

## MAKING HISTORY IN POST-SOCIALIST ROMANIA: CONTRASTING MEDIA AND CULTURAL STRATEGIES

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The paper focuses on a special aspect of the pragmatics of contemporary Romanian history making: on myth-making, foregrounding mostly the boundary defining-characteristics of the historical myths at issue. The paper will view historical myth making as a cultural phenomenon. In an attempt to survey the micro- and the macro-, the local and the national level of Romanian myth making, the article will start off from a case-study of a 1992 incident that occurred in Cluj, then passes on another case-study, but on a national level. The analysis of the first major post-socialist Romanian history textbook debate will use some of the results of the interim conclusions of the first case-study so as to picture a possible global explanation for a better understanding of Romanian historical myth-making as a post-socialist phenomenon.

*"We are the masters of this land"*<sup>1</sup>

On November 24, 1992, Hungarian citizens reported to one of the local newspapers that in Cluj, one of the major cities of Romania inhabited mostly by Romanians, Hungarians and Roma people, the mayor and the local representatives of the Romanian government plan to commemorate the national holiday by placing an inscription on the

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<sup>1</sup> The quotation is part of a very popular Romanian folk song, sang also before and after 1989 mostly in commemorative contexts. According to its refrain: "We are Romanians, we are Romanians / We are the masters of this land" (in original: "Noi suntem români, noi suntem români, / Noi suntem pe acest pamant stapâni.").

statue of King Matthias. The statue, a historic monument, the work of art of János Fadrusz, was erected in 1902 during the Austro-Hungarian government, and since it has a certain symbolic value for the Hungarian ethnic community, the plan immediately resulted in several types of protests, even after the inscription was placed on the statue.<sup>1</sup> In the following I will try to analyze the events using historical myths as the basis and focal point of the discussion.

The occasions when and where historical myths are employed are not contingent and neutral regarding their (actual / on-the-spot) meaning: the occasion of their employment thus can be considered a meaningful aspect of the pragmatics of historical myths. It is not contingent that Gheorghe Funar and the party (and the cultural foundation) backing him up (then The Party of the Romanian Unity, respectively The Romanian Homeland Cultural Foundation) has chosen the 1<sup>st</sup> of December, the Romanian national holiday to place the inscription on the statue. The local organizers of the commemorative acts also underlined the double symbolic element underlying the holiday in the city of Cluj: according to them, since on the 1<sup>st</sup> of December Stephen the Great won over the Hungarian King Matthias, the two occurrences, that of the 1918 Union and that of the 1467 victory are intimately linked and should be treated as such.<sup>2</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> The figure represented, King Matthias, is itself controversial in XIX-XX<sup>th</sup>-century Romanian historiography: he is reckoned to be descended from a Romanian family and thus to be directly linked to the Romanians themselves. On the other hand the statue itself had the Hungarian national symbols on it, these being removed in 1918, after the unification of Basarabia, Bucovina, Transylvania, Banat, Crişana and Maramureş and also with the Romanian 'Regat'. The Hungarian inscription "Mátyás király" (King Matthias) was replaced with a Romanian one ("Matei Corvinul"), and in 1932 a new text was placed on the statue, containing a quotation according to which: "Triumphant everywhere, defeated only at Baia by his own people when he tried to conquer the invincible Moldova." The quotation from Nicolae Iorga, a contested Romanian historian of the first part of the XX<sup>th</sup> century appropriates and ethnicizes the figure of the king, considering it along another controversial event that has divided Romanian and Hungarian historians: whether the battle (1467) between Stephen the Great and King Matthias was won by the former or the latter. The controversial inscription referring to the controversial event and the controversial descent of the ethnically problematic king was now to be placed again on the statue.

<sup>2</sup> For this argument, see, for instance: 'Ziua națională a României', *Adevărul de Cluj*, December 1, 1992, no.767, 3.

endeavour to join the two symbolic acts, and thus to incorporate the new (the uncertain and unfitting) element into the framework of the commemorative ritual can easily be noticed in the communiqués announcing the program of the commemorations: "The celebrations of the National Day of Romania will begin at ten o'clock in front of the statue of Mihai the Valiant [in the Mihai the Valiant Square] with a wreath-laying ceremony. It is going to continue on the Liberty Square [the centre of Cluj] with the unveiling of an inscription inspired by Nicolae Iorga on *Matei Corvin's* statue, respectively with a wreath-laying ceremony at the statue of Lupa Capitolina [i.e. the replica of the famous Roman sculpture of Romulus and Remus]."<sup>1</sup> The statue representing King Matthias and some of his comrades is included within an already value-loaded structure: Romulus and Remus alluding to the alleged Roman origin of the Romanians and Mihai the Valiant standing – in the very pragmatics of the respective commemorative act – for all the Romanian heroes who died or lived for the Romanian nation.<sup>2</sup> In this complex framework that encompasses the myth of antiquity into that of being *sui generis*, the figure of King Matthias is reinterpreted, the new inscription and its constructed history (with the quotation from the oeuvre of one of the most important – but also a highly controversial – Romanian historiographers) makes the instability of the appropriation and transition more easy and credible. So the context of the historical myth of *being sui generis* favours the embedding of an uncertain element into a certain historic and commemorative structure, ascribing from the meaning of the latter to that of the former.

The choice of the Romanian national holiday, a rather political than a neutral type of holiday<sup>3</sup>, politicizes every segment of the

<sup>1</sup> Funar, Gheorghe, 'Comunicat', *Adevărul de Cluj*, November 28–30., 1992, no. 766., 1.

<sup>2</sup> "In the Mihai the Valiant Square the wreath-laying commenced in honour of the heroes of the nation [...] The Holy Father Irineau Bistrițeanu celebrated an extraordinary mass in honour of all the heroes who died for the ancient land." Serghif, Dorin, '1 Decembrie: a fi român', *Adevărul de Cluj*, December 2, 1992., 1.

