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Periphery and Disenchantment. Places, Reports, and Meanings of the Periphery in Manuela Boatcă, Cristian Cercel, Vasile Ernu and Ovidiu Țichindeleanu

Abstract: The interest in the topic of peripheral location (of Eastern Europe, of Romania, of thinking in this cultural space, etc.) has increased in recent years, a proof being the publication of several reference works that address this topic. It competes more and more vigorously the interest in the issue of Europeanisation and it is a reaction, a questioning of European normativism. The article aims to place the periphery issue in the current context, starting from attempts to define and understand authors located in distinct places and adopting distinct perspectives. They aim, for example, to forge a certain outlook on the periphery by appealing to Western theories on neo-colonialism or to Romanian critical theories of the nineteenth century (the theory of forms without substance). Their historical landmarks may be different, such as the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 or the process of westernization of the Romanians in the nineteenth century. They may also have different intentions, from the restructuring of the Euro-centered paradigm to the acceleration of social movements. Undoubtedly, what unites all these attempts is a desire of disenchantment which normative Europeanization postponed indefinitely. But, without a doubt, they also build a complex set of reports and positions necessary to ensure the effect of disenchantment.

Keywords: periphery, neocolonialism, eurocentrism, discourse from the periphery, post-communism.

*„The story told by the hunted is much more true than the one told by the hunter”
(Vasile Ernu).*

The periphery is a recurring, symptomatic concept that comes to light in the attempts to define and interpret a history in crisis or even threatened. Its function can be instrumental, limited to contextual assessments, or global and inaugural, defining, from the outset, a peripheral

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history that begins with *a crisis*. Thus, everything begins with a crisis or a critical state.

A brief history of the consciousness of periphery

Perhaps the most visited place in this regard is the *predoslovia* of Miron Costin (1633-1691) at the *Chronicle of the land of Moldavia*. Costin is not the first in the suite of Moldovan chroniclers, but he is the one who expressed, for the first time in a significant way, the peripheral character of the world he presents. He invokes, it is true, a longer history, starting with the "first settlement" of the Romans, and brings into question the "second settlement" of the founding of Moldova, placing its own chronicle in a broader history. However, he has a consciousness of the periphery, which can be considered exemplary and inaugural. Costin expresses, first of all, history as a crisis situation: "What terrible times have come upon us now, such that we cannot delve in epistles, but in worries and sighs. And this kind of epistle needs a free and unhindered thought. But we look at the terrible times and tragedy of our land." (Costin 1944, 4) If a story exists insofar as it is passed on, possibly in writing, then the story of a crisis has the least chance of being discursively recorded, brought to the level of a consciousness because this consciousness is in turn caught in the roller coaster of the crisis and threatened by it. However, Costin goes even further, showing that the very (hi)story of his own country is threatened by demise, so the construction of a discourse on its history risks being without object: "Yet, this time you receive the little efforts which we made lest it should go into oblivion, from where it is abandoned, with this promise, that you could expect from us even a whole chronicle, if we are to live and in his eternal council the powerful God does not decide to end the destiny of our country". (Costin 1944, 4) For Costin, the periphery is a threatened place, whose history must be legitimized, of course, by discourse, but discourse itself can only appear under this regime of threat and urgency, which can make it less detailed (reduced to the essentials), captive in its own context of production and, therefore, insufficiently abstract, theoretical. Last but not least, it is a discourse that risks remaining unfinished and also indeterminate, a piece of a discourse whose unity has been lost and fictionalized through political annihilation.

Miron Costin has no hope of overcoming this critical historical situation. This probably appears only with the first signs of modernity, in any case at the beginning of the 19th century and is, for the first time, expressed in the desolate form of a historical and civilizational gap between the Romanian Lands and the West. This type of reference will become a constant of theorizations regarding the geographical and historical position of Romanians, but it was expressed, first, as the result of an experience

abroad. In *A Note of My Journey*, Dinicu Golescu compares the world he comes from with the one he meets in his travels. The result is clearly unfavorable to Romanians. After going through a real cultural shock, however, he does not remain locked in the pessimism of Miron Costin, but seeks ways to emancipate his countrymen, in other words to bridge the gap with Western countries and reduce everything to an innocent inter-civilization exchange: "The people learned what was good from each other, the nations followed one another, as we see in history: Greeks, through their travels in Egypt, drew the lights of sciences from there, as well as many of the trades, and communicated them to the Romans, our ancestors. And the Romans poured them out all over the enlightened Europe, and the latter, increasing them day by day, made them very fruitful. And Europe makes its peoples happy by communicating the good gathered from the journeys made by the nations through the lands of others and by publishing them in books." (Golescu 1971, 16). Golescu reaches a deep conscience of the periphery in which he is, and this periphery is defined in a modern sense, as a reference to the center represented by Western civilization. We do not find in his texts a critical perspective, a thought of center from inside the periphery, because for Golescu the civilizational gap was an *objective* one.

