

New technologies for ethno-nationalist imagining. The case of Moldavian Csangos

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Motto : „Dar ungurii aceștia, fără a fi români pe de-a întregul nu sunt nici pe departe așa de străini cum s-ar putea bănuî”.

(These Hungarians, while not being entirely Romanian, are not at all as strangers as they might seem.)

Nicolae Iorga

The Csangos are a hard to define ethnic/religious minority. They have been rather recently recognized and instituted as a minority. According to the 2002 census, the recorded number of declared Csangos was of 769. There is a huge discrepancy between these figures and the ones used by some scholars – from 70.000 to 100.000 – that cannot be dismissed as just the result of technical counting problems and even less of scholarly (dis)honesty. This paper tries to delve on the possibility conditions for imagining the Csangos through new global communication technologies.

Keywords : Csangos, media and anthropology, nationalizing strategy, cyberspace, autochtonism

Cuvinte-cheie : Csangos, antropologia și media, strategia naționalizării, spațiul cibernetic, autohton

Media and cyberanthropology

In 1993, Debra Spitulnik considered that „there is as yet no «anthropology of mass media»”. Even the intersection of anthropology and mass-media appears rather small considering the published literature to date” (Spitulnik, 1993, 293). The emerging topics that anthropologists were beginning to grapple with in 1993 were media constructions of difference, indigenous media (Ginsburg, 1991 ; Michaels, 1986, 1991 ; Turner 1992) and mass mediation of national identity (Spitulnik, 1993, 294). Nevertheless, media anthropology has been lately an important

part of the discourse on reflexivity and objectivity and has been involved in anthropological metadiscourse that takes account of the positioned nature of actors and interpreters. The fact that anthropology itself is embedded into various representational processes that do reflect political interests and the very core of this discipline consists of interrelated activities of cultural translations and interpretations puts the perspective of media anthropology in a central position.

The diversification and growth of media forms in the last decade, the appearance of new information and communication technologies (ICT), has posed new problems but

also elicited large interest in anthropological milieus. The disappearance of the „Other” in classical, field-anthropology seems to find an analogy in the multitude of loci of sameness and otherness produced by the mirrors of mass media. The border between studying and inventing identities can be very blurred when cyberspace becomes, in the same time, the background and the tool-kit for imagining autochthonous and/or authentic, pure ethno-national selves.

In analyzing the processes and politics of hybridity and, respectively, autochthony we agree with James Clifford's position :

„...there is no reason to assume that crossover practices are always liberatory or that articulating an autonomous identity or a national culture is always reactionary. The politics of hybridity are conjunctural and cannot be deduced from theoretical principles. In most situations, what matters politically is who deploys nationality or transnationality, authenticity or hybridity, against whom, with what relative power and ability to sustain a hegemony” (Clifford, 1997, 18).

The cyberspace between liberty and categorization

The fast growing of the new technologies of information and communication (ICT), like the Internet, seems to be undermining the dynamics and structure of the political, economic, cultural and national systems of modernity. Due to their capacity to transcend the temporal and spatial limits of modern types of organizations and to give new significations to social relations, this kind of technologies could lead to a major restructuring of the principal identity patterns. The appearance of a new communicational network like the internet, a network which seems to modify, at least partially, the ways in which the members of the „network society” (Castells, 1996) are interacting with each other ; bring forward the problem of a new kind of social space: the cyberspace. This kind of social and cultural space is slowly becoming a

legitimate domain of inquiry for cultural anthropology. The understanding we have of this concept was determined from the start by some utopian and libertarian ideas and ideals very clearly formulated in the works of William Gibson, Mitch Kapor, John Perry Barlow etc. The way Gibson – the one who first used this term – sees it ; the libertarian cyberspace is a „consensual hallucination lived on a daily basis by billions of legitimate operators... a graphic representation of the informations from all the computers' data bases in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light arranged in the mental nonspace” (Gibson, 1984, 51).