<sup>3</sup> December 1 is not a neutral, civilian type of national holiday since it foregrounds the political act of the beginning of a unitary Romanian state, signaling the importance of the 1918 political events. Its political and boundary-making character is emphasized by the fact that it not only includes, but also excludes and divides, since for the

commemorations. On the other hand the purpose of the national holiday itself is to magnify the otherwise insignificant elements to the level of the national<sup>1</sup>, respectively it prescribes for the individual a certain type and certain number of possible attitudes towards the act of commemoration itself: For instance, every criticism regarding the national holiday itself or those participating at it in the prescribed manner, and every misbehavior according to the norms of commemoration is naturally perceived in a much more negative way than it would be interpreted outside the commemorative framework. So, the commemorative situation itself frames every segment within it, be it a more or less recent or old element, establishes the norms with the help of which also the more recent elements will be interpreted, respectively foregrounds a certain set of possible and canonic meanings that can be attached to the new elements.

The embedding of the new element into a Romanian national narrative that foregrounds the Roman mythical antecedents of the

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Hungarian ethnic minority it may evoke the end of the Austro-Hungarian (Dual) Monarchy. This argument has a rare and taboo character, but it is an existing argument. For instance, December 1, 1992 issue of the Romanian newspaper reports on a meeting of the Association for Interethnic Dialogue: "Szilágyi N. Sándor presented the meaning of the Great Unification for the Hungarian minority. He read an article written two years ago, considering it still valid. According to its text 'For the Hungarians December the 1<sup>st</sup> represents the nostalgia for the the Great Hungary.' 'The unification meant the end of our normal Hungarian being and our transformation into a minority of the Romanian society. [...] Nobody could ask us to become Romanians.' [...] The text ends in the hope that the 'Romanians' [sic] shouldn't expect the Hungarians to do the impossible and appeals to the Romanians for a mutual understanding and respect for each other's feelings." Costea, Rodica, "Semnificația zilei de 1 Decembrie pentru minoritatea maghiară", *Adevărul de Cluj*, December 1, 1992., no. 767., 3. For an earlier account on the problem, see: SZILÁGYI N. Sándor, *Reflexii la o aniversare*, 22, November 30., 1990.

According to the Romanian Iorgulescu Mircea the choice of the day of December 1, 1918 was "a grievous political error" since the national holiday should be a day of "coagulation and not division" and "for an important part of Romania December 1 remains the day when its status and condition took a radical change." Iorgulescu, Mircea, "Provocarea", *Dilema*, October 29–November 4., 1999., 4.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. in general: Turner, Victor, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors. Symbolic Action in Human Society*, Cornell U. P., Ithaca-London, 1974., 105; regarding specific cases: Rintman-Augustin, D., 'The Metamorphosis of Festivals in a Socialist Country', *Ethnologica Europaea*, XX., 1990.

nation, the claims of primevalness by positioning Mihai the Valiant as a new founder of the Romanian nation (certainly neglecting the dynastic and not language or ethnically based character of the province Mihai led, respectively the fundamentally divided and different character of the provinces of that time from modern Romania) and all these in the context of the 1918 Romanian Unification, make also the new figure, that of King Matthias, part of the narrative of a continuous founding<sup>1</sup> of the Romanian nation in which those who side with foreigners (like Matthias did according to the new interpretation conveyed by the inscription) will be defeated by their own fellow nationals. So, in the process of meaning assignment not only the existing framework (including different types of historical myths) attaches a special semantics to the new element (making it similar to the type of narrative and historical myths it is included in), but also the recent constituent produces an effect on it (though according to the logic of the system it is embedded into): it makes the narrative of continuous founding more consistent, less sketchy and offers a quasi negative example with didactic purposes: the defeat of King Matei from the Romanian family of the Corvins that sided with the Hungarians on the one hand, and the figure of the glorious Romanian king who was so brave that he even came to rule the Hungarians, too. Taking into account the afore-mentioned, these could serve as *partial* interpretative arguments to understand both the position of many Romanians (including that of the Romanian Government and Presidency<sup>2</sup>, respectively the local authorities, other than the mayor) and the power of placing the inscription. So, the intensity and actual semantics of the historical myths depends also on the occasion and on the temporal and spatial framework they are remembered and re-acted / re-constructed.

In the following I would like to focus on the intimate relationship between the appropriation of the symbolic space and the enactment of the myth of antiquity regarding both a national and a local space. The

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<sup>1</sup> Gellner, Ernst, *Nations and Nationalism*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1983.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, the nationalist type of discourse (anterior to the then approaching national elections) of president Ion Iliescu and of some of the political parties cannot be neglected, either.

events of late November and early December 1992 of Cluj viewed in the context of the events of the following years (events concerning the meaning assignment to the public space of the city) show an intimate connection and may be interpreted as different phases of a unique narrative, that of the enactment of the myth of antiquity through a kind of use of the public space. If we take a chronological order, the first thing that might occur to us is the circumstance that the endeavour to place the inscription on the statue coincided with an attempt to place Romanian flags on it: "Gheorghe Funar declared to our newspaper that he is going to remove the inscription MATHIAS REX [i. e. the only inscription on the statue before the events of December 1992] and will place two columns in front of the statue so as the Romanian flag could permanently wave on them."<sup>1</sup> The communiqué of the National Board for the Protection of Historic Monuments and Sites<sup>2</sup> that protested against any kind of alteration of the monument and stated that any unauthorized modification is forbidden according to the laws protecting the historic monuments and sites, contained also a recommendation regarding the two flagpoles: "Any flagstaff needed for the celebration of the national holiday are to be erected independently and further from the monument, in its immediate vicinity."<sup>3</sup> The mayor took the recommendation literally and erected also the flagpoles he had mentioned earlier, literally framing the space of the statue (see picture 4). The endeavour to appropriate and reinterpret the history of and the history represented by the statue can be viewed in an interesting manner if we take into account the next step in the alteration of the public space of the centre exactly in front of the statue: as shown by the picture 1. The mayor's office took the initiative in excavating the space in front of the historic statue two years later. Speaking from the specialist's point of view the results that led to the excavation of the remains of a Roman settlement were not surprising at all since in the

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<sup>1</sup> Eduard, Bogdan, 'UDMR este o organizație teroristă', *Evenimentul Zilei*, December 3, 1992., no. 140., 5. Hungarian account of the statements of the mayor: 'Az RMDSZ terrorista szervezet', *Európai Idő*, December 9–December 22, 1992., no. 49–50., 3.

