Duplicity, corruption, and exceptionalism in the Romanian experience of modernity

Marius Ion Bența
George Barițiu History Institute of the Romanian Academy
 bentza@gmail.com

# Abstract

The problem of trickster leadership is discussed in this chapter in the context of the Romanian experience of modernity. This experience has emerged as a Post-Byzantine condition; it was strongly m­­arked by the forty years of communist regimes and was loaded with a high amount of duplicity and ambivalence. The chapter argues that the communist type of trickster leadership in Romania was the outcome of a clash between two types of corruption: a domestic one and a global one. The idea of ‘forms without substance’, coined in 1868 by the historian Titu Maiorescu, is shown to be indicative of the exilic condition in which Romanians remained caught even after their country became independent. The description of this paradoxical condition is followed by a review of the main eras of Romania as a modern state, arguing that this condition has led to an accumulation of disharmony and the absurd in the social fabric of the people.

# Introduction

This chapter addresses the problem of trickster leadership in an attempt at understanding the schismogenic mechanism of the Post-Byzantine world and its long-lasting effects with a particular focus on the Romanian experience of modernity.

The problems of power and leadership lie at the foundation of the political dimension of society. In liminal situations, political power is among the most important things that are being turned upside down, and such an inversion can be a symptom of liminality to the anthropologist. But what happens to leadership in situations of *permanent liminality*, such as the case of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe? The political discourse produced in Western liberal democracies usually looked at these societies as either immature or diseased regimes in need of proper training or care (Ioan et al. 2005; Johnston 2005; Mungiu-Pippidi 2015). However, once one sees Western capitalism as just another ‘ism’, just another type of political religion (Voegelin 1999: 19–73) or just another world sunk in permanent liminality (Szakolczai 2016b, 2017b: 231–248; Wydra 2000), one realises how much similarity and symmetry there exists between the two worlds. Indeed, all along the Cold War, the ideological doctrine prevalent in Communist countries kept seeing the West as a highly corrupt, decadent, immature and diseased bourgeois society, following up on the Western avant-garde.

Before stepping into the question stated above, let us circumscribe the sphere of *the political* and the problem of leadership in its generality. From a wide perspective of political anthropology, reflexive sociology and philosophical anthropology, which I assume here, the political needs to be understood not merely as the set of phenomena we typically refer to as the world of politics, governance and policies, but as a wider sphere of human experience that has to do with *power*. The political is concerned mainly with relations of power and domination, yet it is also related to the life of the *polis* (i.e. the stock of behaviour shared with, and visible to, the others).

To start with the second dimension of the political, one can say that this is the one that has transformed it, in modernity, into a set of practices of derision and comedy (Alexander et al. 2006; Bohn and Wilharm 2015; Szakolczai 2013a), that is, a type of experience that is eminently deceitful, insincere, tricky and corrupt. But do political experience and political action belong invariably to the world of the trickster and the sophist? Is there a genuine political sphere *prior to corruption*? The existence of a charismatic and wise Statesman cannot be possible outside such a sphere, in which the life of the *polis* takes place in harmony with the order of the world – as Plato or Voegelin would put it – in plain sight, under the light of the Sun and under the scrutiny of the ‘third actor’: the witness or the community, which in its corrupt version, is the modern ‘public’ of ‘public sphere’ (Szakolczai 2013a: 1–40).

As the first dimension of the political, *power* naturally involves a transfer or delegation of attributes, resources, glory and freedom of action to a leader, setting up distinctions, as Georg Simmel had formulated it (Simmel 1950) between masters and servants, superior and inferior, dominators and dominated etc. Yet, genuine leadership involves something more: as the epitome of the leader, the king is called not only to be honoured as *superior*, but to *provide* for his people and to *lead the way*. To Ancient Israel, YHWH, the only legitimate King of the people, does just that (Taubes 2009: 19); in the long journey of the Exodus, God *leads* the people through the wilderness and *feeds* them with *mana*. A leader is supposed to be on the side of his or her people both in ordinary times (symbolised here by meal time) and in extraordinary times (symbolised here by the time of walking through the wilderness).

While trickster leadership is amoral, disconnected from transcendence, uprooted from truth and akin to chaos, genuine political leadership (whether such a thing may be more than just a Platonic ideality or not) is rooted in truth and lives in harmony with the cosmos. For this reason, *parrhēsia* or truth-telling, which is essentially a genuine political practice (Foucault 2011: 57–69), is not an attribute of modern politics and governance, as these have become disconnected from truth and morality and have become subordinated to reason via secular liberalism and rationalist philosophy (Morgenthau 1946: 19), thus making all political action ‘potentially immoral’.