Some of the sociologists and anthropologists of the „informational society” (H. Rheingold, B. Loader etc.) believe that, using the technical support of the ICT, a paradigmatic change is going on in the configuration of the power relations between individuals, social institutions and states. This change would facilitate the disappearance, or, at least, the gradual fading of the modern forms of governance and of identification. The borders of the nation-states are, supposedly, getting weaker, more and more porous, because of the expansion of global economies and of the inadequate capacity for control that the national power centers have over the informational flux going on in the cyberspace. Apart from this, the new politics of difference brought by the slow disappearance and weakening of the social classes and the social and cultural identities embedded in the „great narratives” of modernity, find an ideal frame in this new communicational space. The cyberspace appears, from this perspective, as a space of liberty, of multiple and disembodied identities free-floating on the World Wide Web. By an apparently small enlargement of the meaning of these „free” identities, the ethnic or para-ethnic identities that have politically failed or were marginalized by the modern nation-state system are incorporated in this category. The perverse effect (Boudon, 1993) of using a communication „tool” considered to be „more a social space than an object, so

that its effects are more like Germany than like hammers” (Poster, 1997, 216) can be traced in the case of the recent re-inventing of ethnic minorities in Central and Eastern Europe. The discourse of liberation, of understanding the internet, the cyberspace, as a place where the voices of individuals finally liberated from the instrumentalizing frames of modernity can freely express themselves can sometimes hide a classical attempt to categorialize groups and individuals in old fashioned, national identities.

The Csango dilemma. A counting problem

According to the 1992 census, in the eight counties of the historical Romanian province of Moldavia from 276.650 inhabitants of Catholic, 267,739 consider themselves to be of Romanian nationality, 6747 Hungarian, and 2165 Csango. In 2002 the number of declared Csangos was even lower: 769.

The huge discrepancy between these figures and the ones used by some scholars – 80,000 is the number of Csangos proposed by Kalman Benda (Benda, 1990); 62,000 is the guess of Vilmos Tanczos (Tanczos, 1998) etc. – cannot be just a technical problem of counting and even less one of scholarly (dis)honesty.

The more or less real weakness of the nation-states in a globalized world does not necessarily imply a disappearance of ethno-national identities and the interests (emotional, economic, cultural, political etc.) they arouse. Extended networks of organizations, associations, scientific institutes, forums etc. using at the same time global technologies and old or new national myths are very active in trying to model, to forge ethnic identities. This is what is happening to the Roman-Catholic people of Moldavia who are being antagonistically and agonistically imagined – through global networks and technologies – as the lost essence of the archaic and authentic Hungarian or, respectively, Romanian self.

I think the difference between 800 and 80.000 comes from two apparently very different ways, of nationalizing the Csangos. There is a constructing, Hungarian strategy and an effacing, Romanian one¹.

The constructing strategy is the oldest and we can trace it from 1896² onwards (Baker 1996) in a plethora of etymologies for the denomination „Csango” and of theories concerning their historical origins (Baker, 1996; Baker, 1997; Nouzille, 2000; Tanczos, 1998; Mărtinaş, 1997). A large part of the Hungarian nationalizing discourse about the Csangos is combining the themes of the lost national self with the rediscovering of some imaginary archaicity waiting to be rescued. The archaicity of Hungarian-Csangos functions like a mirror through which the Hungarian nation can contemplate, in the same time, its modernity and its continuity with some supposedly pristine ethnic roots. The Csangos are distributed, in this scenario, as survivals, as the living memory of the ethnic, pre-national phase of Hungarians, conferring, in an oblique way, a kind of primordial legitimacy to Hungarian nation building by framing it as natural, spontaneous and uncontaminated with other ethnic groups. For Vilmos Tanczos the Moldavian Csangos are „the only hungarian-speaking group that was not incorporated into the Hungarian nation” (Tanczos, 1998, 20). What explains away the big discrepancies between the numbers of Hungarians, Csangos and Catholics in the present day province of Moldavia is the existence of a certain historical identity corrupted by linguistic assimilation (Tanczos, 1998, 21).

The Romanian nationalizing strategy appears, at first, as a counter strategy trying to unveil the „Hungarianisation” of Moldavian Csangos. In the works of Dumitru Mărtinaş, a quite disputed historian, the Csangos are essentially „hybrids” (Mărtinaş, 1997), half-denationalized Romanians, having, as the only alterity sign, differentiating them from other Orthodox Romanians from Moldova, their catholic religion. The two strategies are not as different as they

first seem. The Romanian nationalist project is discovering the „archaicity” of the Csangos and their pure Romanian essence, while continuing to deny any possible ethnic construction of the „Csango” *per se*³. The Hungarian nationalists are combining the tropes of purity with the ones of pollution and hybridity conveying though a sense of urgency for the Csangos national Hungarian redemption.

The „folklorization” of the Csangos through a Romanian or Hungarian national objectifying gaze, implies a dislocation/relocation of the social imaginary (Castoriadis, 1987) between global, local and national spaces. In this displacement that is, at the same time a de-paysement and a re-paysement, the cyberspace has a very ambiguous face.

