EASTERN EUROPE, BETWEEN POLITICS AND CULTURE

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Abstract: The article attempts to articulate a sort of dialectic of the ruling culturalist discourse that is currently cast on the East European region. The opening moment consists of tracking down the culturalization of the Eastern region's identity and its impact on the continental map, namely the gradual extension – as revealed by the crisis – of the presumed frontiers of the 'Balkan' culture. The second stage will shift the perspective from the continental level, with its opposing cultures of efficiency and competitiveness versus laziness, passivity and corruption, to the particular level of the Eastern region itself. Here, an account of the events surrounding the Romanian 'coup d'état' from the summer of 2012 will track down the effects of the culturalist discourse in the internal social dynamic of the region, and its gradual overlapping with the class divide. Finally, once the issue of class is touched, the very adventures of the culturalist discourse will take us back to the transnational level, where it is precisely the generalization and radicalization of the culturalist discourse that point towards its possible overcoming and dissolution in the structural issue of class struggle.

Keywords: Eastern Europe, Romania, culture, politics of crisis, discourse.

Perhaps not surprisingly, together with its historical and geopolitical relevance, Eastern Europe seems to have also lost much of its specificity. From all perspectives, the region is now nothing but a shadow of the menacing Other that it stood for during the Cold War: institutionally included – or on the path of being included – in the big Europe, economically on the right capitalist track, politically designed on the universal model of liberal democracies, and ideologically the most enthusiastic pupil of the ruling post-ideological discourse. Even in the academia, the still unquestioned division of labor – which requires that non-Westerners specialize in their own identity or region, because direct experience is, apparently, their only ability; while Western scholars, because of their exclusive ability to conceptualize, are allowed to freely roam the earth in the balloon of theory – makes it so that the normal relation appears in reversed form: it is no longer the crucial relevance of the topic that requires scores of specialized scholars; it is rather the constant production of scholars coming from the region that seems to require inventing a specific object of study for them.

And yet, some specific particularities still seem to characterize the region: even if politically and economically integrated in the European family, the region still lags behind, it is not 'catching up' with the West, nor showing any signs that it might do so in the near future. Overall, the much dreamed of western way of life has become a reality, in Eastern Europe, only for the select few, while for the rest of the population, the old bleak realities of state socialism regimes now appear rather as the distant dream. But how is one to name this specificity, this material difference that persists in spite of all the integration at the formal and institutional level? A name, an explanation had to be found for it: it was culture.

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The tactical advantages of deploying a culturalist reading are not difficult to guess: firstly, the culturalist explanation has all the appearances of a profound and insightful approach. It discards the merely historical and conjectural, pierces through the surface of the deceiving appearances, and reaches through to the underlying hidden essence. In this respect, there is no longer any opposition between culture and nature: culture is rather the contemporary, fragmentary mode of appearance of human nature, when there is no longer any universal human nature that could support a grand narrative of progress and emancipation. (Conversely, the ironic fate of the concept of human nature can be read in the contemporary notion of cultural differences: what was discarded in the idea of human nature was not its essentialist and unhistorical vein, but merely its progressive potential.) Secondly, the apologetic bias of the culturalist discourse is aptly couched in the critical form that this discourse shares even with Marxism: while both approaches share the same attempt to go beyond mere appearances, the way they do it stands in complete opposition. Marxism proceeds from the abstract and 'unhistorical' elements that roam at the surface (money, profit, labor) in order to relate them to the underlying structural causality pertaining to the concrete social relations; the culturalist approach starts instead from the concrete social structures, which are explained by means of their abstract and unhistorical cultural ingredients. Thirdly, the culturalist insight is not only profound and insightful, and even critical in its form of appearance, but also 'value-free' and allegedly resisting moralization: if it certainly passes judgments and evaluations, it surely does not assign guilt or responsibility. Things are just what they are – and there is not much one can do about it. Overall then, the culturalist approach, in explaining the historical and conjectural via the unhistorical and the unchanging, while also allowing for an impartial hierarchization without discrimination or blame, has proved to be the best ideological weapon in making some sense out of the present continental mess.

