

The two groupings have met several times during the last few years. To my knowledge, one of the first confrontations on the making of the Fagaras Mountains natural park was organized by the National Romanian Television (TVR) in 2016. More were to come and some meetings, like the one I submit for analysis, were made public on the YouTube channel. Apart from face-to-face meetings, both FCC and NS or the local mayors and landowners have built up their knowledge and have attempted to consolidate their position of agents of knowledge. Each party has authorized a "discursive formation" around the Fagaras Mountains by means of a whole range of "discursive practices" (Foucault 1972): TV shows, face-to-face meetings, web publishing, interviews, etc.; The Western-oriented restoration and conservation discourse promoted by FCC and the Romanian-oriented property discourse highlighted by NS.

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Picture 1. October 2016: TV show 'The Carpathians, the lungs of Europe'
Source: https://www.youtube.com

In this paper I take a look at the face-to-face meeting organized by The Foundation "*Conservation Carpathia*" in Braşov, on the 8th of May, 2019 and hosted by Brasov County council.

The guests are mayors of villages situated in Făgăraş county-region, local landowners and members of „*Nostra Silva*", The Romanian association of forests and pastures owners. Another microculture emerges as the meeting proceeds: "*I want to make it clear to everyboby, including to the Romanian national authorities. 'Fagaras county' is different from the rest of the country. We have proved this throughout history"*[2] *(landowner).* The speaker hints at the remarkable events that have built the identity of this region.



Picture 2. Picture of the meeting organized by FCC
Source: www.nostrasilva.ro

[2] The discussions between the members of the two groupings took place in Romanian. In this paper I have translated them into English myself.

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4. Semiotic analysis

Roland Barthes (1972) uses different terms to mark the process of signification. Myth, secondary semiological system, connotation, or metalanguage (see also Noth, 1978, Fiske, 1990) describe the relationship between the signifier and signified within the sign, and the interaction that occurs when the sign meets the feelings or emotions of the users and the values of their culture. For example, in his phenomenal work *Mythologies* (1972), Barthes discusses the meanings attached to some popular culture products such as the Guide Bleu, Tour de France, red wine or Rolls Royce car. He illustrates the process of signification within two semiological systems, the linguistic system, the language, and the myth, the metalanguage, the second language (Barthes 1972, 113). Myth is used metaphorically to illustrate the way a subject interprets and expresses a message.

In figure 1 Barthes describes the first level of signification, Saussure's scheme, the signifier, the signified and the sign, which explains the linguistic system. Then the myth is constructed. The signifier in the first system becomes form, the signified becomes concept and the sign becomes meaning, the significance being the term corresponding to the myth that receives meaning in a certain, spatial, temporal, historical, cultural, political, social etc context (Barthes 1972, 113).

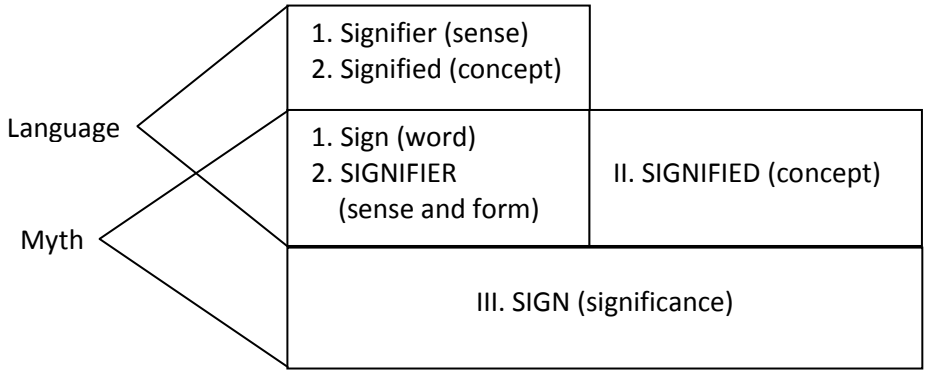


Figure 1. Mythological system (Signifying system) Barthes (1972, 113)

Barthes' semiotic scheme enables me to make a comparison in the way FCC and landowners conceptualize the landscape of the Fagaras Mountains. I pay attention to the different meanings the two groupings attach to the Fagaras Mountains, which foregrounds the formation of knowledge around the Fagaras Mountains in the specific context of the meeting organized in Brasov.

