

TOUCHY ISSUES. HISTORIANS, EXPECTATIONS AND CONFLICTING HISTORIES IN POST-SOCIALIST ROMANIA

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The paper will try to focus on the pragmatics of contemporary Romanian historical myth-making, foregrounding mostly the boundary-defining characteristics of the historical myths at issue. In an attempt to survey both 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 the better understanding of Romanian historical myth-making as a post-socialist phenomenon.

“We are the masters of this land”¹

On November 24, 1992, Hungarian citizens reported to one of the local newspapers that in Cluj, one of the major cities of Romania, populated 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 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.² In

¹ The quotation is part of a very popular Romanian folk song, sung both 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 pământ stăpâni”).

² The figure of the represented, King Matthias is itself a controversial one in XIX-XXth 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, Crișana and

the following I will try to approach the events taking the use of historical myths as the basis and focal point of the discussion.

The occasions when and where the historical myths are employed are not contingent and neutral regarding their (actual/on-the-spot) meaning: the occasion of the employment thus can be considered a meaningful aspect of the pragmatics of the historical myths. It is visually and logically not contingent that Funar Gheorghe and the party (and the cultural foundation) backing him (then The Party of the Romanian Unity, respectively The Romanian Stove Cultural Foundation) chose the 1st of December, the Romanian national holiday to place the inscription on the statue. The local organizers of the commemorative acts also emphasised the double symbolic element underlying the holiday in the city of Cluj: according to them, since on the 1st 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.³ The 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 programme of the commemorations: “The celebrations of the national day of Romania will begin at ten o’clock in front of the statue of Michael the Brave [in the Michael the Brave 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].”⁴ 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 Michael the Brave standing – in the very pragmatics of the respective commemorative act – for all the Romanian heroes who died or lived for the Romanian nation.⁵ In this complex framework that

Maramureş among themselves and also with the Romanian Old Kingdom (Vechiul 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 XXth century alludes to 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 planned to be placed again on the statue.

³ For this argument see, for instance: *Ziua națională a României*, in “Adevărul de Cluj”, December 1, 1992, no.767, p. 3.

⁴ Gheorghe Funar, *Comunicat*, in „Adevărul de Cluj”, November 28-30, 1992, no. 766, p. 1.

⁵ “In the Michael the Brave Square the wreath-laying commenced in honour of the heroes of the nation [...] The Holy Father Irineu Bistrițeanu celebrated an extraordinary mass in honour of all the heroes who died for the ancient land.” Dorin Serghif, *1 Decembrie: a fi român*, in “Adevărul de Cluj”, December 2, 1992, p. 1.

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.⁶ So the context of the historical myth of *being sui generis* favours the embedding of an uncertain element into a certain historical and commemorative structure, ascribing from the meaning of the latter to that of the former.

The choice of the Romanian national holiday, a political rather than a neutral type of holiday⁷, politicizes every segment of the commemorations. On the other hand the nature of the national holiday itself is to magnify the otherwise insignificant elements to the level of the national⁸, 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 misbehaviour 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

⁶ So in the process of the Romanian affirmation of the myth of being *sui generis* while the Hungarian ethnic minority (and also a few Romanians) emphasize the differences between the two ethnic communities, the Romanian one emphasizes the similarities in order to appropriate the canonical figure of the Hungarian king.

⁷ 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, signalling 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 Hungarian ethnic minority it may invoke the end of the Austro-Hungarian (Dual) Monarchy. This argument has a rare and taboo character, but it is an existing argument. For instance, the 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 1 represents the nostalgia for 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] don’t expect the Hungarians to do the impossible and appeals to the Romanians for a mutual understanding and respect for each other’s feelings.” Rodica Costea, *Semnificația zilei de 1 Decembrie pentru minoritatea maghiară*, in “Adevărul de Cluj”, December 1, 1992, no. 767, p. 3.

According to the Romanian Mircea Iorgulescu 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.” Mircea Iorgulescu, *Provocarea*, in “Dilema”, October 29–November 4, 1999, p. 4.

⁸ Cf. in general: Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors. Symbolic Action in Human Society*, Cornell U. P., Ithaca – London, 1974, p. 105; regarding specific cases: D. Rihtman-Augustin, *The Metamorphosis of Festivals in a Socialist Country*, in “Ethnologica Europaea”, XX, 1990.