In what follows, I will attempt to articulate a sort of dialectic of this culturalist discourse and of its material effects. The opening moment consists of tracking down the culturalization of the Eastern region's identity and its impact on the continental map, namely the gradual extension – as revealed by the crisis – of the presumed frontiers of the 'Balkan' culture. The second stage will shift the perspective from the continental level, with its opposing cultures of efficiency and competitiveness versus laziness, passivity and corruption, to the particular level of the Eastern region itself. Here, an account of the events surrounding the Romanian 'coup d'état' from the summer of 2012 will track down the effects of the culturalist discourse in the internal social dynamic of the region, and its gradual overlapping with the class divide. Finally, once the issue of class is touched, the very adventures of the culturalist discourse will take us back to the transnational level, where it is precisely the generalization and radicalization of the culturalist discourse that point towards its possible overcoming and dissolution in the structural issue of class struggle. Hence, at least at the formal level, the present approach is as Hegelian as it gets: from the general, continental level, to the particular, regional moment, and ending with the 'universal', structural and transnational apotheosis.

Let us then start from the beginning. The end of the Cold War and the European integration of the Eastern region have relegated it from the prestigious statute of a political and historical radical Other, to that of a mere cultural oddity. The old classification of the

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three worlds has been thoroughly rearranged. As Pletsch elegantly synthesized it (quoted in Chari and Verdery, 18), it used to be that the division between the first and the second world had to do with the issue of freedom, whereas both worlds enjoyed, more or less, the same degree of modernity; while the opposition between the first and the third world was the opposition between modernity and tradition. Now these two oppositions seem to be conflated in the identity of the Eastern region: the reason why Eastern Europe lags behind the West in terms of freedom is because it lags behind in terms of modernity. After 1989, instead of progressing towards more freedom, on the basis of its already modern social structure, Eastern Europe seems to have been regressing towards pre-modernity (which is not that inaccurate, considering the effects of the economic integration of the region – in this respect, Andre Gunder Frank's early prediction of the inevitable 'Third World-ization' of the region has proved to be right). The political and economical differences are thus recast as cultural differences. Accordingly, Eastern Europe is characterized by an innate culture of unfreedom, which explains why, in spite of the excellent advices received from the West, and even in spite of the enthusiastic embrace of the shock therapy of liberal democracy that the local population certainly displayed, the integration did not succeed as it should have. A culture of unfreedom, or better still, a culture of corruption still prevails: not the occasional free rider kind of corruption, always present in all modern societies, but a sort of massive, pervasive and irreducible culture of corruption. Through this notion of corruption, the culturalization of the region's differences is complete, and its mystification – absolute. Corruption, and even more so when it is elevated to the level of a regional culture, is the conceptual device by means of which the structural and historical specificity of Eastern Europe is explained as un-explainable, as the natural and unhistorical identity of the region[1]. Here, the two axes of the good old three world scheme intersect: we have unfreedom because we don't have modernity; we don't have modernity because we have unfreedom. Corruption explains everything.

However, this cultural turn in the discourse on the region is not an isolated phenomenon. There is a strong culturalist vein in all the recent official discourse of the European elites. And this doesn't have to do only with the fact that, undoubtedly, we are living in one of the most conservative and reactionary historical periods of the last centuries; it also has to do with the contemporary economic crisis and the utter failure of the policies implemented in order to overcome it. In such times of crisis, culture always comes at the rescue. This is what explains the shift from a discourse and set of policies that conceived of the European integration merely in institutionalist or procedural terms, to an almost anthropological obsession with the cultural resistance of the region to be integrated.[2] Formerly, it was thought that a ready-made set of formal rules and a minimalist democratic design would eventually end up by generating their own adequate democratic content, thus

[1] As K.E. Fleming rightly pointed out, "Hermann Keyserling's wry observation, "If the Balkans did not exist, it would be necessary to invent them," was perhaps understated. Even though the Balkans do exist, they must be invented anyway. Simultaneously and tautologically, then, the Balkans are both fully known and wholly unknowable" ("Orientalism, the Balkans, and Balkan historiography", *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 105, no. 4 (Oct. 2000), p. 1219).

