

# Popular music, social capital and the consolidation of public space in post-communist Romania<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *Creating a public space as a space of freedom, dialogue and trust, is one of the last challenges that post-communist transition in Romania faces today. This task is important because public space is merely a political space, meaning that people engaging in this space express the willingness to defend and pursue collective interests, to cooperate by the developing political resources, and to influence the political system. Although those issues are generally addressed by the means of surveys, we chose, instead, to study a widespread popular music genre called 'manele'. Since critical discourse analysis (CDA) has successfully demonstrated that discourse is always connected with elements of various social processes, we use it here in order to fully understand 'manele' as a suitable vehicle carrying images and symbols to generate a particular narrative. Far from being specific to a marginal subculture, 'manele' are a social sign that offers compelling insights into the social world we live in. Thus, the social environment unveiled by 'manele' proves to be dominated by distrust, apathy and disengagement. The gloomy social environment labeled by 'manele' as a 'mean world', dominated by deep social distrust and uncertainty, largely encourages specific defensive reactions, as pervasive corruption, free-riding, social intolerance and violence, in a post-communist society making efforts to rebuild social ties and to consolidate democracy following decades of totalitarian rule.*

**Keywords:** Popular Culture; Social Capital; Public Sphere; Political Participation; Post-Communism; Romania.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** cultură populară; capital social; spațiul public; participare politică; post-comunism; România.

## Introduction

Following decades of authoritarian rule, post-communist Romania now faces the difficult challenge of consolidating public

space as a space of freedom, dialogue and trust. Post-communist societies in the region need not only robust economies and democratic institutions, but also cultural favorable conditions, namely, social trust

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and cooperation. This article explores these favorable conditions not by the means of public opinion surveys, as it is generally done, but by critically analyzing the social discourse expressed in a new genre of popular music called ‘manele’. In spite of the fact that this kind of music is often labeled by intellectuals as *pseudo-music* and *bad taste*, it is to be seen more as the expression of a specific counterculture that gradually influence young people and the entire Romanian society. Using a critical discourse analysis of ‘manele’ helps us to understand more profoundly the discursive interactions that shape the construction of *in-groups* and *out-groups* through cultural consumption, to define marginality, to label social actors and to justify those labels and, finally, to influence complex social issues, such as identity, power, inequality, trust and cooperation.

Public space and its consequences for the consolidation of democracy were largely neglected by the early democratization literature. The early scholarly interest on post-communist transition mainly focused on institutional democratization and marketization, since transition in post-communist countries was expected to follow the same pattern as it earlier did in South-American and South-European settings (Przeworski, 1991; Linz and Stepan, 1996). These limited requirements soon proved elusive (Kuzio, 2001), since democracy desperately needs favorable cultural contexts. This essentially relates to a public space that binds individual interests into common goals and commonly assumed values, norms and socially accepted behaviors. Thus, we are interested in this article in essential cultural conditions for democratization, namely, social trust and cooperation. Generally grouped under the umbrella of social capital, trust and cooperation are important assets for collective action and for the consolidation of the public space (Misztal, 2001; Warren, 1999). With no social trust,

citizen cooperation in public matters, in terms of civic involvement (Almond and Verba, 1963), would be impossible, and citizens unable to mobilize resources for collectively defending essential democratic rights and freedoms, to influence decision-makers and to hold them accountable. Romania is today a good example of early-stage democracy that fulfilled all the requirements for institutional democratization and marketization, and yet struggles to fully consolidate when confronting populist ‘predatory elites’ that captured the state (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2003) and menace to refrain democracy (Levitz and Pop-Eleches, 2010), or even to reduce it to its minimal electoral definition (Miroiu, 2011). This is why the consolidation of the public space proves to be an essential condition for full democratization, which is preserving a space of freedom and a collective power of holding elites accountable. We don’t mean by this that public space is external to politics and power, in a way East European civil society confronted the state during communism. We simply emphasize that public space is an environment where citizens can express themselves, defend themselves from any authoritarian attempt, take decisions or (at least) influence decisions that are of common interest, and attempt to control the elected through formal and informal means (Putnam, 1993).