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 nation, the claims of primevalness by positioning Michael the Brave as a new founder of the Romanian nation (certainly neglecting the dynastic and not language or ethnically based character of the province Michael 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 founding⁹ 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 attribution 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 within), 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 became 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 Presidency¹⁰, respectively the local authorities, other than the mayor) and the symbolic and concrete power¹¹ of the placing of the inscription. So, *the intensity and actual semantics of the historical myths depends also on the occasion and 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 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 attribution 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

⁹ Ernst Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1983.

¹⁰ Of course, the nationalist discourse (anterior to the then approaching national elections) of president Ion Iliescu and of some of the political parties cannot be neglected either.

¹¹ The national authority in matters of protection of monuments and historic buildings protested in vain against the placement of the inscription, considering it the infringement of the law.

that the endeavour to place the Iorga inscription to the statue already coincided with an attempt to place Romanian flags on the statue: “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.”¹² The communiqué of the National Board for the Protection of Historic Monuments and Sites¹³ 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 the immediate vicinity of this.”¹⁴ The mayor took the recommendation literally and erected also the flagpoles he had mentioned earlier, literally framing the space of the statue. The endeavour to appropriate and reinterpret the history of and the history represented by the statue can be viewed in an interesting manner if taking into account the next step in the alteration of the public space of the centre exactly in front of the statue: as shown by 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 view the results that led to the excavation of the remains of a Roman settlement were not surprising at all since in the 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.¹⁵ 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. The protest of the Hungarians (who saw in the excavations an additional sign 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 Romanians¹⁶, so they were integrated into the founding narrative aforementioned.

¹² Bogdan Eduard, *UDMR este o organizație teroristă*, in “Evenimentul Zilei”, December 3, 1992, no. 140, p. 5. Hungarian account of the statements of the mayor: *Az RMD SZ terrorista szervezet*, in “Európai Idő”, December 9– December 22, 1992, no. 49-50, p. 3.

¹³ Published in facsimile in “Szabadság”, December 3, 1992, no. 236, p. 1.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ For an interview with the archeologists leading the excavations see: *Város Kolozsvár alatt?*, in „Szabadság”, July 11, 1992, no. 131, p. 1.

¹⁶ 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]”.

On the 1st 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. The mayor’s office. Cluj-Napoca.” (see picture 2). The point of time chosen for the unveiling of the small statue, the place chosen for the statue, the simultaneous wreath-laying ceremony (like usual 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 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 endeavour to actualize the myth also on a local level. Cluj abounds in monuments built by the Hungarians: from the present-day headquarters of the main university of Romania (Babeş-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 colours. The benches painted in the colours 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 a 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 located in Cluj county): in this case they rather underline the belonging to a certain identity that 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, respectively 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 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 one”¹⁷, “[i]n the eyes of the law and of the authorities all the citizens are equal without any privileges and discriminations”¹⁸, and “[i]n Romania the dispositions of the constitution are obligatory.”¹⁹

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 Funar Gheorghe can also be interpreted from the point of view of the (literary / historiographic) genres they employ. Historiography rarely considers questions of genre since they are tacitly considered transparent and hardly relevant in the constitution of meaning.²⁰ In the first decades of 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 historiography – with the *ego-histoire* type of turns – seems to reinterpret the value of the first person-narrative (literary) genres in historiography, from the genres like 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 interpretive 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.

¹⁷ The 13th paragraph of the Romanian Constitution.

¹⁸ The quotations make reference to the 16th paragraph of the national constitution, the mayor usually using both the former and the latter paragraph in an idiosyncretic way to deny the rights of the ethnic minorities to use their language in the education and administrative system, qualifying such types of requests as being privileges and discriminating the ethnic Romanians.

¹⁹ The 15th paragraph of the Romanian Constitution.

²⁰ Even Hayden White and those representing the linguistic and cultural turn in historiographic studies rarely mention genre, they generally speaking about narratives: cf. e.g. Hayden White, *The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins U. P., 1987, p. 1-57.