<sup>2</sup> Published in facsimile in *Szabadság*, December 3, 1992, no. 236, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem

autumn of 1991 other rich remains were found in another part of the central area and the archeologist of the Historical Museum considered that a former Roman town was to be found almost under the whole centre.<sup>1</sup> In spite of this the remains of the Romans 'discovered' in front of the statue – though contested also by specialists – became almost immediately integrated into the myth of antiquity of the former pattern.<sup>2</sup> The protest of the Hungarians (who saw in the excavations an additional sign of aggression against 'their' historical site) in fact enforced the symbolic boundary-making nature of everything that could be spatially related to the statue. The struggle over the excavations became thus directly linked to the statue both for the Romanians and the Hungarians. On the other hand the excavated Roman remains became directly linked to the Daco-Roman myth of origin of the Romanians<sup>3</sup>, so they were integrated into the founding narrative I was previously speaking about.

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of December 1998 a small column was erected just in front of the excavations, almost in the midst of the pavement, with the inscription: "On this site the replica of the Column of Traianus will be erected on the original scale. December 1, 1998. Mayor's office. Cluj-Napoca." (see picture 2.). The point in time chosen for the unveiling of the small statue, the place chosen for the statue, the simultaneous wreath-laying ceremony (like usually after 1992) at the statue of King Matthias made the excavations and the intended replica of the column part of both the same micro-narrative (including the struggle over the statue) and the very same myth of antiquity. But they also enacted the myth of antiquity by spatially rewriting / remodeling the space of the centre: they were placed symmetrically in front of each other, and both in front of the statue of King Matthias. The myth of antiquity became visualized by means of the position of the new sites. The space can

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<sup>1</sup> For an interview with the archeologists leading the excavations see: *Város Kolozsvár alatt?*, Szabadság July 11., 1992., no. 131., 1.

<sup>2</sup> According to the inscription of the mayoralty, the aim of the excavations was: "..."

<sup>3</sup> According to the English version of the explanatory inscriptions "the objective" [i. e. the aim] of the excavations is: "Documentation on the historical evolution of the ROMAN-DACIAN NAPOCA CITY [sic]"

thus be considered not a contingent, but a value-loaded, semanticized medium regarding the historical myths: these can be made palpable also by spatial references and enactments.

Moreover the appropriation of the space of the centre of Cluj can be viewed in the context of the appropriation of the public space of the town. Thus the claims of primevalness suggested on a national level become the endeavor to actualize the myth also on a local level. Cluj abounds in monuments built by Hungarians: from the present-day headquarters of the main university of Romania (Babes-Bolyai University) to the building of the major library very many buildings reflect another ethnic past than the Romanian one. Thus the following strategies employed by the mayor may be considered as parts of a symbolic struggle to overwrite the space of the town and to suggest a strong claim of primevalness with regards not only to the national, but also to a local Romanian identity. First and foremost: national flags were hoisted on every (!) lamppost of the town, and also the Christmas lighting wore the national Romanian colors. The benches painted in the colors of the Romanian national flag and the metal kerbs protecting the traffic islands in the broader centre (painted also in red, yellow and blue – see picture 2.), the presentation of red-yellow-blue football to the local (and non-local) schools (with special regard to Hungarian ones) were also part of the strategies of symbolic struggle over the local ethnic space and implicitly over the ethnic character of both the synchronic and diachronic times. (The procedure which has a certain pragmatics in Cluj parts from the original context and reappears also in other circumstances (for instance, the railway-stations of Apahida and Câmpia Turzii, both belonging to Cluj county): in this case they rather underline the belonging to a certain identity than enact the myth of antiquity – at least, not with the intensity one can find represented in the city of Cluj.)

The traffic island surrounding the mayor's office, that is the one leading to a major student campus has recently been paved with colourful flagstones in the colours of the national flag. The similarly coloured litterbins (see picture 3.) in the broad centre raised the protest of some Romanians themselves (including the Local Council – in conflict for some time with the mayor).



The inscriptions posted at several spots in the centre and at the borders of the town (so in highly symbolic places) contain references to specific paragraphs of the Romanian Constitution according to which: "[i]n Romania the official language is the Romanian"<sup>1</sup>, "[i]n the eyes of the law and of the authorities all citizens are equal without any privileges and discriminations."<sup>2</sup>, and "[i]n Romania the dispositions of the Constitution are mandatory".<sup>3</sup>

All these strategies of space appropriation are canonically defined and adequately received as border-making strategies that constitute ethnic identities that are made to define themselves *against* each other. On the other hand the appropriation of the local space enacts the myth of antiquity itself on a local level.

The inventing and reinventing of historical myths as boundary-making and -defining entities in the specific context of the November-December 1992 Cluj events and during the whole mayoralty of Gheorghe Funar can also be interpreted from the point of view of the (literary/historiographic) genres they employ. Genres come rarely in the focus of historical craftsmanship since they are tacitly considered transparent and hardly relevant in the constitution of meaning.<sup>4</sup> In the first decades of the nineteenth-century Hungarian culture the epic poem was considered a truly relevant (literary) genre that could produce historical truths regarding the ancient history of the Hungarian nation. Meanwhile (literary/historiographic) genres like biography resisted the refunctionalization of the genre-system in which an allegedly true history can be told and the epic poem became irrelevant from this point of view. But in the last decades professional

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<sup>1</sup> The 13<sup>th</sup> paragraph of the Romanian Constitution.