[2] See the already consistent bibliography produced by this anthropologic turn: Elizabeth C. Dunn, *Privatizing Poland: Baby Food, Big Business, and the Remaking of Labor*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004; Caroline Humphrey, *The Unmaking of Soviet Life: Everyday Economies after Socialism*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002; Ruth Ellen Mandel and Caroline Humphrey, *Markets and Moralities: Ethnographies of Postsocialism*, Oxford, New York: Berg, 2002.

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gradually changing the regional culture into a genuine civic culture of freedom and responsibility. Nowadays, this belief in the material efficacy of the democratic formal framework is abandoned, and it is argued that, on the contrary, the undemocratic culture of corruption that pervades the region is not only untouched by the European acquis communautaire, but that it even manages to corrupt the democratic design that was so magnanimously exported to the Eastern area. If there is one thing we are supposed to learn from the European crisis – the continental elites seem to say – it is not that the political economy of the EU was wrong from the beginning, increasing the internal inequalities and relegating the Eastern regions merely to the statute of plantation economies; it is, perhaps, that the dream of integration was too naïve, since it did not pay sufficient attention to the continental cultural differences. These local cultures have proved to be stronger than the project of neoliberal integration: instead of being reduced to their proper place and dimension, as mere folkloric relics for the tourists' amusement, they have swept through politics and economy and corrupted even the best intentions. In one of the local legends of transition, it is said that the new Korean owners of a Romanian auto factory, after trying in vain to fight the corruption of their employees – whose class struggle took the path it usually took in communism, expressing itself in the repeated thefts from the factory's plants and in the shady quality of the products (Derluguian, 119-120) –, finally gave up and joined the race towards the bankruptcy of the factory.

But this, apparently, is no longer specific only to the Eastern Europe. The same culturalist explanation of the failures of the anti-crisis policies is mobilized in relation to Southern Europe[3]. Actually, as long as the Eastern countries did not step out of the neoliberal line, with Orban's attack on the autonomy of the Hungarian Central Bank, or the alleged Romanian coup d'état in the summer of 2012 (more on this below), their enthusiasm in adopting the harshest austerity measures was given as an example to the more reluctant Southern states. In this case, Eastern Europe was playing again the role of promising 'New Europe' in which it has been previously cast by Ronald Rumsfeld, leading and showing the way to the more inert 'Old Europe'. In some respects, Eastern Europe still plays this role – see, for example, the map of the European countries' votes on the issue of granting Palestine UN membership. But for what concerns the EU led politics of austerity, things do not run so smoothly anymore in the East: see the large protests that have swept through Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria in the last two years. And in this almost incendiary context, culture is summoned back as the ultimate explanation. When numbers and ratings are tumbling down, unstoppably and yet incomprehensibly, metaphors of cultural insight at least provide the appearance of some sense. When Merkel, Sarkozi and Cameron all proclaimed the death of multiculturalism, this was not because the success of integration has made cultural differences irrelevant, but on the contrary, because cultural differences appear now as insurmountable. The enthusiastic neoliberalism that pushed through the effort of European integration is taking now a hit from the crisis, and retreats into a more skeptical conservatism, for which cultural

[3] Unfortunately, this culturalist explanation of the continental economic divisions makes it so that even the resistance to the EU's economic policies is couched in cultural terms, even in the works of some of the best contemporary critical theorists – see Agamben's recommendation that the solution lies in replacing the hegemonic German culture with the Latin one ("The Latin Empire Should Strike Back", http://www.presseurop.eu/en/content/article/3593961-latin-empire-should-strike-back).