All Communist regimes share not a complete lack of concern for truth but an unrestrained liberty to do whatever it takes to attain the interests of the regime. The Romanian experience of Communism, which has lasted for over four decades until December 1989, bore the mark of *duplicity*, as the official discourse couldn’t be farther away from the reality experienced by the people, and, by the terrible history of torture that took place in its first decades in numerous prisons and ‘reeducation centres’, the regime proved that it could make use methodically and effectively of its unrefrained liberty (see, for example, Cesereanu 2001; Ierunca 1990). Can then one say with certainty that Romania’s Communist leaders Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej and Nicolae Ceaușescu can be seen as good examples of what a trickster leader means? Many people in Romania today would not hesitate to say ‘yes’. However, calling a certain political leader a trickster always involves a risk of hasty labelling. Gheorghiu-Dej, who had ruled the country between 1947 and 1965, did not impose a personality cult in the manner of his successor, Ceaușescu, and much of the worship in his time was oriented towards the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, who was the main moral author of Romania’s terror regime, which included a large network of prisons that was used to eliminate political dissent. Ceaușescu, on the other hand, enjoyed initially a certain support from the population and from the Western powers due to his clear resistance to Soviet influence, yet ended up by migrating his country to what was arguably the harshest dictatorship in Eastern Europe.

If one looks at the longer row of political leaders of Romania before and after the Communist regime, the problem becomes even more difficult, as most of them have enjoyed both credit and discredit from one camp or another. The problem cannot be understood if considered in terms of individual ‘trickster case studies’ but rather in terms of ‘trickster political experience’ and from a genealogical perspective.

My argument is that the peculiar type of trickster leadership of Ceaușescu’s type of National-Communism was the resultant of an intersection – or *a clash* – of two opposite drives: a *domestic* type of corruption and a *global* type of corruption. The drive of civilisation is a permanent quarrel between two tricksters (i.e. two equally corrupt avatars of the Byzantine hubris), because the main engine of modernity, ‘civilisation’, is constituted as an agonistic drive following this schismogenic mechanism. This mechanism is significant for understanding the problem of corruption in modernity from a genealogical perspective: first, because corruption and trickster leadership was not an isolated phenomenon of Romania’s Communist past, but had resilient manifestations in the post-Communist era as a hysteresis effect (Neumann and Pouliot 2011: 105–137; Sakwa 2016: 1–26); second, because it had its own roots in the Byzantine experience, which was equally important to the genesis of political modernity at large.

*Corruption* – in the contemporary sense of the word – may be quasi-universal, from Asian countries to South America, southern Europe, eastern Europe or Africa. In Europe, it may be an indexical feature of the east–west and north–south divides. As of 2019, the perception of corruption in Romania was among the highest in the European Union (Transparency International 2018). Keeping in mind that such measures of corruption are highly subjective – given that the phenomenon belongs by definition to the underground, grey strata of society and is virtually impossible to be grasped objectively – one could say that Romanians see their country as an exemplary *dossier* in the Modernity vs. Corruption case.

Romanians tend to believe their country to be *exceptionally* corrupt in virtually every sphere where some form of leadership is involved – from Government and Parliament to the management of state companies, public institutions, police, Justice, education, health, etc. Bribery, nepotism and clientelism are believed to dominate economic, social and political relations. The anti-corruption war was *exceptionally* spectacular in Romania in the past 15 years, having attracted national and international acclaim. The Communist dictatorship was *exceptionally* harsh in Romania, with high restrictions in the quality of life, food supply, freedom of speech, freedom of movement etc. The fall of Romania’s Communist regime was *exceptionally* violent and bloody in December 1989, unlike any other country in the Eastern European block. One is then compelled to ask oneself, what is the meaning of this type of *exceptionalism* or, rather, *negative type of exceptionalism*?

To Romanians, it is rather commonplace to see the problem of corruption related to the post-Byzantine era and the Phanariote rulers. Corruption is typically associated with such dimensions as Balcanism, Orientalism, anachronism, barbarism and dumb resistance to the ‘graces’ of modernisation. However, the idea that modern politics might itself be a peculiar form of ‘corruption’ equally rooted in the Byzantium – as the book of (Szakolczai 2013a) shows it – leads one to a puzzling self-contradiction.

The genesis of modernity, understood as a long-term process, not just as early or late modernity, owes a lot to the Byzantine experience in the manifestations of politics, the market, or cultural life, and the Byzantium ‘has contributed in a *permanent* and positive way to the history of humanity’ (Meyendorff 2010: 8). In this light, the fight between the two antagonistic drives on the political arena, which quarrel over the best path for the ‘Romanian spirit’, very much resembles the quarrel between two characters in *Commédia dell’Arte*, as explained by (Szakolczai 2013a: 207–209). The peculiarity of the Arlecchino–Pierrot quarrel is that it never ends if one remains caught in the drama and is unable to remove the actors’ masks. Indeed, the tension is just as vivid and painful in contemporary Romania as it was in her early days of a modern state.