<sup>2</sup> The quotations make reference to the 16<sup>th</sup> paragraph of the national Constitution, the mayor usually using both the former and the latter paragraph in an idiosyncratic way to deny the rights of the ethnic minorities to use their language in education and in the administrative system, qualifying such types of requests as privileges and discriminatory to the ethnic Romanians.

<sup>3</sup> The 15<sup>th</sup> paragraph of the Romanian Constitution.

<sup>4</sup> Even Hayden White and those representing the linguistic and cultural turn in historiographic studies rarely mention the genres, they generally speak about narratives: cf. e. g. White, Hayden, *The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, The Johns Hopkins U. P., Baltimore and London, 1987, pp. 1-57.

historiography – with the *ego-histoire* type of turns – seems to reinterpret the value of the first person-narrative (literary) genres in historiography, from genres like the diary and autobiography to that of the memoirs. So the relevance of the (literary / historiographic) genres as history-producing media is itself historical: it might suffer serious changes over the time.

On the other hand it is not irrelevant whether a history is told in the form of a biography, a commemorative speech or a diary. All these forms produce rather different histories depending on the rules of their genres (including their narrative perspective) and the way certain interpretative communities are using them. So history doesn't depend only on language and narrative in general, but also on another 'form' that partly prescribes and constitutes its meanings: the (literary / historiographic) genre.

The dispute between those opposing and those siding with the mounting of the inscription to the statue is a wide and complex one directed towards different types of communities. It embraces different levels of the public sphere, operating not only with face-to-face interaction, but also with endeavours to 'convert' both those siding with one or another opinion and the neutral viewers of the conflict (for instance by means of communiqués, handing out rival leaflets with rivaling histories of the inscription etc.). The initiators of the placement of the inscription – headed by the mayor itself – besides the classical type of historiographic reasoning (or at least besides a reasoning that is formally similar to the text criticism and norms of the canonic historiographic discourse) seems to employ other genres, that are less or non-canonical in official historiography, but that are often accepted as truth-producing genres regarding Romanian diachronic or synchronic events: gossip and rumour. The use of these genres as an endeavour to produce truths that seem probable is not an 'invention' of the mayor and of his fellows, it has a certain – though in a certain sense different – tradition from the era of the Communist regime itself and a strong use and abuse during the 1989 Romanian events, nay also during the ethnic conflicts of March 1990.

During the socialist period the so-called "politics of duplicity"<sup>1</sup> helped the formation of a cultural space where on the one hand the public space of the regime aggressively penetrated the private space of the people, but on the other hand (also as a consequence of this characteristics) it resulted in an intimate and strong borderline between the discourse of the regime and the alleged truths on it. Thus, for instance, the official version on the history of the present was continuously and tacitly emended in the private sphere. Gossip and rumour became the most important genres of these emendations, a specific value being attached to them as to 'the most intimate, and thus most believable, publicly unutterable truths'. This overvaluing of the gossip and of the rumor and the attribution of a high value of probability and truth to them in general, made these genres functional also during the 1989 events when a considerable amount of this type of information was present in the mass media. In a certain sense thus the 1989 events perpetuated the overvaluing of these genres from the point of view of their content of an alleged truth.

In March 1990, during the ethnic carnage of Târgu-Mureş between the Hungarians and Romanians, the very same genres came to have a paradigmatic ethnicized semantics, i.e. they were misused so as to demonize ethnic groups. This type of usage has already a certain tradition from the time of the 1989 events, when the leaders of the communist regime alluded to a foreign (also Hungarian) peril that aimed at destroying the country.

So, the mayor of Cluj took over not only a certain poetics of speaking on past and present events, but also a certain politics of them when he began alluding to Hungarians from Hungary that might stand behind the fiasco of his Timișoara canvassing, a Magyarization of Cluj and of Romania in general.<sup>2</sup> The same paradigm may include

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<sup>1</sup> For the introduction of the concept regarding the political regime of Ceaușescu and the application of the term on a specific problem, that is that of social and biological reproduction during Romanian socialism, see: Kligman, Gail, *Politica duplicității. Controlul reproducerii în România lui Ceaușescu*, trad. Marilena Dumitrescu, Ed. Humanitas, București, 2000, pp. 47-52.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance Serghie, Dorin, 'Domnul primar Gheorghe Funar îi amendează pe organizatorii manifestației U.D.M.R.', *Adevărul de Cluj*, no 773., December 9, 1992, 1.; 'Precizări necesare cu prilejul așa-zisului bicentenar al Teatrului și Operei Maghiare din

the statements according to which the Democratic Alliance of the Hungarians is a terrorist society<sup>1</sup>, the Huns (and not the Hungarians) entered Europe in the years 900–1000 AD coming also from today's territory of India<sup>2</sup>, the Hungarians of the Hungarian counties of Romania committed "brutal deeds" and "acted in hordes like a thousand year ago"<sup>3</sup>, "Ceaurescu was a good Romanian in what he did" and "actually at the end of 1989 there were interests that differed from the ones of the Romanian nation, and Ceaurescu's end was decided by the Great Powers"<sup>4</sup>. The textual strategy that often backed up these rumours and gossips during the 1992 events and afterwards is the quotation that – by foregrounding only a part of the original text –, distorts its original meaning. So, apparently the discourse comes close to the classical notion of historic text criticism, but functions in a totally different manner. This type of text criticism is actually typical for the genres at issue: they don't have a fixed meaning, no craftsmanship and professional training is required to utter and / or modify them (like in the case of canonical elite historical genres), their meaning and the spreading of this meaning is elusive. That's why they can be easily used to spread historical myths.