We can only talk about a true critical consciousness in the second half of the same century, together with the *junimists* (Titu Maiorescu, Eminescu) and then with the left critics, especially with Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea. The theory of forms without substance, which has meanwhile become a kind of guiding thought of Romanian modernity, is also the first systematic attempt to think of Romania as a periphery of Europe. Both for the interwar authors (Eugen Lovinescu, Cioran, but also others), and for the post-communist ones, the beginning of the westernization process remained a landmark, according to which the ideological ensemble put to work is organized. Another landmark, comparable in importance, to which post-communist authors inevitably refer, is the 1989 Revolution, but history offers other milestones, larger or smaller, such as the 1918 union or the installation of communists in power (1945-1947). All these historical milestones appear in various ideological reports from post-communism, and the preference for one or the other of them is part of the ongoing ideological battle. But it is premature to talk about the existence of a thinking of the periphery in a theoretical sense, not least because there is a strange relationship between the periphery and the theory. The main reason is rather the delay in building a critical perspective, after years of promoting a super-optimistic "Pasoptism". At least until the years of economic crisis (2008-2009), European normativism was dominant. Critical voices have always existed, but they could not even be imposed as reserve speeches. Costi Rogozanu remarks that, during this period, a certain

“traditionalist”, “interwar” vein detaches from “a liberal vein with progressive nuances” (Rogozanu 2021, 68). In reality, the range of options is wider, from the anti-neoliberal and anti-progressivist traditionalism of some thinkers like Mircea Platon and Alexandru Racu, to the equally anti-neoliberal left currents and for which the progressivism is not a central theme, the central theme being social polarization (Suciū 2020, 223-237).

We cannot talk about a theory of the periphery, although such attempts have not been lacking. This is the case of Constantin Schifirneţ, who, in his work *Tendential Modernity* (2016), offers a model for interpreting peripheral societies, based on the theory of *junimists* and their descendants. Schifirneţ tries to get out of the narrow circle of national forms (without substance) in order to place himself in a globalized world, but no less hierarchical. However, he remains in the paradigm of the “gap”: “I approach modernity as a type of evolution in societies and areas with an insufficiently functional economy. Due to the gap between the faster pace of institutional renewal and the slower economic progress, cultural, political and intellectual modernization is ahead of economic modernization in these societies. (Schifirneţ 2016, 12) A truly influential author on critical thinking in recent years has been the French anthropologist, Claude Karnoouh. *The Invention of the People-Nation. Chronicles from Romania and Eastern Europe 1973 - 2007* (2011) is probably the first reference work, in which the modern history of Romanians is not presented in a liberal key, and which includes, in addition, elements of analysis from the perspective of cultural studies. In fact, Karnoouh is one of the main sources of those who, in recent years, think from a critical perspective and start from a peripheral situation.

Decentralization, peripheralization, peripheral position

However, there is no doubt that the use of concepts such as “periphery”, “coloniality” or “self-colonization” does not refer so much to authors who have previously thought, in relatively similar terms, as to schools and often new concepts, concepts acquired through directly contact with the West, especially with the Western university environment. Cultural, media and colonial studies entered in the Romanian cultural space with considerable difficulty, but their influence could not, in the end, be limited. The authors mentioned in this article - Manuela Boatcă, Cristian Cercel, Vasile Ernu, Ovidiu Țichindeleanu (but the list is longer, let's include Ovidiu Solonar - 2021 here) - capitalize on these new theories and concepts. The fact that their audience is currently quite small (although, for example, Vasile Ernu is a well-known and influential writer), and the impact of their studies on the Romanian public sphere is still weak, this fact does not concern the value of the works, but shows the measure in which the public

sphere is still dominated by European normative discourse. It should be added that all the mentioned authors had, in one way or another, the experience of foreignness (of the West) even for a long period of time, repeating that which Dinicu Golescu ushered in. This is the only way in which decentralization, as an attitude of the periphery, takes a concrete form, rich in meanings. The representation of the East and, therefore, of Romania as a periphery is an experience of relating to the center and, in one way or another, of looking from (a) center. It seems that you must get to the center to realize that the center of your world, of the world you come from, is a periphery.