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differences are all that matter. But this conservative withdrawal is merely a tactical retreat for a more efficient offensive: the neoliberal project is not abandoned, it is merely strengthened with a cultural awareness. In this new context, the East of Europe, which until the crisis was in danger of falling into irrelevance, just as much as it was supposed to fall in line with the Western normalcy, assumes a new importance. Its cultural pedigree, which until recently was being viewed as merely a secondary detail, a local charm incapable of hindering the European integration, is reified again and singled out as the main obstacle of the Western system's encounter with its ideal image: the Balkanic corruption and laziness, the Hungarian fascist authoritarianism, the Romanian mendacity, even when true, are falsified in the Western discourse as just as many causes of its own capitalist crisis. That this cultural identity is now in danger of engulfing even the failing Southern States – which, perhaps not incidentally, have changed their titulature from the moralizing 'PIGS' to the more anthropological 'GIPSI' – is nothing but a proof of its contagious nature. The Evil empire might be dead, but its cultural pedigree of corruption and unfreedom is still advancing westwards, in more insidious and surreptitious forms than ever.

Thus, on the one hand, the contemporary European crisis has presumably revealed the latent cultural divisions traversing the continent. The European culture of efficient and responsible democracy splits the continent into phonies and genuine Europeans, with the same acuity and cold objectivity as the recurrent diagnostics of the rating agencies. In this context, it is no coincidence that even the most sophisticated and technical accounts of the present economic crisis seem to point towards a cultural explanation: the permanent surpluses of the German economy are allegedly related to the superior efficiency and productivity of the German workers[4]. But efficiency and productivity are just as much economic notions as they are cultural and moral categories. The solution to the crisis is, then, not so much bailing out the failing peripheral states – after all, the various experiences in Greece, Portugal or Spain have already made that clear: all this amounts to is 'sending the good money after the bad' –, but rather a necessary infusion of some 'protestant spirit of capitalism' in the periphery. In the same way in which, for Adorno, radical materialism discovers theology at its closing point, the final lesson of contemporary political economy, in spite of all its opacity in terms of intuitive meaning, seems to be a reappraisal of the simplest morality and of the most reified cultural clichés[5]. In this context, Eastern Europe, or, under its more terrifying name, the Balkans, appear to haunt more and more parts of the old continent, revealing their divergence from the European cultural ideal. Or, if we are to put it perhaps a little better, and trace this

[4] As Lapavitsas pertinently deconstructed this cultural construction, the reason for Germany's surpluses and higher competitiveness is not the moral superiority of the German workers, their dedication and workaholism, but the pressure and squeezing of their wages (Lapavitsas et al., *Crisis in the Eurozone*, London & New York: Verso, 2012). Hence, the cultural opposition between Germany and Greece conceals in fact a particular dynamic of class struggle – more on this in the closing paragraphs of the article.

[5] The moralizing intentions and culturalist bias of the official political economy of the EU obviously lead to contradictory policies. See, for example, EU's recommendation to Greece that it should increase the legal limit to the working hours: this move, which effectively increases the unemployment rate, thus amplifying one of the problems it was supposed to solve, is nevertheless legitimized on the basis of its culturalist underlying idea, according to which the problem with the Greeks is that they are too lazy and do not work enough. For an extremely relevant discussion of the moralizing trend in the contemporary discourse of economics, see Fourcade et al., "Discussion Forum: Moral categories in the financial crisis", *Socio-Economic Review* (2013), 11, 601–627, especially Wolfgang Streeck's piece.

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dynamic exchange of culturizing glances at the continental level, one could say that, in this splitting of the continent along cultural lines, Eastern Europe had a much bigger contribution than one might have expected: after all, the enthusiasm for the good old idea of Europe was resurrected from its neoliberal depression precisely by the 'glorious revolutions' of 1989 and by the passion for freedom expressed by the ex-communist societies (Buden, Zizek). That nowadays this idea of Europe is divorced from the very people that brought it back to life only proves that history doesn't keep track of copyrights. In any case, the external, spatial cultural division of the continent, between true European societies (outperforming everybody in terms of productivity and democracy) and shaky middle formations (be it Mediterranean or Balkan) is, from this perspective, a projection of the internal, temporal division in Eastern Europe, between the European ideal that it brought back to life in 1989, and the reality to which Western Europe relegated it afterwards. The presumed path of transition from Eastern Europe to proper Europe has turned into the ever growing divergence between Eastern Europe's noble ideal of Europe and Europe's ever more skeptical idea of its Eastern region.