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Cluj-Napoca', *ibidem*. In order to back the reality-effect of his assertions, the mayor sometimes refers to concrete things, details. For instance, after being chased from the Timisoara canvassing trip by a furious crowd consisting of several hundred people (that considered his person as being not worthy of placing a wreath at the foot of the memorial of the Timisoara revolutionaries) he reckoned that about ten-eleven supporters of the Hungarian's party were identified (among them, a deputy) as being present at the spot of the incident together with a bunch of 'young and blue-eyed people from Hungary' that probably planned to go on to the next place of his canvassing trip. The construction of the physical traits of the alleged group responsible for the incidents makes way for the construction of an entire characterology of the side to be blamed in the case of a conflict (involving the mayor). Cf. for instance *Szabadság*, September 17., 1992., no. 181., 1.

<sup>1</sup> Eduard, Bogdan, 'UDMR este o organizație teroristă – a apreciat dl Gheorghe Funar', *Evenimentul Zilei* December 3., 1992., no. 140., 5.

<sup>2</sup> Etelka, Csók – Oplatka, Andreas, 'Szeretne-e ön ma és itt magyar lenni, polgármester úr?', *Szabadság* July 17., 1992., no. 137., 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*

So in the context of the different types of historical myths that appeared within the 1992 Cluj events (and not only)<sup>1</sup> these genres proved a highly effective and fit media for the spreading and success of the very same historical myths. According to these experiences: the effectiveness (including its boundary-making character) of historical myth may be in direct ratio to the genres, the poetics, respectively the politics of the (historical) genres it is employed within.

"Let the young shock us"<sup>2</sup>(?)

Early in the autumn of 1999, following the reform of the curriculum also regarding the teaching of national history, a history textbook was granted permission to be published.<sup>3</sup> Several days later sixty-four deputies – the whole Opposition and some deputies from the then governing parties, too – signed a motion of no confidence backed by a former recommendation of the Commission for Culture, Science, Youth and Sport. The motion of no confidence regarding the textbook had also many opponents: first and foremost the Ministry of Education and at the same time rector of Babes-Bolyai University (where the textbook in question was elaborated), intellectuals, the Romanian Diaspora of Paris<sup>4</sup>, many historians protested against the motion and considered the textbook good or very good. The motion of no confidence was aimed at the immediate withdrawal of the history textbook since – according to its text – the latter "ignored, underrated and ridiculed" the Romanian national heroes.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The analysis might end in similar results if applied to the textbook-debate I am going to approach later, but so as to maintain the coherence of the paper I decided to treat the question along my first case-study.

<sup>2</sup> Cioroianu Adrian, 'Șo pă Sorin Mitu', *Dilema*, October 15–29., 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Mitu Sorin (supervisor) – Copoeru, Lucia – Pecican, Ovidiu – Țărău, Virgiliu – Țărău, Liviu, *Istoria românilor. Manual pentru clasa a XIII-a*, Sigma Publishing House, București, 1999. For an excellent overview of the debate see PARAIANU, Răzvan, *National Prejudices, Mass Media and History Textbooks: The Mitu Controversy in Nation-Building and Contesting Identities. Romanian and Hungarian Case Studies*, eds. Trencsényi Balázs et al., Regio Books-Polirom, 2001., 93–117.

<sup>4</sup> For the declaration of the Romanian diaspora from Paris see: 'Diaspora română din Paris – de partea manualului de istorie', *Evenimentul Zilei*, November 16., 1999., 3.

<sup>5</sup> For a synopsis and interpretation of the motion of no confidence see: Nistorescu, Cornel, 'Bulă cu papion', *Evenimentul Zilei*, November 16., 1999., 1. For the whole

According to several deputies the textbook "strikes out the national-patriotic content from the educational process"<sup>1</sup>. But not only the motion, but also a part of the written and audiovisual press attacked with a rarely seen vehemence the idea of the writers of the textbook to focus more on the 'mentalities of a given period' than on individual historical characters. Another idea causing the polemic attitude was a critical discourse on the mythologies that had been constructed along the Romanian nation-formation (e. g. the myth of the concerted Daco-Roman founding of the nation, an ahistorical analysis of the archaic historical times by operating with modern, for instance language-based, identities and territories) and in former textbooks, highlighting the fragmented nature and lateness of the founding of the modern Romanian national state (thus, for instance, demythologizing the figure of Mihai the Valiant, who had been constructed as a foremost leader of an allegedly common Romanian state). Nay, the authors introduced the synchronic world into the framework of the textbook, considering it worthy of historical analysis: contemporary personalities, from famous TV presenters to former anti-communist human rights fighters were included into the last chapters. This latter solution led to a new type of argument according to which the authors politicized (so *fragmented*) the otherwise united national history and overvalued contemporary phenomena by treating them in a similar format to that of the 'legendary heroes'.<sup>2</sup>

The motion was also implicitly directed towards the then recently changed national curriculum on history that gave preference to several historical methodologies over the political historical one; already the title pointed out this broader interest and stake of the parliamentary debate over the textbook and its authors: "Motion of no

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parliamentary debate see: *Dezbaterea moțiunii semnate de 64 de deputați, având ca obiect "Politicile educaționale promovate prin manualele de Istoria Romanilor"*, Stenograma ședinței Camerei Deputaților din 15 noiembrie 1999, <http://www.cdep.ro/steno/owa/plen.stenograma>

<sup>1</sup> 'Parlamenti vita a tizenkettedikes törvénykönyvről', *Szabadság*, November 14., 1999., 8.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance: 'Mașina de vot a Puterii a respins moțiunea îndreptată împotriva manualului lui Mîtu', *Curentul*, October 17., 1999.

confidence the object of which is the educational policies promoted by the textbooks on Romanian history". The reasoning of the motion foregrounds the idea that the most excruciating characteristic of the textbook was the fact that it reduced the attention usually dedicated to 'legendary' figures of Romanian history and "with a view to reach these goals a forced demythologizing and an enforcement of the imaginary took place." The motion itself contains a hidden reference to the stereotype of the foreigners (usually those from Western Europe and the United States – a stereotype that appears also in the December 1992 events of Cluj to explain the opposition of the Hungarians towards the deeds of the mayor) that might stand behind the strange and demythologizing character of the textbook: the book "imposes some ideas from Recommendation no. 1283 of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe<sup>1</sup> selectively, disproportionately and not at all in harmony with the historical truth".