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 rivalling histories of the inscription etc.). The initiators of the placement of the inscription – headed by the mayor itself – beside the classical type of historiographic reasoning (or at least beside 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 are often accepted as truth-producing genres regarding Romanian diachronic or synchronic events: gossip and rumour. The use of this 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 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 socialist times the so-called “politics of duplicity”²¹ 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. The gossip and the 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 rumour and the attribution of a high value of probability and truth to them in general, made these genres be 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 come to have a paradigmatic ethnicized semantics, i.e. they are misused so as to demonize ethnic groups. This type of usage has a certain tradition already 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.

²¹ For the introduction of the concept regarding the political regime of Ceauşescu and the application of the term on a specific problem, that of social and biological reproduction during Romanian socialism see: Gail Kligman, *Politica duplicităţii. Controlul reproducerii în România lui Ceauşescu*, trad. Marilena Dumitrescu, Bucureşti, Ed. Humanitas, 2000, p. 47-52 (originally: Gail Kligman, *The Politics of Duplicity. Controlling Reproduction in Ceauşescu's Romania*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, California, University of California Press, 1998).

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.²² The same paradigm may include the statements according to which the Democratic Alliance of the Hungarians is a terrorist society²³, the Huns (and not the Hungarians) entered Europe in the years 900-1000 AD coming also from today's territory of India²⁴, the Hungarians of the Hungarian counties of Romania committed "brutal deeds" and "acted in hords like a thousand year ago"²⁵, "Ceaușescu 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 Ceaușescu's end was decided by the Great Powers"²⁶. The textual strategy that often backs 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 manner wholly different from it. This type of text criticism is actually typical concerning 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 in the spreading of historical myths.

So in the context of the different types of historical myths that occur within the 1992 Cluj events (and not only)²⁷ *these genres prove a highly*

²² See for instance Dorin Serghie, *Domnul primar Gheorghe Funar îi amendează pe organizatorii manifestației U.D.M.R.*, in "Adevărul de Cluj", no 773, December 9, 1992, p. 1; *Precizări necesare cu prilejul așa-zisului bicentinar al Teatrului și Operei Maghiare din Cluj-Napoca*, in *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 Timișoara 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 Timișoara 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, p. 1.

²³ Bogdan Eduard, *UDMR este o organizație teroristă – a apreciat dl Gheorghe Funar*, in "Evenimentul Zilei", December 3, 1992, no. 140, p. 5.

²⁴ Csók Etelka, Andreas Oplatka, *Szeretne-e ön ma és itt magyar lenni, polgármester úr?*, in „Szabadság”, July 17, 1992, no. 137, p. 3.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ 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 in treating the question along the my first case-study.

effective and fit media for the spreading and success of the very same historical myths. According to this experiences: the effectiveness (including its boundary-making character) of an historical myth may be in direct ratio to the genres, the poetics, respectively the politics of the (historical) genres it is employed within.

“[L]et the young shock us”²⁸(?)

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.²⁹ Several days later sixty-four deputies – the whole Opposition and some deputies from the then governing parties, too – signed for 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 Minister of Education and at the same time rector of Babeş-Bolyai University (where the textbook in question was composed), intellectuals, the Romanian diaspora of Paris³⁰, many historians protested against the motion and considered the textbook as being 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.³¹

According to several deputies the textbook “strikes out the national-patriotic content from the educational process”³². 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 controversial aspect was a critical attitude towards the mythologies constructed along the Romanian nation-formation (e.g. the myth of the concerted Daco-Roman founding of the nation, a historical 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 Michael the Brave, who had been constructed as a foremost leader of an allegedly common Romanian state). The authors even introduced the present-day world into the framework of the

²⁸ Adrian Cioroianu, *Șo pă Sorin Mitu*, in “Dilema”, October 15-29, 1999.

²⁹ Sorin Mitu (supervisor), Lucia Copoeru, Ovidiu Pecican, Virgiliu Țărău, Liviu Țărău, *Istoria românilor. Manual pentru clasa a XIII-a*, București, Sigma Publishing House, 1999.

³⁰ For the declaration of the Romanian diaspora from Paris see: *Diaspora română din Paris – de partea manualului de istorie*, in “Evenimentul Zilei”, November 16, 1999, p. 3.