According to Habermas (1989), the public space (or *sphere*, as Habermas labels it) is the environment accepting the public political reasoning, an environment in which the individual can speak freely, and where the arguments are not influenced by any political or social power. It makes possible for everyone to express itself, regardless of any constraints on time, resources, participation or themes. An ideal type of democratic space imagined by Habermas is the space created by the discursive interactions between private people willing to let arguments, instead of

status or the authority of tradition, to be decisive (Johnson, 2001). Thus, public sphere is a medium for political justification, for putting the decision-makers to account, as well as for political initiative and the mobilization of political support. This is an ideal type of democratic space, emphasizes Habermas (1989), and it is hard to believe that one can still imagine society as an association that regulates itself through media and the rule of law, since complex contemporary societies face increasing functional differences triggered by the dominance of market economy and power ruled administration. In fact, the new democratic struggle imagined by Habermas (1989) is to democratically limit the abusive interventions of systemic forces, such as wealth and bureaucracy in the public sphere.

According to Wagner (2000, 547), soon after the French revolution, the public sphere underwent a structural transformation that favored the development of intermediary organizations between family solidarity and state bureaucracy, merely focusing on assistance and support in providing human services. The emerging paradigm of a decentralized and mixed economy of welfare, favored by the functional and structural transformation of the public sphere, serves today as a strong corrective to the Jacobin assumption that the state is the only institution of the public sphere. Thus, the public sphere not only enables today the autonomous opinion formation, but also empowers citizens to influence decision-makers (Eriksen, 2005), and, therefore, turns into a favorable condition for democracy and self-government.

Public opinion and researchers in Romania recently witnessed a refreshed concern on public space and cooperation issues (Preoteasa, 2002). Not surprisingly, this is merely related to corruption outcomes (Uslaner and Bădescu, 2004a; Uslaner and Bădescu, 2004b; Uslaner,

2007), since corruption reflects concerns with illegitimate power, social domination and egoism. In fact, corruption is a way to overpass collective action dilemma (Ostrom, 1990) through selfish means, yet its apparent social success might more broadly affect social trust and undermine further cooperation. When it comes to engaging in collective action, many people cannot identify a common reality, a common ground, and this easily makes them believe that such a non-objective reality is elusive, remote, hostile, subject to manipulation by distant forces and impossible to change by ordinary citizens. This might explain why Romanian citizens generally turn out to be more distrustful, pessimistic and disengaged than citizens from other European countries, when one compares survey data (Bădescu, 2003; Uslaner, 2004).

### **Trust and cooperation in the public space**

The public space is mainly a political space, meaning that people engaging in this space express a willingness to defend and pursue a collective interest. The common interest is expressed by the willingness to cooperate, on the one hand, and by the desire to refrain egoism, on the other hand. The two aspects are embedded in the theory of social capital and are relevant for the political dimension of the public sphere, since social trust, reciprocity and altruism are ingredients for cooperation. Cooperation facilitates, in turn, the development and growth of political resources of individuals and groups, enabling them to influence the political system (Coleman, 1990; Fukuyama, 1995; Misztal, 1996; Putnam, 1993, 2000; Seligman, 2000; Warren, 1999). In fact, social capital implies a willingness to do one's shares in collective endeavors. In a setting rich in social capital, one is less

likely to expect others to be free riders and, partly in consequence, one is also less likely to be a free rider himself. This consolidates one's trust in other people, impacts one's desire to refrain egoism, and, finally, even enhances tolerance and optimism (Stolle and Rochon, 1998).