So, the motion not only aims at a concrete and immediate action, but also gives a sketchy explanation of the way such a deed could have ever occurred: it seeks for the reasons outside the community in order to be able to picture the community as being pure and immaculate, respectively wholly homogenous. It also contains a hidden, identity-strengthening narrative about all the good things originating from the community itself, while the bad things have their origin outside the national community.

The very same type of discourse operating with similar imagery recurs in the broader reception of the textbook: during a TV-show with an extremely high tune-in the chief editor of the textbook was attacked because he has a Hungarian wife and had formerly accepted the support of a foreign foundation so as to participate at a conference. Other views uttered throughout the same discussion established a close link between the allegedly Jewish background of the authors and the problematic characteristics of the book.<sup>2</sup> The newspaper entitled

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<sup>1</sup> The respective recommendation was aimed at improving the Bill of minority rights, especially after the series of complaints of the representatives of the Hungarian ethnic minority.

<sup>2</sup> For an account of this episode see: Iordache, Alina, 'Ei/ noi evreii și manualul de istorie', *Dilema*, October 29 – November 4., 1999., 2.



*Curentul* placed in the same column, one beneath the other the news according to which *Hungarian teachers from Romania ask pupils to tear the dustjacket of the Hungarian textbooks so as conceal that they come from Hungary* and the negative comments on the rejection of the motion of no confidence, ethnicizing the case of the history textbook in a very subtle way.<sup>1</sup>

So, the discussion employs a myth that tends for a comprehensive explanation and thus goes far beyond the authors of the textbook, functioning as a construction of an allegedly pure and perfect Romanian identity. It also aims at positioning the participants of the discourse to those who can/may represent the whole community and those who should be excluded from or negatively received in this process of representation, selects the values which should stand at the basis of the judgments that are to be made. And it has also another characteristic, perhaps the most important from the point of view of an interim conclusion I would like to draw regarding the nature of the historical myths in general and of some specific ones in particular in the context of the debate I am trying to approach. It is to note that the discourse, which focuses on the apology of the historic myths contained by former textbooks seem to work according to similar principles to those of the historical myths themselves, respectively establishes the negative myth of the demonic that tries to destroy good and valuable things and threatens the identity of the community itself. Many historical myths operate on binary principles<sup>2</sup> and not only include, but also exclude; provide not only a positive and valuable picture, but also more or less firm borders and a symmetrical *other*

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<sup>1</sup> 'Profesorii maghiari din România cer elevilor să rupă copertele manualelor ungare pentru a nu se vedea că provin din Ungaria. Banii și voința Budapestei nu înfrâng legile vecine Ungariei', *Curentul*, October 17, 1992, respectively 'Mașina de vot a Puterii a respins moțiunea îndreptată împotriva manualului lui Mitu', *Curentul*, October 17, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> For excellent comments on this type of structures and the way enemy-construction uses them: Koselleck, Reinhart, *Feindbegriffe*, 1994.; Carl Schmitt, *Über das Verhältnis der Begriffe Krieg und Feind*, 1938.; Schwab, George, *Enemy or Foe: A Conflict of Modern Politics*, 1987.; Burke, Kenneth, *Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'*, 1941.; Edelmann, Murray, *The Construction and Uses of Political Enemies*, 1988.; Ricoeur, Paul, *Violence et language*, 1967.



world beyond these borders (of course, constituted by values with a symmetrically different symbolical load). While refuting the challenge of the ideas contained by the textbook, those completely accepting the presence of the historical myths seem to operate with the same type of constitutive strategies historical myths do. The imaginary of the debate (of course, those parts I have predominantly discussed here) thus has the angelic types siding with the 'real' 'patriotic' and 'national' past and the demonic character of the demythologizers. It is the dichotomy of the *inside* and *outside*, of *us* and *them*.

The discourse attacking the demythologizing character of another historical discourse and attitude, and thus siding with the mythologizing discourse actually reproduces the structures of the mythological historical discourse itself. So by speaking for the mythologizing discourse this viewpoint comes very close to the strategies, the core of the world-view and the type of discourse used by the attitude it tries to protect/speak for. Nay, in this specific case the viewpoint that attempts at defending the *raison d'être* of the Romanian historical myths has recourse to another myth (that often permeates also the historical myths): that of the *demonic other*.

One of the major assumptions of those contesting the figure of the historian that led the task of history text-book writing was that by having a Hungarian wife and because sometimes ago his research work was supported by a foreign foundation he could be considered at least suspicious when dealing with Romanian national history.

This assumption might offer us the possibility of a theoretical consideration regarding the nature of the process that in this specific case backs the legitimacy of the old historical myths and underpins the argumentation. When positioning the co-author and supervisor of the textbook in question outside the Romanian community (by calling him a "bad Romanian" and "agent of foreign powers" respectively alluding to his marriage as being underhand) the argumentation constructs a homogenous "we" within and in the name of whose it speaks and also solves the painstaking problem of identifying the cause of the allegedly illegitimate nature of the textbook. It focuses primarily not on a professional reasoning, but on the process of *othering* all the figures that could refute the myths. This is why it might

prove more successful in a culture where the cultural attributions are not specialized, but interwoven. Specialists are considered not the solely ones that can produce *the truth* regarding specific cases, but – for instance – politicians, journalists or the opinion of the public are able to produce similarly – if not more – truthful accounts of both present and bygone events. Historical myths in general in this case seem to be supported by the symbolic exclusion (by means of the process of *othering*) from the homogenously imagined nation of all the professionals and non-professionals that question the legitimacy of the historical myth or myths at issue. On the other hand this nation-conception sketches what stands on the margin or what remains outside the borders of Romanian nationhood: the ethnic minorities (Hungarians and Jews in this case) and the foreigners are strongly believed to be disreputable/incompatible with Romanian history in general and/or its historical myths in particular.