Let us now shift our attention from the continental plane to the regional one, and trace down the effects of this culturalist discourse on the social dynamic of the Eastern countries. In the internalization of the culturalist discourse, the external, continental opposition between different degrees of European culture is projected onto the class divisions of the Eastern societies. In brief, this culturalizing discourse produces a societal split in Eastern Europe, whereby it covers the political issues and the economic inequalities with a cultural narrative which in turn conceals the former and legitimizes their effects. Perhaps a short report of the events surrounding the alleged Romanian coup d'état from the summer of 2012 will highlight better the mechanism of this culturalizing discourse. It all started with the anti-austerity protests in January and February 2012, which were sparked by the declared plan of the presidency to privatize the emergency service – not only the plan per se, but also the brutality with which the president dismissed the head of the emergency service live on national television, for having expressed doubts about the opportunity of this plan, intensified the rage of the protesters. The political effect of the one month long protests was the change of government, after numerous desertions in the parliament deeply affected the strength of the ruling party. The new government, consisting of members of the former opposition (the USL - Social Liberal Union) did not waste time once in power: in no time at all, they removed various heads from the high ranks of the administration (the presidents of both houses of the parliament, but also such figures as the People's Lawyer or the director of the Romanian Cultural Institute – all known for their loyalty to the president) and proceeded towards the removal of the president: first by suspending him, for having breached the Constitution, and then by calling for a referendum, as required by law. The legal validity of these moves has been a subject of heated debate – the president's side blaming the other of an authentic coup d'état, the other side claiming that their actions did not breach the legal frame, and that if they did indeed seem hasty and impulsive, it was because the extreme situation required this kind of actions. The fact is that these actions were always forcing a bit the letter of the law – however, they were perfectly in line with the actions taken by president Băsescu when he came to power: it has become a tradition in Romania to change all the heads of the administration once a new party comes to power. In this fiery context, the EU intervened: numerous voices, from the political elite (Barroso to Merkel) up to the leading opinion

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makers in the European journals, quickly lumped together the Romanian political developments with the authoritarian and anti-democratic trend of Viktor Orban (guilty, in the eyes of the EU, mostly for having abolished the autonomy of the Central Bank), and blamed the rampant culture of greed and corruption affecting Romanian politics. The vehemence of the EU's intrusion was a surprise for almost anybody following the events from inside the country. No argument was spared, from the culturalizing claim that the events clearly show the lack of democratic and civic spirit in the region, to the more technical one that these developments will definitely end up by scarring the markets and the investors. The external, democratizing pressure paid its price and led to the imposition of a quorum of 50% for the referendum. It was clear for everybody that this quorum is almost impossible to reach, considering not only the usual low political participation of the Romanians, but also the holiday context. The president's strategy radically changed once the imposition of the quorum was achieved: while previously boasting that he would take the fight and win the democratic battle on the field, once the quorum was imposed, he advised his supporters to stay at home. To complicate matters even further, the census of the population, which was completed almost one year before, did not yet managed to come up with the results. Thus, the referendum had to go on with non-actualized data from several years before, even though everybody knew the actual population was considerably less, due to massive emigration. In this context, the result of the referendum was politically crystal clear, yet legally irrelevant: almost 90% voting for the removal of the president, with a turnout much bigger than expected, yet missing the quorum by few percents. Thus, the president returned to power, even though 7 million people voted against him, while only 5 million elected him three years before. Democracy was restored and the markets allegedly calmed down. The later publication of the census results in the summer of 2013 further embittered this democratic pill, by showing that the quorum for the referendum has been actually reached.