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Turning to the theoretical body of cultural geographies, I take Meinig's (1979) visions of landscape, i.e. landscape as nature, habitat, system, history, problem, aesthetics, to frame the significances attached to landscape as emerged from the dialogue between FCC and the landowners.

I extract some of Meinig's (1979, 34) perceptual mapping of landscape in light of the central idea that "any landscape is composed not only of what lies before our eyes but what lies within our heads" as follows:

- Landscape as habitat - "a blend of man and nature", "a piece of Earth as the Home of Man"
- Landscape as System – "landscape is a dynamic equilibrium of interacting processes and man is part of these systems"
- Landscape as history – "landscape is a complex cumulative record of the work of nature and man in a particular place"
- Landscape as Nature – "remove man from the scene, to restore nature to her pristine conditions"
- Landscape as problem – "landscape evokes wrath and alarm, it is a mirror of the ills of our society and cries for drastic change"
- Landscape as Aesthetic – "landscape as scenery, taking its artistic qualities" (Meinig 1979, 34-47)

The following two figures illustrate a semiotic analysis, a heuristic approach to the meanings attached by the landowners (figure 2), and FCC (figure 3).

A few examples show the evolution of signs from the denotative, i.e. the Fagaras Mountains as morphological arrangement in space, to the connotative level, i.e. the ideas, the messages used to make sense of the mountain. The analysis reveals that landowners' representatives or Nostra Silva mainly frame their knowledge within what Meinig (1979) calls *landscape as habitat, system or history*. This also underscores an insider's perspective of the mountain:

Landscape as habitat:

(1) '*We want you to take account of our property right*.' (landowner)

(2) Landscape as system:

(3) '*We have the resources, we know how to manage them*'. (landowner)

(4) Landscape as history:

(5) '*We knew how to preserve the forests and we still have them and our grandchildren will have them as well*' (landowner)

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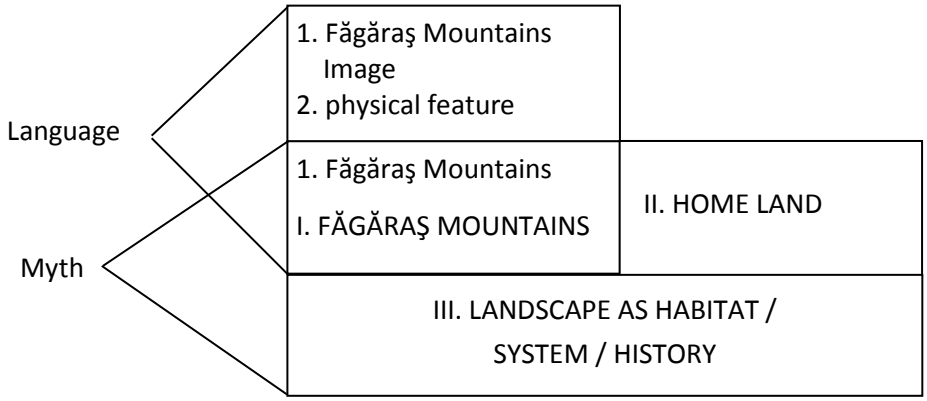


Figure 2. Signifying system: Landscape as perceived by landowners and Nostra Silva, the Romanian association of forests and pastures owners

The Foundation "*Conservation Carpathia*" appears to bring what Aasbo, 1999 (in Knudsen, 2008, 111) names "ready-made academic systems of categorization". The foundation is formed mainly on professional and expertise basis in the field of environmental protection. Thus, FCC's perspective of landscape is mainly related to landscape as nature, problem or aesthetic, as revealed by the foundation's representatives involved in the dialogue with the landowners from Fagaras county:

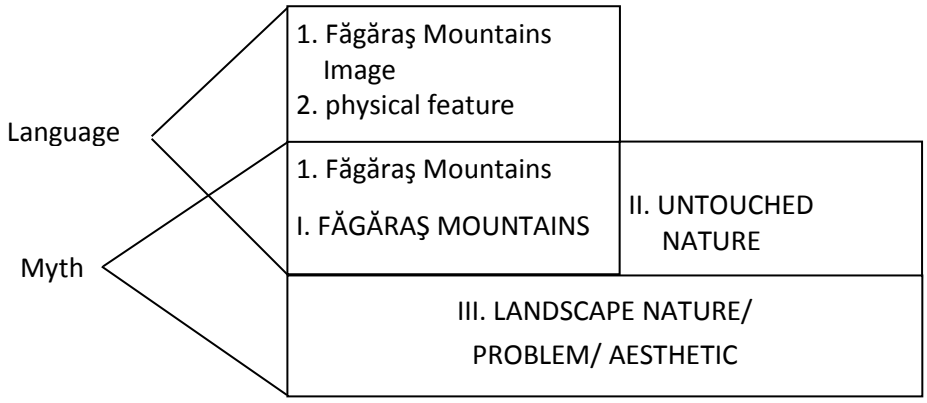


Figure 3. Signifying system: Landscape as perceived by Foundation "*Conservation Carpathia"*

Landscape as nature:

(1) '*What impressed me the most when I first came to Romania was the intact nature*' (Austrian FCC member)

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(2) Landscape as problem:
(3) '*Romania still has capital that Austria, Germany lost.' (*Austrian FCC member*)*
(4) Landscape as aesthetic:
(5) '*Let us become the most beautiful country in Europe*' (Romanian FCC member)

The speakers have a different national cultural background, but they are guided by the same belief, that "this new National Park should be a world-class wilderness, an icon for conservation in Europe" (www.carpathia.org, n.d.). Both Austrian and Romanian members have a similar experience of the mountain, grounded in the shared professional background. This emphasizes a prominent part micro-cultures may play in connecting people beyond national cultures (Gibson 2010).

The semiotic analysis points to the contrasting reading of landscape by the two groupings. Knudsen (2008) undertakes Peircian semiotics in order to understand the origins of the different visions of a particular landscape. My findings confirm his results. The divergent – insider versus outsider - views of the Fagaras Mountains lie "in lived experience with the particular landscape in question" (Knudsen 2008, 111). The insiders, the landowners, feel they are part of the mountains and they can deal with all the problems that may arise. On the other hand, the outsiders, FCC representatives, feel humans should take a step back and give nature privacy so that is may regain its beauty.

In the next section I explore knowledge formation around the Fagaras Mountains natural park.

5. Knowledge formation

The semiotic insight has unveiled that the meanings FCC and landowners attach to landscape are grounded in the social and culture background, as well as in the shared experiences inside the boundaries of micro-cultures.

In this part of the paper I attempt to show how meanings become goal-oriented processes (see Billet, 1998) and build up knowledge to consolidate the position of agents of knowledge around the making of the Fagaras Mountains natural park: "*Conservation Carpathia"* supports the creation of the park. The landowners and "*Nostra Silva"* try to stop the creation of a natural park in the Fagaras Mountains.

I group the social and cultural knowledge into three categories that van Dijk (2008) regards as essential in knowledge formation.

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5.1. Knowledge 1. Local knowledge - Group attitudes, landscape values

Kellert (1994) is one of the first researchers to carry out studies on people's perception of particular species, including bears and invertebrates. He defines the four factors that frame the attitude towards wildlife, namely wildlife values, perceptions of particular species, knowledge and understanding of wildlife, and people-animal interactions. Kellert (1994, 45) defines the following wildlife values: aesthetic, dominionistic, ecologistic, humanistic, naturalistic, negativistic, scientistic, and utilitarian.