Therefore, the experience abroad decentralizes; this is easy to understand. But how is it that the experience of foreignness can, at the same time, marginalize our own place and our own center of the world we come from? For marginalization is not a simple decentralization, but the awareness of the existence of asymmetrical relationships between center and periphery. Periphery involves not only the experience of abroad, but also the visit of a world that appears to us as a center or that claims to have an excellence of the center, that it is an exception. From a political perspective, the center is defined as excellence and as an exception, which - paradoxically - it converts into a universalist ideology. The strangeness of the existence of some central territories (several centers) and, of others, peripheral ones (several fringes) consists in the distribution of these territories on the surface of a sphere, which is planet Earth. We know that the surface of the sphere has no center, and the fact that the Earth is round should defy any hegemonic claim. This division between the center and the periphery therefore has no basis, no firm ground, at least if we look at things from a geographical perspective. And yet it exists, it is a political, economic, social, cultural reality. There is no center, but there is an investment of a place with the characteristics of the center, which has verticality rather than expanse. "In terms of cultural preferences, the mainstream is still unconditionally credited with value and there are no marginal *scenes*." (Țichindeleanu 2016, 80)

As difficult as it may seem from an existential viewpoint, decentralization and awareness of the center-periphery relationship is only the beginning of the process of reporting on the topic of the periphery. The problem that arises immediately afterwards is that of the position of the one who assumes a discourse on this subject, a position which, for a self-conscious peripheral (and the self-consciousness of the periphery is always disturbed), cannot, under any circumstances, be the position of a central. Some of the authors mentioned live most of the time in Western countries, as researchers. They live in the center, but their position, converted into a discursive perspective, is different from that of the center in which they live.

"This to-and-fro movement between Romania and Germany is exactly the position from which I am talking", says Manuela Boată (2019, 113). Boată is therefore situated between the center and the periphery, trying to think both about the benefits that the center brings to the periphery and the strategies by which the periphery can overcome its own subalternity. A more radical position is adopted by Ovidiu Țichindeleanu, who currently lives in the Republic of Moldova, thus preferring the periphery situated on the verge of political indeterminacy to a "semi-periphery" relatively stable and integrated in the EU, such as Romania. Like Boată, Țichindeleanu does not think of the periphery in national terms, that is why the report to Romania is an eloquent example, but never the only one. Even more interesting is the position adopted by Vasile Ernu, a writer from the Republic of Moldova, but whose reference, whose center is not the West, but the USSR, the empire in which he was born. In his books, Ernu, who lives in Bucharest, presents the process of marginalization of Eastern Europe after the fall of the Soviet Union, the Romanian Revolution of 1989 being, for him, a visible event in this much wider context.

The irony of historical destiny and the construction of a history of the periphery

Within peripheral reference, positions may be different, but they state in unison that the periphery is worth thinking about, we need to dwell on it. The periphery is not a no man's land, a white spot on the world map, but rather an area with unclear status and changing borders. Just as the center consider the periphery from the perspective of the center, so the periphery must consider the center from the perspective of the periphery. This means that there is a perspective of the periphery, or that it should exist. We must build the theoretical means of this thinking about the periphery. To look at the center from the periphery and not to look at the periphery from the center involves an extra distance, including from the presence of the center or the messengers of the center at the periphery (because, in one form or another, the center is present in the middle of the periphery, the center *supervises* the periphery). When it overcomes ahistorical pessimism, like Costin's, and the objectivity of reporting, as in Golescu's case, the consciousness of the peripheral situation leads to the acceleration of the critical impulse, to a form of lucidity in relation to the dominant discourse and discourses of any kind. All-encompassing discursive constructions, seen from the periphery, appear as tools of ideological domination. They lose their necessary and even destiny character (history as destiny is always ironic in the periphery), and they appear as pompous, presumptuous castles, whose main role is not an epistemological one, but a

deontic one (Bochenski, 2006). They do not serve knowledge, but power. "To this day, the word 'ideology' is an abbreviation for 'communist ideology', and this contributes to fueling conceptual confusion and, as such, obscuring the horizon of meaning of a possible theoretical critique engaged in his time" (Țichindeleanu, 2016, 78) The periphery removes this "liberal" naivety and, for this, is ready to produce surprising reversals of meaning, to see in negative terms what is seen at the center in positive terms, such as liberal ideology: "Liberalism has therefore become the dominant ideology of the world system". (Țichindeleanu 2016, 120) The periphery removes this "liberal" naivety and, for this, is ready to produce surprising reversals of meaning, to see in negative terms what is seen at the center in positive terms, such as liberal ideology: "Liberalism has therefore become the ideology dominant role of the world system". (Țichindeleanu 2016, 120) In fact, reversing the meanings and seeing a world "upside down" is one of the main strategies of thinking on the periphery and it can produce ideologies in total contradiction with the dominant national ideologies or those promoted by the hegemonic center.