What interests us here is not only the culturalist discourse surrounding these events, but also its social and political efficacy. In no time at all, the social and political issues have been translated into a sort of war of civilizations and cultures: the thrust for political power of the opposition and the social anti-austerity agenda of the protesters have been read, both by the president's camp and by the European leadership, as a clash between a very feeble – in terms of support – yet courageous drive towards democracy, personalized by president Băsescu, and a rampant culture of corruption, authoritarianism and populism. To be sure, this cultural reading did not come out of clear blue sky: the very austerity measures – large-scale privatizations, drastic wage cuts in the public sector, etc. – have been, from the beginning, couched in cultural and civilizational terms, as a painful but necessary attempt to reform and modernize the state. The economic crisis was thus merely a fortunate pretext for this necessary Europeanization of the country. In this context, the anti-austerity protests and then, later, the attempt to oust the president have been presented as a manifestation of society's resistance to this necessary and civilizing effort, as proof of its still underlining culture of passivity and corruption. Extremely relevant in the mechanism of this cultural reading is the mutual reinforcing and exchange of confirming glances between the European leaders and opinion makers, and the local, corresponding discourse. Whenever it wanted a further confirmation of the antidemocratic, populist and authoritarian bias of the opposition, the president's camp simply pointed to the allegedly impartial reading of the whole situation in

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various major European newspapers. However, the authors of these articles (in *Le Monde*, *FAZ*, *Spiegel*) were usually Romanian correspondents who, as any quick glance at their texts would make clear, were either misinformed, biased or plain stupid. Nevertheless, the fact that their voice was coming from Europe put their comments beyond any doubt, and further put to shame the opposition's attempt. The fact that the European establishment, through its political leadership and opinion makers, was so heavily involved in – or as they put it, 'concerned' by – the internal developments further highlighted the cultural and civilizational stakes of the political battle, by turning the whole issue into a pro or against Europe and democracy. On the other hand, the president's political and ideological strategy fitted perfectly with this kind of reading. As a matter of fact, from the very beginning of his terms in office, the president's strategy focused not so much on building his electoral base and mechanisms (he ended up by dumping his own party), but rather on occupying those key places of power that are beyond the electoral game – namely the judiciary apparatus, from the Constitutional Court, to the Anti-Corruption National Department up to the magistrates' ranks. Thus, his power was the power of justice and integrity, hence any attack on it would be read as an affront to justice and proof of corruption. From this position, even the electoral game could pass as undemocratic, when its results would threaten to change the established justice system. This image of a more and more encircled president, who has only justice on his side, clearly touched the sensibility of the European leaders, which was anyway already informed by its cultural stereotypes. It is only in this way that one can explain the utter naivety of such political leaders as Merkel or Barroso, who seemed to assume that once in power, the opposition would actually change the austerity drive, or at least sweeten it a bit – as indeed it claimed. Obviously, this belief has been contradicted by every political decision that the former opposition took once it occupied the government.

The lasting effects of these political developments and, more importantly, of their phrasing in cultural terms, have been a massive increase in euro-skepticism in Romanian society – a society that until recently was one of the performers in terms of euro-enthusiasm. Up until now, the overwhelming misery (briefly alleviated only for a few years before the crisis, thanks to the credit boom) was sold out to the public as being caused not by the integration into the European structures and global capitalism, but, on the contrary, by the local resistance and deviation from this predetermined path: that is, by the local culture of corruption. Hence, the solution to the devastating effects of global and continental integration was more integration, more liberalizing reforms, more privatizations, more flexibility. This pill was not so difficult to swallow by a society that, like all the other countries in the region, but in a much more aggressive way, due to Ceausescu's own way of dealing with the crisis of external debt (Ban), has been used to be treated with uninterrupted austerity every since the early 80's. However, the performance of the EU's leadership in the context of the referendum, its obvious bias and patronizing contempt for the anti-austerity message of the population has finally turned things around. The culturalizing and patronizing official discourse eventually produced its perverse effects: if any demand for some kind of social and economic justice is deemed anti-European, then anti-Europeanism must be the way to reach those social desiderata. Thus, for most of the population, Europe is no longer associated with democracy, which eventually has to lead to some kind of prosperity. It appears, instead, more and more as the very obstacle to such goals. In this way, the very radicalization and crystallization of the

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culturalist approach has led it to coincide with the class oppositions traversing Romanian society. The cultural clash at the level of discourse and policies is, now more than ever, the distorted mode of appearance of the underlying class struggle. Thus, even though the culturalist reading is utterly mystifying, the opposing social camps that it identifies are actually correct[6].