# The trickster in post-Byzantium

The space of the Romanian identity is highly liminal in many respects: historically, culturally, socially, geographically and politically. Historically, the formation of the Romanian state took place in two liminal moments when several empires have disintegrated.[1] Culturally and socially, this position implied a situation of permanent awareness, suspicion and ambivalence towards the *other* while being subject to a diverse set of influences from other groups and cultures. Geographically and politically, Romanians are aware that they are a people at the confluence of large tectonic imperial areas, which translated, even to this day, in a general feeling of living at the margin of the political realm, of living in ‘a remote borderland’ (e.g. Transylvania was a remote borderland of Austro-Hungary; Moldova was a remote borderland of the Russian or the Soviet empires; Wallachia was a remote borderland of the Ottoman Empire). In this sense, Romanians have inherited a peculiar complex of marginality and a feeling that important things always take place ‘elsewhere,’ not ‘here’, which translates into a peculiar form of ‘negative exceptionalism.’ Living at the margins of ‘civilisation’, Romanians have constantly struggled with a high sense of corruption, which says that their world is corrupt and that there isn’t much to do about it.[2] Significant for this mind-set are the words of the French political leader Raymond Poincaré, which have been used by the writer Mateiu Caragiale as a motto for one of his novels: ‘What do you want, here we are at the gates of the Orient, where all things are being taken lightly …’.[3] The notion of living in a corrupt, decadent and awry world is pervasive in Romanian culture and the condition of ‘Byzantinism’ was widely portrayed in Romanian works of fiction, drama and film.

In 1868, the historian and political leader Titu Maiorescu published a paper where he coined an expression that was to become famous and indicative for what was seen as a peculiarity of Romanian modernity: ‘forms without substance’,[4] which could be explained as a particular tendency to formally embrace the ‘modern’ at an institutional level while preserving more or less unaltered the ‘local’ and ancient specificities (Maiorescu 1874: 321–372). As he was a man of letters, Maiorescu applied a metaphor that was related to the literary skills of authors in a time when Romanians were encouraged to produce more works of value in literature and to compensate for the marginal character of the Romanian spirit, which was seen in competition for the grand European fountains of intellect.

The antinomy form vs. substance points to Plato’s conception of form (*eidos*)[5] and may correspond to the antinomy syntagmatic expression vs. semantic content; the expression accounts for a writer’s craft of saying things in a beautiful and polished way, yet without communicating much, that is, without ‘substance’; in contemporary media, the distinction refers to the separation of *form* (e.g. visual appearance) and *content* (i.e. text).

Maiorescu published his paper nearly a decade after the birth of the first Romanian state and 50 years before the creation of the largest Romanian state in terms of territory. His conception of culture and civilisation was in line with the ideals *en vogue* at the time in Europe and among Romanian intellectuals:[6] progress was as a necessary and inextricable drive of society, and Europe played an essential role in bringing light to uncivilised peoples. Romania, too, needed to be drawn out of her ‘oriental barbarism’ – a scar of her having lived for centuries in the sphere of the post-Byzantine world – by adopting modern institutions, laws and forms of culture. Maiorescu noted that Western forms of rationality, precision, efficiency and time management, as they found their expression in economy, jurisprudence or political organisation, were met in Romania with duplicity-loaded resistance. He argued that, given this strong conspicuous tension, progress was not to be imposed and grafted artificially upon Romanian society, but rather nurtured and cultivated organically.

Beginning with the Herderian perspective, modern anthropology gives little credit to Eurocentrism and the domination of the West, and would qualify Maiorescu’s progressivist vision of culture as rather idealistic. However, the tension concerning the peculiarity of the Romanian exceptionalism, in which Romanians tend to see themselves as either exceptionally great or exceptionally corrupt and failed as a nation (Alexe 2015; Mihăilescu 2017: 43–71) is as strong today as it was in Maiorescu’s time in the form of contrasting views on progress, tradition, globalisation, EU integration, corruption, etc.

Maiorescu’s syntagm, which today one could understand as a *duplicity*-based mode of resisting modernity, was a clear formulation of the principle of negative exceptionalism of the Romanian people,[7] which is perceived today as an acute pain caused by a unique and profound inability to embracing the values of civilisation and to finding the syntony and synergy necessary for the collective engagement in a common project.

# The ‘politics of duplicity’

Duplicity is a classical deception technique that involves a *double* side of speech in the form of incongruence between words and actions or between what is being spoken and what is really meant. Duplicity means double-speak, half-truth or the partial hiding of a truth within the multiple meanings created by jokes, ridicule or sweet lies. Duplicity is a device of the trickster and the double-faced god Janus. In Victor Turner’s anthropological terminology (Turner 1975: 37), it is a symptom of a certain lack of meaning or a ‘disharmonic’ process. Such an attitude may stem out of a situation of *perpetual* *exile*; it is like a rite of passage that was never concluded, a failed conversion, a fake transformation, a state of not being in order, or a constant state of waiting.

In times of exile, duplicity and cheating can be effective survival stratagems (Scott 1985). In all Communist regimes, artists made use widely of duplicity to evade censorship. The abundance of eclectic forms of expression in modern literature or the arts cannot be explained if one does not admit that modernity, too, is metaphorically a type of exilic period.