We can see the imagining of Moldavian Csangos as a kind of emergent autochthony movement. What differentiates it probably from other likeminded movements is its antagonistic ways of articulating itself (or of being articulated) with conflicting nationalisms: Hungarian *versus* Romanian.

By using Arjun Appadurai’s (Appadurai, 1996), Comaroff and Comaroff’s (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2001) insights into the problems raised by „autochthony” and globalization, we can locate the imagining of Csango ethnic identity at the level of certain articulations between the local and the global having, nevertheless, the nation-state, as an essential actor.

The processes of fragmentation and localization are not to be mechanically contraposed to omogenisation processes because globalisation engenders not a new integrated order but a system of disjunctures. Men, technologies, money, images and ideas are set on increasingly nonisomorphic trajectories. The speed, volume and dimensions of these global flows are aduc în prim planul politicilor culturii globale tocmai aceste rupturi (Appadurai, 1996). There are, in Appadurai’s view, five major dimensions of these global cultural flows: ethnoscapas, mediascapas, technoscapas, finansescapases, ideoscapases.

This „perspectivist” way of understanding globalization and autochthony, also called the „paradox of globalized primordialism” (Appadurai, 1996) implies the existence of an imaginary/global character of these cultural flows, strongly modulated by the historical, linguistic and political position of various social agents: nation states, multinational corporations, diaspora communities, groups and movements (religious, political etc.), subnational groups, villages, families etc. (Appadurai, 1996, 33). Imagination is becoming a central social practice in all cultural and social strategies. The autochthonous identity can be seen, using Appadurai’s model, not only as imagined and perspectivistic but also as „nested”, in the sense that the global, national and regional are actually internal relations constituting the autochthony of the local. The content of autochthonous identities are indeed post-national, making claims on and sometimes even entering in conflict with nation-states but we must not forget that these nation states are in the process of becoming more local and global at the same time (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2001, 254). The crisis of the nation-state does not imply the total disappearance of the classic, modern way of imagining the nation.

The ways in which the Csango identity is being imagined in the cyberspace can be understood only by complicating the nested identity model of the autochthonous. Global actors and networks can be part of nationalist imagining processes. The nation states are becoming network centers, among others, in processes of nationalistic imagining.

The „dark side” of the internet

Before we can determine the role of internet in the invention of the „authentic Hungarian/Romanian Csango self” we have to look a bit at the „dark side” of the cyberspace.

The cyberspace is a fragment of the new technologies of surveillance, cultural and social control or, a cause of the rapid advance of the social fragmentation, paralleled by a

growth in the flexibility and power of the centers of new capitalism, of the new global industries of the imaginary. Cyberspace is not only libertarian but also an instrument in the advent of what Negri and Hardt call the „new empire” (Negri and Hardt 2000). The World Wide Web becomes crucial in the implementation of the „quaternary relations” (Calhoun, 1992).

The quaternary social relations are „the products of surveillance and exist wherever a sociotechnic system allows the monitoring of the individuals’ actions transforming them into communication regardless the intentions of the social agents implied” (Calhoun, 1992, 219). The individuals in quaternary relations are caught in asymmetric power relations having no control over them, or sometimes not being even conscious of the existence of these power relations. The cyberspace is not only ambiguous; it is also mythologized (in a barthesian sense). The ludic, postmodern configuration of the cyberspace, like a total identity pastiche that allows, supposedly, for the appearance and exploring of new types of subjectivity and cultural decentering, is sometimes hiding less pleasant things. The ICT can transform itself in a new instrument, of an amazing scope and dynamics, of the kind of surveillance identified by Foucault in his analysis of modernity.

The power to configure identity narratives and to impose them, is a kind of power „which applies to the daily life who categorizes the individual, designates himself with his own individuality, attaches him to his identity, imposes on him a law of truth he has to recognize and others have to recognize it in him” (Foucault, 1980, 186). This form of power succeeds only if it transforms the individual into a subject, a subject of control and dependence to another person but also a subject of the connection with his own identity by his conscience and self-knowledge (Foucault, 1980). The new industries of the imaginary are assuming this important power of imposing a law of truth, maybe also because of the fading of the „old institutions of the social imaginary”.