³¹ For a synopsis of the motion of no confidence see: Cornel Nistorescu, *Bulă cu papion*, in “Evenimentul Zilei”, November 16, 1999, p. 1.

³² *Parlamenti vita a tizenkettedikes törvénykönyvről*, in “Szabadság”, November 14, 1999, p. 8.

textbook, considering it worthy of historical analysis: contemporary personalities, from famous TV presenters to former anti-communist human rights fighters were included in 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 manner similar to the “legendary heroes”.³³

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 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 characteristics 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 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 Europe³⁴ selectively, disproportionately and not at all in harmony with the historical truth”.

So the motion not only recommended concrete and immediate action, but also gives a sketchy explanation to the way such a deed could have ever occurred: it seeks explanations outside the community so as 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 having 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 popular TV-show the chief editor of the textbook was attacked for having a Hungarian wife and having formerly accepted the support of a foreign foundation 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.³⁵ The newspaper entitled “Curentul”

³³ See for instance: *Mașina de vot a Puterii a respins moțiunea îndreptată împotriva manualului lui Mitu*, in “Curentul”, October 17, 1999.

³⁴ The respective recommendation was aimed at improving the Bill of minority rights, especially after the serial complaints of the representatives of the Hungarian ethnic minority.

³⁵ For an account of this episode see: Alina Iordache, *Ei/noi evreii și manualul de istorie*, in “Dilema”, October 29–November 4, 1999, p. 2.

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.³⁶

So the discussion employs a myth that claims 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 judgements that are to be made. And it has also another characteristics, 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. Notably that the discourse that 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 trying to destroy good and valuable things and threatening the identity of the community itself. Many historical myths operate on binary principles³⁷ and not only include, but also exclude; provide not only a positive and valuable picture, but also more or less firm borders and a symmetrically *other* 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, the 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 the *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

³⁶ *Profesorii maghiari din România cer elevilor să rupă copertile manualelor ungare pentru a nu se vedea că provin din Ungaria. Banii și voința Budapestei nu înfrâng legile vecine Ungariei*, in “Curentul”, October 17, 1992, respectively *Mașina de vot a Puterii a respins moțiunea îndreptată împotriva manualului lui Mitu*, in “Curentul”, October 17, 1992.

³⁷ For excellent comments on this type of structures and the way enemy-construction uses them: Reinhart Koselleck, *Feindbegriffe*, 1994; Carl Schmitt, *Über das Verhältnis der Begriffe Krieg und Feind*, 1938; George Schwab, *Enemy or Foe: A Conflict of Modern Politics*, 1987; Kenneth Burke, *Rhetoric of Hitler's "Battle"*, 1941; Murray Edelman, *The Construction and Uses of Political Enemies*, 1988; Paul Ricoeur, *Violence et langage*, 1967.

to the strategies, the core of the world-view and the type of discourse used by the attitude it tries to protect / speak for. Indeed, in this specific case the viewpoint that tries to defend 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 main author of the text-book was that by having a Hungarian wife and by having received the occasional support of 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 legitimises 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 which it speaks and also solves the painstaking problem of identifying the cause of the allegedly illegitimate nature of the textbook. The framework this argument employs outlines the different logic according to which the process of vindicating the historical myths works in this case. 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 sole producers of *the truth* regarding the 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 homogeneously 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 sought 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 look at 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 Minister of Education Andrei Marga 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: “This textbook – like all the other alternative textbooks – 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: i.e. a modern, scholarly open view on history”.³⁸ But already this first detailed reaction of the minister contained an argument that recurs 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”.³⁹ Or, as a councillor 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.”⁴⁰ 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”⁴¹ 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.”⁴² 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 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”⁴³; 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 of the book; an influential (and bellicose) journalist puts forward the proposal to return to the single history textbook (and implicitly to a single Romanian history).⁴⁴

³⁸ Klárik Attila, *Marga miniszter és az i-re tett pont...*, in “Romániai Magyar Szó”, October 13, 1999, p. 1.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ *Szakemberek dolga minősíteni a tankönyveket*, in “Szabadság”, October 9, 1999, no. 236, p. 1.