The semiotic analysis above has shown us that the local landowners perceive the Fagaras Mountains in terms of landscape as habitat, landscape as history, landscape as system. These perspectives are mirrored in the group attitude that underscores the humanistic and utilitarian values:

(6) *'Fagaras mountains are themselves a special natural reservation. Guarded by themselves*.' (forest ranger)
(7) '*We have the resources, we know how to manage them*' (local landowner).
(8) On the other hand, FCC representatives treat the Fagaras Mountains as a problem, and emphasize the aesthetic value of the mountains. This approach points to the importance of the mountains from ecologistic, scientific and aesthetic point of view.
(9) '*What impressed me the most when I first came to Romania was the intact nature that Romanians have protected!' (*Austrian FCC member*)*
(10)'*Romania still has capital that Austria, Germany lost.' (*Austrian FCC member*)*

Landowners' attitude may be explained by the insider's perspective, "shaped through the intertwined relationship of livelihood" (Timms 2008, 103). In the same vein, Tuan (1977, 166) adds that "the farmers are keenly aware of their place, which they have created themselves".

FCC's position may be explained by the outsider's perspective, shaped by "the view that national parks are purely natural areas" (Timms 2008, 96).

5.2. Knowledge 2. Local knowledge - Group ideologies towards nature

"A blend of man and nature", "a piece of Earth as the Home of Man" (Meinig 1979, 36), this is the landscape as habitat that the locals picture. In terms of ideology or environmental beliefs, the landowners develop a human-centered, an anthropocentric view.

(11)*'We have the resources, we know how to manage them*' (landowner) is an example of people wishing to order their world in relation to nature. Tuan (1977, 93) explains the anthropocentric view of the world of individuals wishing

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"to order his experiences of the world". Newsome et al. (2002) also explain the anthropocentric views that put humans at the centre of things.

(12)'*Have you made a study to find out the social impact of such a park in the Fagaras Mountains? This stirs the emotion that we are all feeling now*' (landowner).

The utterance emphasizes the influence of episodic memory in the creation of knowledge in a particular context model (van Dijk, 2008).

"Primary concern for the environment as a system and for interrelationships between wildlife species and natural habitats" (Kellert, 1994, 45), this is the knowledge FCC builds around the Fagaras Mountains.

(13)'*Let us have a better living by exploring our rich resources in a sustainable way'*. (Romanian FCC member)

FCC expresses an ecocentric view that "recognizes the importance of biodiversity", "encompasses the belief that nature exists for all of Earth's species" and posits that "a healthy economy depends on a healthy environment" (Newsome et al., 2002, 5).

5.3. Knowledge 3. Group attitude, human-landscape relationship

(14)*'You are pressing us economically and financially, forcing us to sell the lands that our grandparents died for.'* (landowner)

(15)'*Do you want all the Romanians to leave? For whom should Romania remain preserved?'* (landowner)

These utterances refer to what the locals perceive to be the outsider's intrusion in their properties. The landowners signal what sociologists and cultural geographers name "geography of exclusion", which is defined as "monopolization of space and the relegation of weaker groups in society to less desirable environments" (Sibley 1995, IX). Germic (2001), also cited by Timms (2008), explains the role of Yellowstone natural park in the "manufacturing of the geography of exclusion" by removing people from their land. He describes the way "people who lived in the area of the park were either killed or interned elsewhere attendant to the park's establishment" (Germic 2001, 9).

Insiders, the landowners, picture landscape as a system, as "a dynamic equilibrium of interacting processes and man is part of these systems" (Meinig 1979, 38). This is one important issue that those involved in the creation of the park should take account of.

FCC also takes the role of an insider in expressing their relationship with the country, Romania. It is now their turn to feel geographically excluded (Sibley 1995).

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(16)'*I am from Austria. This seems to be my mistake. Because I have lived here for 25 years and I do not feel a foreigner at all*.' (Austrian FCC member)

(17)'*I love this country more than you can imagine. And I have fought for this country internationally more than you can imagine*.' (Romanian FCC member)

The view of landscape through the eyes of FCC "evokes reverence for nature, a deeply felt concern for the earth as habitat, and a conviction that we have the scientific ability to right these wrongs (Meinig 1979, 40). This is an important issue that those living in the Fagaras Mountains should take account of.