On the one hand, we have the winners of transition, which roughly correspond to what Eyal, Szelenyi, and Townsley have labeled *Bildungsburgertum*, i.e. the intellectual and technocratic strata united in the camp of 'civil society'. Their social status, economic positions, and political ideology are all fused together in the cultural Europeanist mission and identity that they assume. If there were still any doubts, the contemporary economic crisis has functioned at least as a catalyst towards the clarification of their mission and identity: if in the beginning the discourse of 'civil society' could pass as an ambiguous third way, between capitalism and state socialism, the crisis has made it clear that the necessary culture of an active civil society translates economically into pure monetarism and austerity. This slippage was, after all, already potentially present in the DNA of the anti-political and anti-communist movement of 'civil society'. As Eyal, Szelenyi and Townsley rightly point out: "The political dimension of the monetarist ideology has strong elective affinities with the critique of state socialism developed by the dissidents: the ideology of 'civil society'. This critique problematizes responsibility and initiative in much the same way that utopian monetarism aims to inculcate them through financial discipline" (91). However, it was the current economic crisis and the austerity measures that finally drove this point home: the discourse of 'civil society' revealed its apologetic strain and class bias, which becomes efficient precisely by means of the cultural mystification that it operates. It used to be that the reasoning of the civil society proponents would pass from the necessary political liberties to their necessary material base, the economic freedoms. Nowadays, the path is reversed: as a leading economist at the Romanian National Bank argued in the context of the referendum, in times of crisis, the political freedom – which technically allows for the social grievances of the population to be politically expressed and, eventually, addressed – runs the risk of falling into populism and thus eroding the economic freedom (Croitoru)[7]. Which means that, in times of crisis, even the

[6] Again, the cultural mystification of the class divide did not come out of clear blue sky. The primal scene of the Romanian nascent democracy was the infamous street battles in June 1990, opposing the anti-communist intellectuals, who were protesting the staying in power of the old communist nomenklatura and its reluctance to modernize and Europeanize the state, and the miners, who intervened in order to defend the elected government, but also the rights and workplaces they have enjoyed under socialism. Thus, the social conflict has been couched in cultural terms from the very beginning, as a conflict between the European and democratic culture of the enlightened middle class, and the corrupted culture of passivity and collectivism of the working class. The intellectuals took a beating in 1990. But everything since then, and especially the austerity measures implemented lately, have been seen by them as a well deserved vengeance over their uncivilized opponents, and as a necessary lesson on the virtues of liberal individualism and social Darwinism.

[7] On the other hand, the very same chief economist argued, in a different 'study', that one can prove the market-prone and business-oriented nature of the Romanian people – hence, its promising, positive potential – simply by looking at the reserve of national ancestral proverbs. Again, economy could be rescued by a sort of cultural revival of the already present national heritage.

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culture of democracy can become a dangerous culture of corruption[8]. The alliance of the upper strata of the technocratic milieus with the public intellectuals has never been stronger: while the former complain about the corrupting and dangerous effects of political democracy, the latter do the cultural mystification, and legitimate the austerity measures as a necessary anti-communist, Europeanist and civilizing effort. In this cultural mystification that sustains its concrete, social and political efficiency, the discourse of civil society finally shows its real face, as capitalism's project of perpetual peace, the class dream of a society without classes. Unfortunately, of course, sometimes perpetual social peace needs an economic total war, and the accomplishment of the civil society without classes, comprised only of petit bourgeois responsible and efficient individuals, stumbles on the resistance of the very society it wants to dissolve. But that is just the burden of civilization.