⁴¹ *Parlament előtt a vitatott történelemkönyv. Asztalos: a képviselőház túllépte hatáskörét*, in “Szabadság”, October 13, no. 239, p. 8.

⁴² Gál Mária, *Bukarestben győzött a józan ész. Kihallgatták Andrei Margát tankönyvvügyben*, in “Szabadság”, October 14, 1999, no. 240, p. 16.

⁴³ Adrian Cioroianu, *Puşcăriaşi şi academicienii*, in “Dilema”, October 29–November 4, 1999, p. 3.

⁴⁴ Mircea Vasilescu, *Cum se naşte un “caz”*, in “Dilema”, October 29–November 4, 1999, p. 3; Adrian Cioroianu, *Şo pă Sorin Mitu!*, in “Dilema”, October 29–November 4, 1999, p. 3.

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. Another relevant aspect of the problem that this blurring of the borders I am speaking about occurs with a particular intensity exactly around questions of the national past.

All these aspects are important because – as we could have already noted – 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 specialists⁴⁵ (not to speak about his attempt to erect a statue in the memory of somebody convicted for criminal behaviour during the war⁴⁶ and to recently place the bust of the same person in the assembly room of the local city council against the dispositions of the law). Putting together these 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 further the approach. A Hungarian literary historian, Katalin Hász-Feher refers to the nineteenth-century Hungarian (and broadly Eastern European) notions [!] of literature 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. She derives the notion of *integrated* from its Latin stem, meaning “intact”, “whole”, “untouched”, “complete” and refers to a paper of Plumpe and Werber using the notion in the same way to mark a common endeavour of the avant-garde of the 1910s-1930s to restore the original, broad notion of literature

⁴⁵ For a detailed interview with the supervisor historian of the excavations, the director of the Historical Museum see: Gál Mária, *Kifürkészhetetlen a főtéri gödrök sorsa. A Történelmi Múzeum igazgatója a változásban bíz*, in “Szabadság”, November 10, 1999, no. 263, p. 8.

⁴⁶ On the debate upon the question see for instance: Balló Áron, *Buchwald Péter felfüggesztette az Antonescu-szobor felállításáról szóló határozatot. Ideiglenes prefektusi minőségében cselekedett*, in “Szabadság”, November 11, 1999, no. 264, p. 1; Kiss Olivér, *Antonescu-szobor közkívánatra? Sálcudean nem akar ujat húzni a lakosság nagy “részével”*, in „Szabadság”, November 20, 1999, no. 272, p. 1.

prior to its differentiation.⁴⁷ Taken in this sense, 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 subsystems 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 subsystem of culture, literature foregrounds its specific, unique values (for instance, the aesthetic ones) that make it different and performing different functions from any other subsystem of culture. In this latter case the discourse on a specific part of culture is subsystem-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 fields of the same national culture are thus probably incompatible with one another. This latter type of system might be called *structured* one based again on the Latin stem of the term at issue, meaning: “structure”, “construction”, “building”, “wall”, alluding to the manifolded 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 of 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 hinted upon in the foregoing – is not identical with the institutions or institutional aspects of the respective culture, since each institution might have a different programme and view on its own, respectively others’ functions regarding questions of history and specialization.

Naturally, the reality modeled 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

⁴⁷ 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».” Gerhard Plumpe, Niels Werber, *Literatur ist codierbar. Aspekte einer systemtheoretischen Literaturwissenschaft*, in Siegfried J. Schmidt, ed., *Literaturwissenschaft und Systemtheorie. Positionen, Kontroversen, Perspektiven*, Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1993, p. 39.

constituted not only by converging tendencies and homogeneities, but also by inhomogeneities, hesitations, divergencies, internal differences and transitional states and aspects.

So the model of 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 should be mentioned that *the historical myths of today's Romania are often perpetuated by the ethnic 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 characteristic of contemporary Romanian culture in a historical framework, a historically argued 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 realms. 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 viewed by a serious 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 subsystems of the respective culture) functions as a fertile ground for the perpetuation and strengthening of the historical myths.



Picture 1. Statue of Mathis Corvinus and proposed site of Trajan's Column emplacement, Cluj cites centre



Picture 2. Red, yellow and blue – painted metal bollards in a central Cluj street