Till now I have focused mainly on the analysis of those discourses that asked for an immediate withdrawal of the textbook (and even for the punishment of their authors) and I have hardly used the counterarguments of those siding with the writers, the textbook and the methodologies it represented. In the following I will spotlight a recurrent idea of those intellectuals and historians that commented not only on the textbook, but also on its multiple uses throughout the debate.

The then Ministry of Education Andrei Marga as the intellectual who gave the new history curriculum the go-ahead and had pleaded for the idea of alternative textbooks and alternative history teaching for several times, backed the textbook and its authors up: "This textbook – like all the other alternative textbooks published till now – was supervised and judged by a recognized group of historians and diverges in nothing from the principles the Government of Romania agreed with the World Bank on: i. e. a modern, scholarly open view on history"<sup>1</sup> But already this first detailed reaction of the minister contained an argument that recurs

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<sup>1</sup> Attila, Klárik, 'Marga miniszter és az i-re tett pont...', *Romániai Magyar Szó*, October 13., 1999., 1.

later, during the parliamentary debate itself on the part of those defending the textbook: "History should be written by those skilled in historiography [...] The majority of the protesters is not competent to question the conception of a textbook"<sup>1</sup>. Or, as a councilor of the Ministry of Education put it from the very beginning: "The judging of the history textbooks and of their methodology is the task of the specialists."<sup>2</sup> Nay, a deputy of the House of Representatives, member in the Committee for Educational Problems reckoned even that "the evaluation of a textbook is outside the sphere of authority of the Parliament. The committees of experts [of the two Houses] go beyond the bounds of their sphere of authority when they try to interfere with professional questions."<sup>3</sup> And "in the whole Europe there has been no precedent for a parliamentary committee of experts to question the competence of the scholars. Between this and a political decision that changes the result of the twice two is hardly any dividing line."<sup>4</sup> All the above-quoted opinions remark on a specific distribution of competences (between political and scientific attributions) that should exist and the borders of which have been transgressed by the Parliament itself. The very same distribution of competences is touched upon in a special number of the independent weekly *Dilema* of the time. The periodical enumerates a series of incidents that – according to the authors of the thematic number – have one common feature: the protagonists of all are persons who are not competent to decide the value of the textbook: the prisoners of a Romanian prison lodge a protest against the book, "being offended at the way it treats the Romanian sovereigns"<sup>5</sup>; parents threaten the authors of the book; the same authors are accosted on the street by furious citizens; a director of historical films questions the competence of the supervisor

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<sup>1</sup> Ibidem

<sup>2</sup> 'Szakemberek dolga minősíteni a tankönyveket', *Szabadság*, October 9., 1999., no. 236., 1.

<sup>3</sup> 'Parlament előtt a vitatott történelemkönyv. Asztalos: a képviselőház túllépte hatáskörét', *Szabadság*, October 13., no. 239., 8.

<sup>4</sup> Mária, Gál, 'Bukarestben győzött a józan ész. Kihallgatták Andrei Margát tankönyvíróban', *Szabadság*, October 14., 1999., no. 240., 16.

<sup>5</sup> Cioroianu, Adrian, 'Pușcăriai și academicienii', *Dilema*, October 29 – November 4., 1999, 3.

of the book; an influent (and bellicose) journalist puts forward the proposal to return to only one history textbook (and implicitly to one Romanian history).<sup>1</sup>

What is of paramount importance for me is not the literal level of this discourse, but the conceptual one: the circumstance that some protagonists of the debate signal the need for the distribution of competences and foreground one of the very interesting characteristics of the debate: the intermingling of the otherwise specific spheres of activities and the fact that this intermingling leads to the blurring of the borders between the different parts of the same culture. In this context the truth of a specific segment of culture will not be produced anymore by somebody who is suited for this by means of his/her qualification etc.

All these aspects are important because – as one could have already noticed – they already occurred in the case of the Cluj events both in November – December 1992 and afterwards: a mayor with no special training in historiography decides and comments in extremely delicate matters of history against the national authority in matters of conservation of the historical buildings and sites, then – in spite of the opinion of the local specialists in archaeology and history – maintains historical excavations even with brute force, then decides about the erection of a statue that is disapproved by the same specialists<sup>2</sup> (not to speak about his attempt to erect a statue in the memory of somebody convicted for criminal behaviour during the war<sup>3</sup> and have recently placed the bust of the same person in the assembly room of the local city council against the dispositions of the law). Putting together these

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<sup>1</sup> Vasilescu, Mircea, 'Cum se naște un 'caz'', *Dilema*, October 29 – November 4., 1999, 3.; Cioroianu, Adrian, 'Șo pă Sorin Mitul', *Dilema*, October 29–November 4., 1999, 3.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed interview with the supervisor historian of the excavations, the director of the Historical Museum see: Mária, Gál, 'Kifürkészhetetlen a főtéri gödrök sorsa. A Történelmi Múzeum igazgatója a változásban bízí', *Szabadság*, November 10., 1999., no. 263., 8.

<sup>3</sup> On the debate upon the question see for instance: Áron, Balló, 'Buchwald Péter felfüggesztette az Antonescu-szobor felállításáról szóló határozatot. Ideiglenes prefektusi minőségében cselekedett', *Szabadság*, November 11., 1999., no. 264., 1.; Olivér, Kiss, 'Antonescu-szobor közkívánatra? Sálcudean nem akar ujat húzni a lakosság nagy „részével”', *Szabadság*, November 20., 1999., no. 272., 1.

similar segments of the two case-studies – the local and the national – they seem to allude to a paradigm and may lead us to broader interpretive conclusions regarding the survival (and in some cases: revival) of the historical myths in Romania.