Maiorescu’s syntagm implies not only a presumable inability of Romanians to adapt to a truly Western set of values and institutions, but a whole *attitude* when confronted with the persuasion of progressivist forces as well. Romanians did not show direct resistance to the novel *forms* of social, political and economic life, but proved an inclination towards embracing their vocabulary and shallow structures while refraining from adopting their *substantive* structures. This attitude of political duplicity, compromise and ambivalence is peculiar to someone confronted with an inacceptable, yet unavoidable, situation. It is somehow the opposite of the duplicity as dramatic performance of a political actor in front of the public: rather, it is the duplicity that a vassal, subaltern or subordinate community chooses to adopt as a survival strategy when confronted with an authority whose legitimacy they don’t fully recognise. This translates to a constant ambivalence at the level of the *exilé*: your leader is both your provider *and* your enemy, a stranger to you *and* your protector at the same time. It is the typical exilic condition of Christians living the times of persecution in the Roman Empire, when they were forced to hide their faith and communicate religious stories through eclectic icons, the condition of Jews living in perpetual exile while hiding their faith within eclectic practices or the condition of those living for some reasons in the underground strata of society and hiding their discourse under carefully chosen words.

Living in the post-Byzantine world meant for Romanians – as for other Christian nations – a constant fight to preserving their Christian faith under Ottoman rule. The country became independent in 1859, but could Romanians get rid of their feeling of living in ‘exile’ and of their deep duplicity practices? The main pressure for them was to become ‘Westerners’, to modernise and to progress, and it is likely that they took this pressure as just another form of exile. In fact, all the periods that followed – the Interbellum, the Communist regime and the post-Communist era – showed the presence of this exilic, duplicity-based condition in various avatars of the conflict between ‘global’ and domestic forces.

As mentioned above, duplicity is an essential feature of modernity, too. The West is torn between dichotomies and paradoxical drives, such as the permanent fight between global and local tendencies at various levels of the social life: governance policies, culture, habits and everyday life. The march towards globalisation appears to be quasi-universal, and, at the same time, the forms of resisting globalisation and promoting localism tend to spread, too, in the form of social movements or cultural trends. The paradoxical nature of the problem is conspicuous here, given that those forms of localism that have been imported from a cultural space into another defy the very essence of ‘localism’ and appear as just another avatar of globalisation.

As a drive, an impetus, a revolutionary force or ‘spirit’ of modernity, globalisation exhibits features common to what Voegelin called ‘secular religions’. Szakolczai has linked the spread of this wave of changes with the ascetic practices of traditional monasticism (Szakolczai 2013b: 1–17), seeing the West as moving towards a ‘global monastery’. He argued that the contemporary phenomenon of globalisation can be understood as the expansion of a set of inner-worldly ascetic practices, in Weberian sense, which have originated in the Western monastic tradition. The ‘global monastery’ is a world plunged in permanent liminality, and the forty years of communism constitute the best case study for understanding its mechanism.

While colonialism was legitimated as a distorted emanation of the Gospel’s missionary project, modern globalisation was an emanation of the secular religion of neoliberal democracy. One of the striking facts about this phenomenon is, apart from the apparent tendency towards a hegemony of the global, a dialectics of the global/local interplay and an agonism-based kit for ‘doing modernity business’. Wherever it became manifest to a higher or a lesser extent, globalisation appeared not so much as a uniformisation of the secular forms of cultic expression, but rather as a ‘polytheistic’ playground where a plurality of secular cults and novel structures of collective worship – such as nationalisms, leftist ideologies, right-wing ideologies, consumerism, brand cults, music cults, film cults, economic cults etc. – coexist in agonistic dialogue, negotiation, competition, trade, mutual tolerance or conflict. As a framework for the ‘flourishing’ of a series of secular religions – or, to paraphrase Szakolczai, a series of monastic orders –, this playground finds itself in denial of its Jewish and Christian roots (see Kelsen 2012) in spite of its inheriting massively from these roots, such as the linear conception of time, the celebration of a future eschaton and the steady cultivation of divinisation in many spheres of human experience (Horvath et al. 2019).

The ‘global monastery’ did not appear overnight. In the centennial history of the Romanian society’s existence, the dynamics of the global/domestic antinomy can be highlighted across a number of specific time periods.

# Romania in the ‘global monastery’

The *first period* refers to the process of modernisation of Romania during the first decades of the young Romanian state. The global/domestic antinomy translates here into a clash between two ‘monastic movements’: the urge for modernisation and the ‘resistance’ of traditionalist forces – mostly Orthodox Christianity at the time.

Soon, the new spirit of the nation – which had been crystallised following the German model and the Herderian conception of the *Volksgeist* – acquired the attributes of a political religion inspired by both Russian phyletism and German National-Socialism. The Iron Guard, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu’s far-right movement, was the result of a schismogenic mechanism. Nationalism – itself an emanation of the French Revolution – gave birth in Romania, on the one hand, to a West-oriented, progressivist type of love for one’s nation supported by such intellectuals as Eugen (Lovinescu 1924) and, on the other hand, to an Oriental, conservative type of worship of the nation supported by such scholars as the historian Nicolae Iorga or the writer Nichifor Crainic. A particular *niche* of the latter was dominated by the figure of the philosopher Nae Ionescu, the mentor of a young generation of intellectuals, such as Mircea Eliade, Emil Cioran and Constantin Noica. The group showed a certain affinity with the ideals of the Iron Guard, even though they were not members of Codreanu’s movement.