I have tried to investigate what Foucault (1972, 201) names "the space in which the subject may take up a position and speak of the objects with which he deals in his discourse". Specifically, I have looked at some social and cultural aspects that define the knowledge around the making of the Fagaras Mountains natural park and the positions taken by the two agents of knowledge, i.e. landowners and "*Nostra Silva"*, one the one hand, and "*Conservation Carpathia"*, on the other hand.

5. Conclusions

Orave's (1984) study on controversy around the construction of a dam in Hetch Hetchy Valley between the conservationists, who supported the utilitarian principle, and the preservationists, who supported the naturalistic principle is regarded as one of the first papers on environmental communication (Milstein 2009). The formation of natural parks has been on the agenda of researchers as well, but more within a geographical, cultural or ecological frame of reference. In this paper I have addressed the debates around the making of natural parks from a semiotic perspective. I have encompassed two research strands, i.e. cultural geography and semiotics, and I engaged two thinkers, namely D.W. Meinig and Roland Barthes to fulfill my aim. I have also encompassed socio-cultural and cognitive perspectives in order to support the idea that knowledge is a goal-oriented activity (Billet 1998; Scribner 1985)

I succeeded in gaining insight into the meanings revealed in a particular communicative event. I also managed to track the formation of knowledge within the boundaries of the context defined by the meeting between the Foundation "*Conservation Carpathia*" (FCC) and the landowners from Fagaras region, (represented by either the mayors of villages situated in the area of Fagaras Mountains or "*Nostra Silva"*, the Romanian association of forests and pastures owners). The analysis is heuristic, it opens questions, but also provides answers, which may be a step forward for the two groupings involved in the fervent debates around the making of the Fagaras Mountains Natural Park.

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What I have found so far:

1. Non-epistemic communities, that is to say contrasting micro-cultures, are hard to handle. This is the reason why we have to allow an in-depth analysis for each epistemic community in order to understand their position as agents of knowledge and the formation of their discourses.

2. Knowledge is formed as a communicative event progresses. A lot of knowledge is triggered by the ongoing events, by the on-the-spot sparks, usually emotionally produced.

FCC representative: '*I see you look at us as your enemies*'
Local landowners: '*You are indeed*.'
FCC representative: '*We are not bad-intentioned. We don't want to fall on you, the landowners*'
Landowner: '*But you already have'*.

These *sparks* inform us on people's emotions, uncertainties or anxieties so that we could find ways to work them out.

3. Communication professionals need to get the clues from the perspectives on landscape and socio-cultural knowledge so that they may create new communication products that might mediate the relationship between the Foundation "*Conservation Carpathia*" and the landowners.

4. Separation of humans and nature traditionally marked the formation of American natural parks. I believe FCC should deal with this problem that has perpetuated over the time all over the world. When a natural park is due to be created, local inhabitants are afraid of being driven out from their land. FCC declares and initiates many actions to support local communities, but harder work is required. They admit this and want to find new ways to communicate:

FCC representative: '*Maybe we made mistakes because we didn't publicize earlier and we didn't get closer sooner. Yet, there are many issues that I ask you to listen to… please, listen to us*'.

5. Both "*Conservation Carpathia*" and the landowners (represented by mayors and "*Nostra Silva*" experience anxiety and feelings of uncertainty:

FCC representative: '*We are not bad-intentioned. We don't want to fall on you, the landowners*'.
Landowner: '*It is not the creation but the management of the park that is at stake here. The park's is due to fall into the hands of Conservation Carpathia because, apparently, we are incapable of doing this'*.

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Communication mediators may help both parties become aware of each others' anxieties and uncertainties and find strategies to improve dialogue around this fervent issue, i.e. the making of Fagaras Mountains natural park.

The triangular approach – cultural geography – semiotics – knowledge has been prodigious because I succeeded in supporting my thesis. I trust that this research may support a more constructive dialogue between the two combative parties on the issue of making the Fagaras mountains natural park. Moreover, both The Foundation "*Conservation Carpathia*" (FCC) and the landowners, supported by "*Nostra Silva"* (NS), the Romanian association of forests and pastures owners may better understand each other's views on the Fagaras Mountains natural park and move forward to find a common path to protect the beautiful landscape of Romania.

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