

TRANSYLVANIA ACROSS EMPIRES. MANUELA BOATCĂ AND ANCA PÂRVULESCU INTERVIEWED BY ÁGOTA ÁBRÁN

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ÁÁ: The articles that came out of your research project entitled *Creolizing the Modern: Transylvania across Empires* are absolutely fascinating especially from a methodological point of view. Could you explain what inter-imperiality means and how you use Rebreanu's novel *Ion* to showcase Transylvanian rurality as a place where imperial and peripheral dynamics play out?

AP: We use a transdisciplinary positionality—one of us is in the humanities and one in the social sciences—to analyze Transylvania's unique historical predicament at the intersection of a number of empires (Habsburg, Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, Russian). Methodologically, the gesture of locating a region “across empires,” as we do with Transylvania, offers an alternative to the “ethnic lens” of methodological nationalism. For us, Transylvania is an exemplary multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-confessional region of the world, a condition stemming from its exemplary inter-imperial positioning. In dialogue with the work of Laura Doyle (her book just came out from Duke), we think of inter-imperiality as the condition of being located between multiple, conflicting empires vying for power in a region. We argue that the unequal agencies of various subjects in such region are placed into sharp relief when traced through the prism of a negotiation across empires.

MB: We also employ the methodological lens of reading “across empires,” empirically anchored in Transylvania's history, in order to bridge two otherwise disconnected theoretical fields. Textbook knowledge of postcolonial theory typically posits the emergence of postcolonialism as both a descriptive term and an academic field of study as occurring in parallel to the creation of the Third World at the end of World War II. The newly independent states that resulted from the administrative decolonization of European empires in Asia and Africa formed the object of what would later become postcolonial studies. This conceptualization has tended to neglect an array of world regions that—for very different reasons—did not correspond either to the category of the Third World or to the conventional postcolonial timeline. Among them were regions that had achieved independence long before the end of World War such as Latin America, areas that continue to function as colonies today, such as Puerto Rico, the British Virgin Islands, and the French Antilles, but also European regions with a pronounced inter-imperial history, such as Transylvania.

ÁÁ: Not long ago I was asked to write about my perspective on what it means to be a Hungarian minority in Romania, and I refused, because I always felt that, when talking about it I reinforce some kind of nationalistic concept of Hungarianness, or else the term ‘minority’ reinforces already an idea of nation-state (where other ethnics are ‘minorities’), while the whole discussion often leaves out much

more vulnerable groups, be it ethnic, racial or class. So I found Pârvulescu's work on racial triangulation and your project's focus on the relationship between ethnicities as a whole, eye opening, because it could tackle the question of the diversity of Transylvania from a very empathetic (but not romantic) and careful point of view, where the understanding and performance of the different ethnicities all depend on one another as well as on the economic and political (imperial) context. And obviously, while this means a relational methodology, it also shows how privileges are built upon and against each other. For those who did not read your articles I wonder if you could summarise this dynamic both within a larger European and a Transylvanian context?

AP: As you know, the historiography of Transylvania largely revolves around a Romanian/Hungarian tension, often framed—as a function of methodological nationalism—as a majority/minority problem. On the Romanian side, the focus is often on the Hungarian state's oppression of the Romanian population of Transylvania, which it sometimes triangulates with the German minority. Such approaches rarely consider the larger ethnic and racial field formed by Hungarians, Romanians, Germans, Roms, Jews, and Armenians. This means that the category of race is most often subsumed under discussions of nationalism and therefore not theorized as such. Rebreanu's Romani characters, however, radically trouble the narrative of Romanian oppression at the hands of the Hungarian state. As you know, we use Liviu Rebreanu's highly canonical novel *Ion* (1920) as an extended case study for our project. One of the chapters of our book shows that, however oppressed Rebreanu's main character Ion is, he can be violent, physically and verbally, to the Romani characters in the novel. We have been told again and again that Romanian nationalism of the nineteenth century was premised on the linguistic, cultural, political, economic and religious contact between Romanian-speaking populations across the Carpathians. What historians of nationalism rarely acknowledge is that racial prejudice stemming from the history of enslavement also traveled. Our reframing of the discussion reveals the notion of freedom developed in the context of Romanian Transylvanian nationalism to be profoundly racialized.

MB: This reframing also helps us distinguish processes that cut across nation-state borders, past and present. On the one hand, we engage the constant tension between Habsburg, Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires as inter-imperial rivalry. On the other, we argue that empires not only interact with each other *as* state formations, but that connections, exchange and mobilization *across* empires as well as *below* the state level take place simultaneously. In distinguishing between *inter-imperial rivalries* and *trans-imperial processes*, we build on Kristin Hoganson and Jay Sexton's recent work on trans-imperial connections. We are thus able to disentangle the fact that the different ethnic groups engaged in anti-imperial struggles in Transylvania negotiated their claims inter-imperially, that is, between empires, but they also navigated existing imperial and colonial hierarchies of race, gender and class so as to advance their own interests, that is, they acted *trans-imperially*.

ÁÁ: Your project has mainly an historical perspective. How do you see inter-imperiality and ethnic and racial dynamics play out in Transylvania today?

MB: We cannot understand the role played by nationalisms in the region today without a *longue durée* perspective on how it emerged inter- and trans-imperially. Revisiting “old” questions is thus a way of excavating their present relevance. Today's policies of ethnicization are anchored in many of the inter-imperial conflicts we address. Viktor Orbán offered Ukraine to introduce dual citizenship for Hungarians in Transcarpathia to “remedy Trianon” in 2017. A few years earlier, a survey revealed that 94% of the Romanian respondents believed that Romanian citizenship should be revoked to the ethnic Roms who commit crimes abroad. Some of today's politicians still refer to the novel themselves. When

Ion and Ana's real-life daughter turned 95 in 2019, the vice president of the Social-Democratic Party in Bistrița county paid her a visit, which he described with the words: "Today, I went to pay homage to the living symbol of the Transylvanian village as it was described by Liviu Rebreanu in *Ion*. And granny Saveta from Prislop, Ion and Ana's daughter, is here to testify to 95 years of life in Transylvania!". The politician's framing of his visit clearly serves a political function and at the same time makes a territorial claim to Năsăud County, the inter-imperial border region, for a national project whose centenary had just been celebrated the year before, in 2018.

AP: Rebreanu's novel is arguably the most canonical text in the Romanian language. Generations of students have read it as mandatory reading. Even if they have not read it, its canonicity assures the widespread recognition of its plot and characters. Cultural documents like *Ion* have, in a sense, formed us. I'll give you three examples of contemporary resonances of our project. In one of our chapters, we discuss the gendered dynamics of the struggle over land in Transylvania, resulting in violence against women (the character of Ana is repeatedly beaten by her father and her husband). This problem has sadly retained its urgency to this day. Second, we write about the complex multilingualism in Transylvania and its politics. We believe our account resonates with contemporary debates about the use of language in the public sphere, which it attempts to shift. Third, we know that in time racialization sediments into stereotypes and idiomatic language. Unfortunately, racialized language has very much remained operative in contemporary media and the larger cultural field. These are just three examples of how a historical account focused in the year 1920 simultaneously functions as a history of the present.