The Guard was heavily loaded with a specific form of this-worldly asceticism. A controversial article that lists the ideals of the Guard had the name of Eliade as author (yet Eliade denied having written it) explicitly invokes the ideal of a monastic-ascetic life elevated at the scale of the whole nation: ‘For never before has a whole nation lived a Christian revolution with its whole being, … never before has a whole people chosen as their life ideal monasticism and as their bride – death.’[8]

The motto chanted by Iron Guard followers, ‘Let the Captain make a country like the holy sun in the sky’ (Tismaneanu 1998: 47), strikingly reminds one of the Messianic appeal to Tsar Ivan III by the Monk Philotheos of Pskov in 16th century Russia: ‘Of all kingdoms in the world, it is in thy royal domain that the holy Apostolic Church shines more brightly than the sun’ (Berdyaev 1972: 10). To desire for one’s country to be as shiny ‘as the sun in the sky’ is common to patriotism everywhere, and may be just an innocent use of a poetic device; yet, at the same time, it may be symptomatic of the worshipping of a nation in the process of self-divinisation (see Horvath et al. 2019): the glory of a country, a state or a nation is meant to inspire feelings of awe, fear and gratefulness similar to the *numinous* experience. The source of this schismogenic mechanism has been theorised by Hobbes and Rousseau, as Wydra explains:

Hobbes refers to a sacred oath as the expression of the fear of that invisible power, which is the worship of God … Rousseau’s solution for taming the self-destructive force of self-love (*amour propre*) resorts to patriotism by the worship of the collective god of the nation … (Wydra 2008: 7)

The *second period*, that of the first Communist regime in Romania, was marked by a massive attempt to imposing the Soviet-style socialism in all the dimensions of social life. The ‘cosmopolite’ (i.e. internationalist) version of Romanian Communism, which was dominated by the figure of the Prime Minister Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, can be seen as a mode of imposing the global over the domestic, and the consequences of this era upon the Romanian society are difficult to assess, given that the credibility of social research at the time was greatly affected by the ideology and the practices of the regime. As a particular type of global monasticism, cosmopolite socialism launched a war against all the movements that existed in the country and were not in line with Soviet ideology. A vast network of prisons and forced labour camps was developed throughout the country on the model of the Soviet Gulag meant to destroy the elites of the country and to create a nation-wide carceral society metaphorically “centred around its prisons” in a paradoxical situation in which the centre and the wall had their meanings turned upside down, as I have argued elsewhere (Benţa 2018: 68). This ‘total city’, as Constantin Dumitresco (1980) called it hinting with irony at St Augustine’s ‘City of God’, is a place where values have been turned upside down, human bonds have been broken, the spirit of community has been perverted and the natural order of the world has been disrupted in its most intimate tissue.

By making use of brute force and electoral frauds, the new power imposed itself as a regime that could not be trusted by the people who were forced to live under the authority of a despotic rule in a corrupt universe and to develop duplicity skills as survival strategies. Unlike Russia, which had experienced the Bolshevik Revolution as a genuine movement (Berdyaev 1972), in Romania as elsewhere in Eastern Europe socialism was brought as an imported revolution which was congruent with hypocrisy and duplicity. The official Messianic narrative of the liberating proletariat could only meet the contrasting reality of an oppressed proletariat and a frustrated peasantry, stirring up hope for a true liberation that would come, obviously, from the West or America. It was a general feeling of having been *left behind* and of constant waiting, for the return of the saviours proved to be forever delayed, a feeling similar to that of Christians waiting for the *parousia* of Christ, which paralleled the eschatological waiting of the official narrative, which claimed that Socialism would be followed inevitably by a New Era of happiness and welfare called Communism.

The *third period*, posthumously labelled as ‘National-Communism’, started with the tendency of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej to distance himself from USSR after the death of Stalin – a drive that was common to the whole Socialist bloc – and continued with the policies of Nicolae Ceaușescu’s regime. This could be seen as a return to a cultural framework based on nationhood and tradition, yet the means and practices of the regime showed that the new ‘monastic life’ was imported from alien cultural spaces of the socialist bloc, such as China. The artificial character of the ‘localism’ that was promoted or tolerated during the second era of the Romanian Communism was obvious in the enthusiasm with which of the post-Communist Romanian society rushed to give up much of its domestic specificity during the post-1989 ‘transition’ period.

The population at large generally distrusted the Communist ideology, a fact noted by American anthropologists Gail Kligman and Katherine Verdery, who realised that Romanians developed a set of skills to help them maintain an effective façade and duplicity (Kligman 1998; Kligman and Verdery 2011; Verdery 1991).

The name of Nicolae Ceaușescu is today associated with the harshest of the Communist dictatorships that has plagued Eastern Europe. The author of a long-term program of governance that spanned over 24 years and produced huge changes in the Romanian society, economy and culture, Ceaușescu was also, in the second part of his regime, the object of a self-imposed personality cult. The Romanian dictator was undoubtedly devoid of personal charisma, as opposed to other dictators who possessed genuine abilities to captivating the masses. However, as it is generally risky to label a particular political leader as a clear trickster or a purely charismatic personality, Romania’s last dictator is no exception. The level of frustration and hatred that the population had accumulated against him was immense (for a while, after the fall of his regime, his name was written uncapitalised in Romanian newspapers), and yet, decades after the 1989 events, the level of genuine nostalgia for his regime is surprisingly high (INSCOP 2015).