The mentioned authors have distinct historical landmarks, but which prove to be coherent, if we place them on an axis of peripheral thought or construct a history of it. For example, for Manuela Boatcă, westernization is a moment of transition from Ottoman to Western domination: "With the end of Ottoman domination in 1821, the Romanian principalities faced the transition from a protocolonial system, in which their economic surplus was used to finance the luxury of the politically dominant metropolis (Chirot, 1976, p. 10), to a neocolonial regime of agrarian province of Western Europe. (...) ... a mutation of the "periphery axis", from the subordination to an eastern empire, to that to the western center (Bădescu, 2004, p. 82 et seq.) (Boatcă 2019, 19) Boatcă also admiringly mentions the "peripheral conservatism" of Eminescu and Maiorescu and deplors the fact that, after 1989, their thinking was not capitalized at all: "The recovery of this theoretical tradition is still problematic in the post-communist era, in which political, economic and intellectual alignment to the Western norms, which imply the (vague) promise of European integration, dictate the rejection of critical approaches, of globalization, wholesale westernization and cultural leveling and therefore make epistemic oblivion a necessary condition for political and economic recognition "(Boatcă 2019 , 32) Țichindeleanu is less concerned with the history of the Romanians, but he recognizes - in the footsteps of Tamas Gaspar Miklos - in the 1989 Revolution "a founding myth of the present". In *Philogermanism without Germans. Romania in Search of Europeanness* (2021), Cristian Cercel offers a "German key" interpretation of the monarchical era of Romania (1866-1947), which is quite far from the

post-December royalism, but also notes its continuities in the history of the present (the position of president of a person of German origin). Such a perspective opens to a "post-imperial history", as conceived by Oliver Jens Schmitt, in *The Balkans in the Twentieth Century* (2019). Even if none of the authors mentioned intend to detail the interpreted history, the assumptions of this interpretation are in line with what we might call mainstream European history.

Relating to the Western Center is not even a theoretical priority, as long as "... the experience of Latin American resistance theories and practices is much more relevant for Eastern Europe, a space on the periphery of the world system of capitalism, than the internalization of civilization as disciplinary. ." (Țichindeleanu 2016, 122) We find the same approach in Manuela Boatcă, who analyzes "Eastern Europe and Latin America in (co) relationship". The proximity of the peripheries is part of the arsenal of strategies used to disenchant the world of the center. Also, concern for marginalized communities, ignored by the center or conflicting with it. One of the techniques to fight against the hegemony of the center is to fragment the map of the empire as much as possible. In *The Little Trilogy of the Marginals* (3 volumes - 2015, 2016, 2019), Vasile Ernu has as central characters marginal communities from the former USSR (bandits, neo-Protestant communities, Jews). Cristian Cercel presents the history of Romanians' relating/comparison to the Saxons of Transylvania (*Sași*), a small community of ethnic Germans in the center of present-day Romania, as well as the way Romanians' assessments of minority groups are distributed: admiration, in the case of *Sași*, depreciation, in the case of the Roma people: " Germans Europeanize and westernize Romania; the Roma de-Europeanize and orientalize it. Particularly, after 1989, the Romanian assertion of its European identity was built on the basis of a rejection of the "Other Gypsy" (Cercel 2021, 2017) The rapprochement between the peripheries, a reverberation of the slogan "Proletarians from all countries, unite!", as well as writing the history of marginalized communities, usually in conflict with the majority, is also part of the strategy of building a discourse on the periphery and a history of the periphery. The reference to the dominant center is sometimes replaced by a peripheral survey of the periphery itself and its critical potential.

The peripheral performer and the struggle

The relation of a marginal person to the center makes him or her a lucid being, but also disturbed, complicated. His position is difficult to theorize. Cristian Cercel invokes the concept of *liminality*, used by Maria Todorova to describe the paradoxical state of the periphery, namely to be