On the other side of the class divide, the effects of the culturalizing hegemonic discourse already show their dangerous potential. After all, the main peril with the culturalist discourse is not that it is wrong and mystifying, but that, by means of its own material effects, it might become true. Since the EU is seen as the main responsible for the country's social misery – in large part, as we have seen, thanks to the role it played in the referendum – the grievances of the population are more and more couched in anti-colonialist and nationalist terms. Hence, instead of an opposition to capitalism and to its more and more obvious dynamic, which relegates the country to the statute of a regional periphery based on an economy of extraction and largely dependent on the influx of foreign capital, we get an opposition that lumps together the critique of EU and Europeanism together with the critique of modernity, technology or civil rights for minorities, which are seen as the immediate cultural and civilizational supplements of the colonizing process. The obvious trade-off practiced by the EU, for example in sweetening the austerity pill with the granting of rights for the sexual minorities, clearly further strengthens this kind of reading. Even on the timid and barely nascent local left, the most vocal camps advocate either a necessary divorce from modernity and return to the traditions of communal farming (vaguely in line with the *décroissance* movement), or a necessary alliance with the religious communities and the traditional resistance to modernity of the Orthodox Church – even if it is a widely known fact that the Romanian Orthodox Church has no social doctrine whatsoever and has been accommodating to any kind of political regime, be it socialist or capitalist. Where the economic crisis had at least the welcomed effect of crystallizing and revealing the underlying capitalist dynamic, the cultural discourse comes at the rescue and shifts the blame from capitalism to homosexuals, immigrants, modern technology or the corrupted and sold-out elite. Thus, in its generalization and radicalization, the culturalist reading combines the highest social accuracy and transparency with the uttermost opacity and mystification: class struggle is finally acknowledged as a menacing haunting specter in the official political discourse; yet its political potential is curtailed precisely by its mystification in cultural terms.

[8] Not incidentally, a similar position and recommendation has been expressed by the financial capital, through the voice of Morgan Stanley, in relation to Southern Europe: the economic problems of the Southern countries are actually political problems, rooted in the excess of democracy and anti-fascism that, for historical reasons, has been inscribed in their Constitutions (http://www.constantinereport.com/jp-morgan-to-eurozone-periphery-get-rid-of-your-pinko-anti-fascist-constitutions/).

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But perhaps this very development, this generalization and crystallization of the culturalist discourse could point the way towards its possible overcoming. Once the cultural issue no longer translates into a neat opposition between the undemocratic culture of Eastern Europe (now contaminating also Southern Europe) and the democratic culture of the West, once it corresponds to the very class divide, it transcends the regional oppositions and specificities and cuts through all European societies. In this context, Eastern Europe – as a specific region – is again dissolved into a larger entity; but it is no longer the great European family or the global neoliberal project; instead, it stands for the cultural form of appearance of the structural and transnational issue of class struggle. We are no longer dealing with the culturalization of a region, but with the culturalization of class. There are already signs that this cultural war no longer opposes the West to the East, but is being imported even in the once booming and performing Western societies. Even in the West, the increasing pressure on wages and social rights, the wave of privatizations and flexibilizations are sold to their victims as a necessary civilizational effort, as a painful but mandatory divorce from the inertias of the old and rusty social-democratic Europe. You do not want to become like the Greeks, nor do you want to be outbid by the Chinese competitiveness – hence, for the sake of tomorrow, give up your social rights today. This generalization and radicalization of the culturalist discourse thus paradoxically ends up by creating or reinventing a sort of transnational working class culture in the very act of demonizing it, and in the absence of any internationalist working class consciousness. Whether the bearers of this demonized culture will become conscious of their transnational objective alliance, whether this recreation of the working class culture will lead to a proper international class consciousness and consequent mobilization is hard to tell. What is certain is that this culturalizing approach, even in its radicalized and internationalized form, separates just as much as it unites, mystifies just as much as it illuminates. Its overcoming and re-translation into the structural, historical and transnational issue of class struggle – towards which it is actually already pointing – would be a necessary first step.

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