Ceaușescu’s era was different from the previous one not only in what the national element was concerned. Among other changes, it marked the end of the Romanian Gulag and brought a wave of fresh economic development, massive industrialisation, deep changes at social level as well as a certain cultural ‘flourishing’, which, in spite of an effective censorship, was facilitated partly due to a limited openness of the regime towards the West. During this era, ‘the global’ was ambivalently synonymous with either the desired Communist future – as there was an irresistible desire of Socialism to acquire global hegemony spreading like a viral infection (Horvath 2008: 28) – or with the corrupt, bourgeois, and imperialist West, which was no less desiring of revolutionary expansion.

If one tried to make a short inventory of the ascetic-monastic practices of the regime, the first that would come to one’s mind were food scarcity, shortage of basic goods, obsession with hard work and frugal life and a very limited freedom of movement. Like a Medieval monastery, Communist Romania was a walled-in country. But the Ceaușescu era brought inner-worldly asceticism to a new level. Just as the life of a monastery involves an exercise at collective *synchronisation* of emotions and states of mind by praying together at the same time, the penetration of radio and television in the country in the 1960s and 1970s has created the situation where virtually a whole nation received the news at the same time, was sad at the same time, laughed at the same time and listened to odes and songs at the same time. In this line, perhaps it should not come as a surprise the fact that the 1989 Revolution against the Ceaușescu regime was the first media-driven revolution.

Yet, the Romanian Revolution did not kill its monsters. The truth about the sacrificial event that took place in December 1989 is still in the dark. As it tends to happen with most revolutions, the monster just turned around in its nest. If there exists any certainty about the Romanian 1989 Revolution three decades after the events, it is the fact that the new structures of power have emerged using trickster stratagems out of the old ones. The problem with the 1989 events – the passage from a Communist dictatorship to a democratic regime – was that it meant the switch of a political regime floating in permanent liminality (socialism) with another political regime floating in another sea of permanent liminality (secular neo-liberal democracy): Ciomoş (2017: 7–14) noted that the 1989 moment was the replacement of a revolution with another, which risked placing Romania into a permanent ‘state’ of exception.

In the *fourth period*, the ‘global’ began being synonymous with such desirable adjectives as ‘European’, ‘Western’ or ‘modern.’ In the post-1989 era, ‘Europa’ was a powerful keyword carrier of salvation-related meanings all over Eastern Europe (Drakulić 2001). Citizens of these countries, who had experienced Communism, shared a quasi-unanimous desire of turning into ‘Europeans,’ which translated ambivalently into their country joining the European Union, their country becoming more European in terms of values, policies or life-style, getting a chance to emigrate or simply getting a chance to embrace Western customs, culture and fashion. The ‘European dream’ seemed to come true for Romanians in 2007, when their country became a member of the EU; by that time, a large population exodus had already taken place; the Western life-style was adopted particularly in large cities, which deepened the contrast between large cities on the one hand and small cities and rural areas on the other hand.

In this period, one could see the professionalisation of many spheres of activity along with the commodification of a higher realm of human experience. The media (Pro TV in particular in the 1990s), were an important carrier of the new consumerism-oriented values, which included its self-subversive stratagems. A whole new elite started coming to life and a whole new underground was invented to subvert the values of the new elite. For example, the first hip-hop band in Romania to enjoy wide success was BUG Mafia, who promoted a culture that was completely new in the country: for the first time, a Romanian band shouted lines that were full of obscenity, violence and subversive anti-system ideas. But BUG Mafia were successful in their anti-system enterprise precisely because they performed as a very well-organised business, making use of the very system they were overtly subverting and adopting a purely ‘capitalist spirit’: in an interview to *Agerpress*, a member of the band said that they succeeded because they adopted a professional way of working by delivering a high quality product following the rules of modern business (Ghiţă 2016). This is a truly paradoxical situation, when anti-system and subversive discourse is being developed in the very register of the capitalist system: subversion itself is being professionalised, corporatised, bureaucratised and packed into clear procedures and recipes. The meaning of this paradox is the fact that export of the liberal democracy from the West to such countries as Romania involved an export of both the values and the anti-values of the system in the form of a ‘performative tandem’. In other words, when the global monastery exports its model to new realms, it does not export a world or a set of rules and values; it exports the *front line* of a war zone.

The post-1989 era brought a devaluing of truth and righteousness (political lustration never took place and little was done to heal the injustice of the Communist past) along with an explosion of the media industry and a generalised state of confusion and never-ending scandals, which can point to one direction: an acute crisis of *parrhēsia*. During the 1990s, the publications that enjoyed the highest credibility were not mainstream newspapers, but marginal magazines specialised in humour, cartoons, derision, parody, satire and laughter, such as *Cațavencu* and, later, *Plai cu boi*. Such publications included sections of investigation journalism. Later, in the 2000s, Romanian media would reach its climax as a stage of trickster figures dancing in perpetual movements of ridicule, grotesque and unreality.