The internet and the Csango

When an important European bureaucrat, during a scientific seminar in the Moldavian city of Iasi, said that „our job is to tell the Csangos that they have to sing by themselves their own ballads and songs, dance their own dances and tell stories to their children” we are in fact very close to the assuming of this kind of power by a relatively wide and lax network of European Council bureaucrats, nationalist intellectuals, ethnographers, historians, sociologists etc. connected by scientific institutes, NGO’s, internet forums and portals etc. In the replacement, competition or complementarities between such networks and national states in modeling identity narratives the cyberspace plays an important part. The „Csango dispute” exposes the inherent ambiguities and pitfalls of any modernist project, regardless of the institutional agent involved – nation state or nationalist identity network – for inventing ethno-national identities when the cyberspace is an essential part of this project. The narratives are more or less the same in a void and decontextualized space having, apparently, no power configuration. In the life of the quotidian world, the *Lebenswelt*, in the social world, the narratives disclose various competitions and asymmetrical power relations.

In the case of the invention of a „Csango” Hungarian or Romanian the internet has a dual function. The Csango identity is a mirror image of a Hungarian/ Romanian identity, an image of lost authenticity, purity and archaicity linguistically polluted by Romanians respectively Hungarians, is an imaginary identity imposed by a nationalist imagery on the self image of a population which tends to reject ethnical denominations, adopting a confessional, religious mark of its identity (Tanczos, 1998; Cotoi, 2002). There is, at first, an image of the Csangos (www.Csango.hu, www.ceangai.ro, www.asrocatolic.ro, <http://noborders.interfree.it/> etc.) in cyberspace. An image which, as long as it inhabits only this hypergeographic space, where the truth is not the adequation of reality

and mind as in the aristotelic worlds, and where the ordering of the reality is based on simulation and seduction, any question about the representational value of the „virtual Csangos” is absurd. The virtual Csangos are autoreferential signs having absolute transparency. In such cyberspace designed groups „there is an invocation of community but not a production of it. There is a groupmind but no social interaction. There is on line communication but there are no true residents of cyberspace. Technosociality creates a synthetic world where history is blocked” (Robins, 1995, 10 *apud* Dell’Aquila, 1999, 29).

Major problems are due to appear when such „virtual tribes” are expelled in the world of daily social reality. These phantasms can parasitize historical, concrete social groups, who are caught in a perverse mechanism able to falsify and block their historicity by imposing on them some ideological and nationalistic models. Due to the auto-referentiality of cyberspace identities, any imagined identity in this non-aristotelic world has a kind of wholeness strangely similar to romantic, herderian views on nationality.

The ethnicisation, taking place through the new industries of the imaginary, cannot be accounted solely through the theories of the „nationalizing” states of Eastern Europe (Brubaker, 1995). The nationalist networks, even if they can be used by nation states, are beyond the analyses in terms of antagonistic relationships among nationalizing states, national minorities and „mother countries”.

We are probably facing a strange nationalist awakening that is using postmodern tools and discourses and can be analyzed and deconstructed only by a profound understanding of the role of the imaginary in the post-socialist countries in a permanent analogy and antagonism with the western models.

The second, related, function of the internet in the case of the invention of a Csango identity, strangely connected to the construction of a virtual, postmodern identity consists in coordinating a classical, modernist national (minority-)building. Thus, the internet is able to capture the whole dimension of this process by capturing the attempt to coalesce the two types of identity: virtual and traditional.

The presentation of the Csangos in everyday life, to paraphrase a famous book, is instrumentalized by strangely ethno-primordialist networks, who are archaizing and „folklorising” this self in order to transpose it from the frames of romantic-nationalist imaginary into the realm of real geography. There are agrotourism networks, tourist itineraries of ethnic display selling stories of ethnic resistance, online shopping for Csango souvenirs etc. where you can embark from cyberspace to Moldavia (www.Csango.hu, www.ceangai.ro, <http://noborders.interfree.it/>). It looks like Csangos are being now transformed not only in some more or less imaginary archaicity pool for rival nationalisms but also, in the same time, in a resource for global tourism, for global capital.

Notes

1. Any discourse on Csango identity trying to avoid the pitfalls of these two nationalizing strategies finds itself in the strange situation of having to find a way of speaking about an entity without constituting it (in a Hungarian national sense) but also without denying it any right of existence (in a Romanian nationalist way).
2. In 1896, the Hungarian Kingdom celebrated „the Millenium”, a thousand years since the Hungarian tribes arrived in Pannonia.
3. From 1998, a collection of folklore from „Moldavian Catholics”, stressing their Romanian roots, is being edited by I. Ciubotaru (Ciubotaru, 1998).

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