First of all let me introduce some notions that will characterize the approach. Plumpe and Werber refer to a common endeavour of the avant-garde of the 1910s–1930s to restore the original, broad notion of literature prior to its differentiation.<sup>1</sup> Literary historians of nineteenth-century (broadly) Central- and Eastern European notions [!] of literature often refer to this paper when elaborating the notions of integrated and structured literature – literature, of course, taken in its broader, historical notion, prior to the disciplinary divisions into parts. They derive the notion of *integrated* from its Latin stem, meaning 'intact', 'whole', 'untouched', 'complete' and refer to a paper of Plumpe and Werber in order to express that literature as a subsystem of culture has similar values and functions as all the other subsystems of the very same cultural system. In this framework there are no disciplinary boundaries and specific disciplinary values and specialists. A very frequent form of the framework at issue throughout the nineteenth century is the one within which all the sub-systems of the culture pinpoint at the value of *nationhood*, its revival being their common aim; they all function subordinated to this value and idea. The other type of system strives after differentiation: in this sense, as a sub-system of culture, literature foregrounds its specific, unique values (for instance, the aesthetic ones) that make it different and performing different functions from any other sub-system of culture. In this latter case the discourse on a specific part of culture is sub-system-specific, i. e. the truths on a discipline, for instance, can only be asserted by specialists of the respective field and the truths of different

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<sup>1</sup> The original *locus* of the paper at issue is: "[...] diese Differenz von System und Umwelt noch einmal als Medium wählt, nun aber in der Absicht, diese Differenz zu entdifferenzieren: Kunst, Literatur und »Leben« zu integrieren oder zu »verschmelzen«." Plumpe, Gerhard – Werber, Niels, 'Literatur ist codierbar. Aspekte einer systemtheoretischen Literaturwissenschaft' in Schmidt J., Siegfried, ed., *Literaturwissenschaft und Systemtheorie. Positionen, Kontroversen, Perspektiven*. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1993., 39.

fields of the same national culture are thus probably incompatible with one another. This latter type of system might be called *structured*, based again on the Latin stem of the term at issue, meaning: 'structure', 'construction', 'building', 'wall', alluding to the manifold and split nature of the respective system.

Let me take the notions of integrated and structured literature to a higher level of conceptualization since they could be extremely useful in interpreting not only the textbook controversy, but also the Cluj dissensions of 1992. I will speak in what follows about the integrated type of culture and the structured type of culture, the former denoting a culture where the subsystems (including that of the disciplinary discourse on the past) are hardly specialized, or in spite of the existence of the institutions and persons with specialization, they have the similar function of legitimating a common cultural value, mostly that of the nation.

The structured culture is the framework comprising different subsystems that – on their turn – have different, sometimes incompatible functions, and even if their values are similar or identical, they use it according to different pragmatics. The notion of the structured culture – as mentioned upon in the foregoing – is not identical with the institutions or institutional aspects of the respective culture, since each institution might have a different program and view of its own, respectively others' functions regarding questions of history and specialization.

Naturally, the reality modelled by this dichotomy is much more complex: we could most probably speak of cultural orientations, respectively about differently oriented situations of the very same culture, this latter being constituted not only by converging tendencies and homogeneities, but also by inhomogeneities, hesitations, divergences, internal differences and transitional states and aspects.

So, the model of the unspecialized culture (where the production of the truths regarding national history is not linked to specialization and craftsmanship, but some other segments of the national culture may have similar (or even more important authority) to produce historical truths (like the discipline of historiography itself) proves a framework that enables the use and misuse of history and historical myths.

## Conclusions

Several conclusions can be drawn that go beyond the interim conclusions of the paper.

1. First and foremost it should be mentioned that *the historical myths of today's Romania are often perpetuated by the ethnical differences and struggles*; the conflicts that arise from the different interpretations of the myths not only perpetuate and strengthen the ethnical borders (thus functioning as border-making and identity-constituting formations) and ethnical affiliation to these myths, but also reproduce and strengthen the myths themselves, respectively often intensely ethnicize them.

2. The type of unspecialized culture in the framework of which history and historical myths *can be used and are used* exactly because the production of the truths regarding national history is not linked to specialization and craftsmanship, but some other segments of the national culture may have similar (or even more important authority) to produce historical truths like the discipline of historiography itself. If we view this characteristics of contemporary Romanian culture in a historical framework, a historically argueded interpretation may be given that provides a macro-framework for the understanding of the preservation, uses and misuses of historical myths both in Romania and in specific parts of the Balkans.

Romania – unlike Hungary, for instance – became a unitary state only in 1918, after the unification of Transylvania and some smaller regions with the other Romanian provinces. Though the ideology of the Romanian nation-construction is partly prior to the actual formation of the national state, the successful actual constitution of a homogenous national state was much delayed both because of the regional differences and also as the result of the existence of significant ethnic communities (mainly the Hungarian and German ones) in Transylvania. The slowness of modernization also slowed the process of nation-formation. According to my view this is why there is a huge (and sometimes anachronistic – of course, from the point of view of the new, more global, and less national identities) phase shift in the process of nation-construction: history is still being seen by an

important part of the elite and of the population as the foremost ground of an allegedly homogenous national identity. That is also why there seems to be as much continuity as paradigm shift in general between the former patterns and interpretations of national history, prior to 1989 and those after it, both on the part of the Romanian Academy of Sciences and the public at large. A type of unspecialized culture (i. e. an integrated one) including a teleological way of defining the value of the national and the relationship towards it (i. e. positioning the value of the national above all types of values of the respective culture and imagining it as the value that transcends the whole culture, irrespectively of disciplinary boundaries and of sub-systems of the respective culture) functions as a fertile ground for the perpetuation and strengthening of the historical myths.