The *fifth period* is one in which the global-local antinomy turned even more ambiguous given the massive emigration, EU integration, increasing cosmopolitism; the quasi-universal access to the technologies of communication have led to a situation where the local is easily ‘transportable’ (thus, de-localisable) – as it is the case, for instance, of the Romanian communities in Spain or Italy – and the ‘local’ collective identity is floating and dependent of the discursive pole in the sense of Zygmunt Bauman’s ‘liquid modernity’.

This era, which started when Romania joined NATO in 2004 and later the EU, was marked by massive migration, the adoption of US-inspired practices in politics and governance, the adoption of EU regulations, a long-term media-centred, dramatised ‘war against corruption’ modelled to America’s ‘war on terror’, controversial secret protocols between institutions of the state and a series of long-term guerrilla wars at the top level of governance (involving the President, the Government, the Parliament or the Constitutional Court).

Being now officially part of a supra-national entity was a good reason for Romanians to revisit their nationalist conceptions, to try and get rid of the nation’s luggage of mythology and idolatry, as it was seen by such historians as Lucian Boia (1997, 2013), Sorin Mitu (1997) and others and to discuss the forms and ‘avatars of Romanian exceptionalism’ (Mihăilescu 2017: 43–71). In the context of the sheer disregard for historical or factual truth in the time of the Communist regime, the enterprise of cleansing history books from inaccuracies and exaggerations may be a legitimate step in the realisation of a meaningful order of communal life. However, such an enterprise, which focuses on factuality and knowledge, may overlook more profound dimensions of life, such as verticality and healing.

# Carnival, Dada and the absurd reality

Every era of modern Romania had its own frontline between friends and foes, its monastery walls and its ascetic methods. Every time there was a schismogenic mechanism at work or perhaps it was the same mechanism that propagated itself across history. The problem with the conflict between the two trickster-driven attitudes that have propagated throughout the Romanian modernity is that it hindered every attempt at restoring the meaning and harmony of life by a constant flux of confusion, meaninglessness, despair, nostalgia, faithlessness and powerlessness. The result was a series of movements of artists and writers[9] who were concerned with the world’s lack of meaning, coherence, harmony and love.

Liminal events of communities, such as wars, revolutions or catastrophes come unexpectedly. Once they are over and the community returns to a state of equilibrium and order is restored, liminality is transformed into sacred history, and the life of the community starts going on again as orderly time. Liminal periods are essential for transformative experiences of individuals or communities. However, they are not always experienced as *fully meaningful*. The experience of death, disease, revolution or war can inflict deep wounds, which may remain unhealed, incomprehensible, absurd or incoherent to the experiencing self. Life cannot follow a graceful and flourishing path from one generation to the other without a proper labour of understanding, acceptance, forgiveness and amnesty. This is why debt, rancour and unforgivenness needs to be settled over large generational cycles, as it used to be prescribed by the 50 years jubilees in ancient Mesopotamian civilisations or with the ancient Israelites (see Bergsma 2007).

When meaninglessness becomes permanent, society faces outbursts of an absurdist, Kafkaesque or Dadaesque atmosphere (Kafka or Tzara), and slowly turns into a grand carnival (Bulgakov, Hamvas, Caragiale or Szakolczai), a world of rhinoceros (Ionesco) or a nonsensical universe where the rules of society have become illogical and incongruent (Beckett, Urmuz or Adamov).

Not surprisingly, Romanian culture proved to be a sadly fertile ground for such artistic creations (four of the names mentioned above are Romanian). An atmosphere imbued with the carnivalesque and the absurd dominates the writings of Romanian playwright Ion Luca Caragiale – notably *Carnival*,[10] which had its premiere in Bucharest in 1885, and still dominates the post-1989 society in Romania; this ‘spirit’ has reappeared incredibly untouched after 40 years of dictatorship and grew grotesquely in spiralling fashion due to the amplifying power of the media which exacerbates the use of ridicule and satire, and is widely recognised today as pervasive in the country’s political life.

Romanian modernity knew its own moments of trauma that have remained more or less in a state of meaning-dissonance. Such moments are the opposite of grace, charisma and flourishing; they constitute the liminality that has not been accounted for. If one wanted to make an inventory of those events, one would probably start by mentioning the 1907 peasant revolt where nearly ten thousand people have been killed; the First World War, which has involved meaningless sacrifices and has led absurd situations, such as Transylvanian Romanians fighting against Romanians from the Kingdom of Romania; the sacrifices of Second World War and the ambivalent feelings of Romanians for the Iron Guard or Marshal Ion Antonescu; the Communist repression of the Romanian Gulag; the crimes of the Securitate, the crimes against the elite and the generalised distrust instilled by the practice of denouncing one’s neighbour; the 1989 Revolution, with the ambivalent mingling of two sacrifices: one performed by the Ceaușescu regime, the other by the new power through a staged terrorist invasion and the scapegoating of the dictator; the ‘mineriades’ of the 1990s.