both inside and outside, eastern and western. Their complicated condition is also addressed by Manuela Boatcă, but in terms of privileges: "... the epistemic framework of the former Second World, located on the border between the imperial and colonial powers of Europe, is one of ambiguity - the difference from the West - and of the split - between the partial otherness of the West and its incomplete self "(...)" ... to live outside the center means not to have privileges to defend ... "(...)" ... to live in border means both having a share of privileges and the experience of oppression " (p. 87). The peripheral is not legitimate insofar as it has no power, for only power can be legitimate or illegitimate. It is invisible, being taken over by the main communication channels only, possibly, in negative frames. He or she is captive, his or her thinking seems to work inside a trap. Therefore, the consciousness of the peripheral is almost the same as the consciousness of living in a trap and can lead to the historical pessimism of Miron Costin. It presupposes not only the fact-of-being-thrown-into-the-world, but - to ironically move Heidegger's concept from its place - and the fact-of-being-thrown-into-the-world-in-a-country-like-Romania or like Bulgaria or, in other words, to be thrown *between two worlds* (East and West). The peripheral, and even more so the post-communist peripheral, does not have much to lose because its world is poorly capitalized. It is a precarious world, insufficient for itself, dependent on a center and its benefits, which gives rise to endless intimate colonizations.

In relation to this sequence of attributes, the condition of the peripheral seems to be one without escape. Any effort of emancipation seems doomed to failure, unless emancipation has already taken place, but has had no political consequences. It has long become a tedious tendency, which blocks the peripheral as a child (Buden 2009). Precisely in this situation, proceeding by reversing the meanings in relation to the center, the periphery becomes a true avant-garde and a center of struggle. The periphery is thus seen by Ernu as a place where reality comes into being: "... actuality and reality are not in the center, but on the periphery. The center is just a place for those who live something that has already taken place on the outskirts. Therefore, the periphery is in fact at the forefront of events, only these events are not yet history. The center just takes over these events and makes them history, historicizes them. The center is the antique shop and the place where its history is exposed. But the place where reality, topicality and especially life take place is the periphery, the fringe. Yes, we can say that the center produces death, but also power, while the periphery produces life, the only one that can oppose the power at the center. Only life can overcome death. (Ernu 2016, 312) The consequence of the reversal as a technique of peripheral thinking is the conception of a history of struggle.

Questions instead of conclusions

This excursion, no matter how preliminary and summary, through some critical works published in recent years, raises questions. Their relatively late appearance is undoubtedly a sign of "enmity." After a long period in which European normative discourse dominated without problems, critical thinking began to take its place, changing the frameworks of the debate and reversing the terms of the problem. But if we consider the broader course of the European idea, its Pasoptist origins, as well as the way in which Europe was configured as a discourse, after 1989, we find that there are enough reasons for such critical thinking to emerge. A first question can therefore be asked with reference to the national Pasoptist project, one of a liberal nature. Starting from the hypothesis that a project is a project only insofar as it is realized, we can consider that the project of westernization and modernization of Romania, launched by the Pasoptists, can be considered realized if it transformed the Romanian nation into a western and modern one. Was this project done? For, if the project led only to the transformation of Romania into a periphery of the West, then it can be assumed that the Pasoptist project failed or did not belong to the Romanians (or failed because it was not, in fact, to the Romanians), but to the West or, at least, that the Romanians westernized themselves (self-colonization). Let us add that the Pasoptist project is no longer largely current because the nation is not the basis of today's Europeanization, in the Pasoptist sense. So did Pasoptism make sense? These questions are not rhetorical and do not seek, by promoting a radical ideology, to deconstruct an entire national project, but to claim the lucidity of perspective and to always provoke other historical reconfigurations, perhaps more adapted to the present time. The very notion of periphery includes an evaluative meaning, other than the normative one and in opposition to it, revealing both the contingencies and ideologies that keep the periphery away from the norm and further peripheralize it. In any case, it seems that the dream of European integration has turned into a nightmare of peripheralization. This is why the theme of the periphery, which - otherwise - is old and recurring in the Eastern European space, has once again approached the center of interest of thinking that thinks about the present.

One of the most difficult questions, especially since it comes from a complicated character, such as the *periphery*, is whether the very existence of the periphery can be a cause for doubt. Put another way: is the periphery something as certain as the center? This question arises not only from the political indeterminacy of any peripheral area, but is also a proof of the self-

reflexivity of the periphery. Could it be that, if it existed to the end, the periphery could become what it itself challenges by relating to the center? This self-reflexivity is necessary (it is all the more necessary on the part of the central) to avoid the traps set by that kind of thinking, such as Marxism, which wants to change the world and, to this end, imagines a final dissolution of all contradictions go through or decide for a dictatorship of the proletariat or the periphery. It can also be seen from the center as an endless story of the emancipation of the periphery.

The dialectic of the periphery is complex and subject to many contingencies. Peripheral thinking is too little theoretical, the theoretical being a form of domination of the center, but it can be irony, social criticism, deception in any form and, last but not least, struggle.

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