As traumatic collective events are not healed by the mere passage of time and by the birth of new generations, their presence may keep manifesting itself in the form of a certain prevalence of the absurd, an inability to coexist in syntony and synergy, an inability to engage in common projects and an inefficiency in reaching true peace. Peace can be reached only by *coming to peace*, apology, forgiveness, truth, acceptance and by applying collective therapy in terms of justice and political memory (Máté-Tóth 2019: 101–162).

Romanians need an account of the history of their meaningless and disharmonic experiences, which are pure emanations of trickster leadership. This may pave the ground for the emergence of charismatic leadership, which was arguably absent in the post-1989 political life of the country. Corruption cannot be eliminated using recipes of governance and policy change strategies, as think-tank experts based in Brussels or in Washington, DC suggest. It cannot be eliminated using anti-corruption wars, because the idea of an institutional framework built from the ground up for this purpose – as the Romanian National Anti-Corruption Directorate (known in Romania by the acronym DNA) was – carries the utopian presumption of the possibility of a group of unblemished bureaucrats who will investigate the rest of the country’s bureaucrats and can only lead to a ‘witch hunt’ similar to the Inquisition of the Middle Ages.

# Conclusion

We saw that self-contradiction and duplicity lies at the heart of political leadership’s schismogenesis; the march of modernity cannot take place in the absence of an agonistic fight between opposing trickster forces. In the case of Romania, the schismogenic mechanism manifests itself in the fight between two Post-Byzantine exilic stages: the post-Byzantine exile of Romania and the Post-Byzantine global exile of the modern world. In a way, as Romania finds itself in a constant struggle to escape being at ‘the margins of Europe’ and become modern, the whole modernity finds itself ‘at the margins of Europe’.

Both drives have to do with trickster leadership and both are caught in a vicious circle; it is no wonder that Romania is today at the same place it was 100 or 150 years ago in terms of her absurd and carnivalesque atmosphere if not worse. All her revolutions – just like *any* revolution (Horvath 2013) – were mere carousels of history, merry-go-round experiences in the grand carnival of modernity.

Global modernity does not teach forgiveness. The assumption of a human being thrown into an amoral universe, whose actions have no consequence farther than the event where it took place, makes forgiveness a meaningless effort: what is the point of wasting my energy in trying to be sorry for my mistakes as long as I can live just as happily and prosperously without the hassle? Modern rationalism encourages me to apologise only if this is the algorithmic optimal solution offered to me by rational choice in the logic of trade-off. Globalist modernity is still mesmerised by the Cartesian *cogito*, where the existence of the other is bracketed under the spell of doubt. Truth, healing, meaningfulness and verticality are only possible in a retributive universe and require one to perform the exact opposite act: to bracket oneself in order to leave room for the other, for the world and for transcendence.

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# Notes

[1] The formation of modern Romania took place roughly in two stages following the crisis and disintegration of the large empires that had dominated the area for centuries, the Russian Empire, the Habsburg (later, Austro-Hungarian) Empire, and the Ottoman Empire: the first in 1859, with the unification of Moldavia and Wallachia and the second in 1918, when Transylvania became part of Romania.

[2] The feeling of hopelessness is very deeply imbued in the Romanian spirit, as portrayed in the ballad ‘Mioritza’.

[3] In French original: ‘Que voulez-vous, nous sommes ici aux portes de l’Orient, où tout est pris à la légère …’ (Caragiale 1929).

[4] ‘Forme fără fond’, in Romanian.

[5] For an extensive discussion of Plato’s political ideas and their relevance to the modern world, see Chapters 3 and 4 of this book.

[6] The Transylvanian historian George (Bariţ 1887: 39–41), in a time when Transylvania was a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, expressed the need for more studies to describe and understand the culture and life-style of Romanians living in the villages of the empire and advocated for clear policies to reducing their ‘civilisational backwardness’ (‘înapoierea’, in Romanian).

[7] In an 1934 essay, Mircea Eliade commented on the peculiar world-rejection attitude of Romanians: ‘I don’t think there is another European country where so many intellectuals feel ashamed of their own people, frantically counting its weaknesses, deriding its past and admitting loudly that they would prefer to belong, by birth, to a different country’ (Eliade 1934: 194–195, my translation; in Romanian original: ‘Nu cred că se află ţară europeană în care să existe atâţia intelectuali cărora să le fie ruşine de neamul lor, să-i caute cu atâta frenezie defectele, să-şi bată joc de trecutul lui şi să mărturisească, în gura mare, că ar prefera să aparţină, prin naştere, altei ţări.’)

[8] In Romanian original: ‘Dar niciodată un neam întreg n-a trăit o revoluţie creştină cu toată fiinţa sa, (…) niciodată un neam întreg nu şi-a ales ca ideal de viaţă călugăria şi ca mireasă – moartea’ (Eliade 1937: 1–2).

[9] For a thorough investigation of the way modernity’s permanent liminality is reflected in novels, see (Szakolczai (2016a, 2017a).

[10] The title of the play was translated in English in various versions, such as *Carnival Adventures*, *What’s on*, *Only during a carnival*, *Carnival stuff* and *Carnival scenes*.