According to Yamagishi and Yamagishi (1994), trust is an expectation of others' benign behavior under circumstances where people do not have control over others, and do not know each other. By contrast, assurance occurs in relationships where people do have control over others, for example, where people know each other and are mutually committed. That difference might explain the levels of generalized trust and cooperativeness between different kinds of societies (Hayashi et al., 1999). In post-communist settings, the public space was partially reclaimed from the previous tight state control that was based on communist ideology, yet it was not regenerated as to fulfill its function of pursuing a common interest. The partial persistence of essential elements derived from the previous social environment might explain the low level of social trust, since that regime was based on tight ideological control, low social trust and small networks of close relations, exclusively with few trustworthy fellows, relatives and close friends with whom one used to discuss personal affairs and politics (Völker and Flap, 2001). Additionally, the persistent logic of networks previously used to secure goods and services in a shortage economy might be a plausible cause for the pervasive corruption in the region (Rose, 1998; Hayoz and Sergeyev, 2003; Uslaner, 2007). Such networks have an important effect on social trust, reciprocity, altruism and cooperation. These attitudinal variables are essential for the way people conceive social relations, as we underline later in our discourse analysis.

## Methodology and source material

The methodological framework we chose for this article derives from the theoretical framework of critical discourse analysis, also known as CDA. On the one hand, CDA has lately established itself as a decisively successful tool of critical study (Billig, 2003, 2008). Since *Language and Social Control*, the seminal book of Fowler and his co-workers (1979), CDA has successfully demonstrated that discourse always has a relationship with elements of various social processes, power and ideology (Fairclough, 1992, 1995; Van Dijk, 1993, 2006; Wodak, 2007). By combining linguistics and socially embedded approaches within the analysis of discourse, CDA transcends the pure linguistic dimension, and incorporates sociological, political, historical and psychological dimensions when analyzing specific discursive phenomena. Thus, it mediates between the social and the linguistics (Weiss and Wodak, 2003), in order to accomplish and surpass the efforts and interests of both earlier social philosophers of language (Foucault) and critical analysts associated with the Frankfurt school (Adorno, Habermas and Marcuse). On the other hand, CDA has managed to incorporate multidisciplinary approaches (Van Dijk, 2001), not only linguistic, but also socio-cognitive, and, thus, now offers a better perspective for critically analyzing complex social issues as identity, power and inequality, as shown in this article.

The themes expressed by *popular music*, as source material, are critically analyzed. We are interested here in both conceptual and relational analysis of discursive elements, and will stick to the discourse-historical approach of the CDA, since we intend to understand discourse as a text in context and to unfold the meaning

given by young people to essential social concepts. We are interested here into social capital, defined as trust, reciprocity, commitment and cooperation, but we are also interested in shedding light on their relationship with various dominant social norms, as consumerism, sexual aesthetics, social competition, power and domination. Thus, we carefully scrutinize the occurrence of antonymic pairs of concepts that describe attitudes and values, focusing on relevant issues for social capital: friends and 'brothers' vs. enemies, friendly world vs. 'mean world', (close) friends vs. misleading friends, strong ties vs. weak ties. According to Bassani (2007), five dimensions of social capital theory have been already analyzed by various youth studies: different forms of capital influence on well-being, the positive relation between social capital and well-being, the transformation of resources into social capital, the creation of social capital in a complex process, and how the social capital formed in two groups (such as family and school) interacts in order to influence young people. We intend to use CDA for emphasizing the last three dimensions of social capital and the processes pertaining to our socio-cultural category of youths listening to popular music. For a deeper understanding of the complex social issues at stake pertaining to marginalization, social trust and cooperation, we will focus on CDA strategies (Wodak and Meyer, 2001) of nomination (the construction on *in-groups* and *out-groups* by cultural consumption), predication (the way social actors are positively or negatively labeled by various social instances), argumentation (justification of positive or negative attribution by the *in-group* and the *out-group*), perspectivation or discourse representation (by expressing the involvement of the speaker), and intensification (by modifying/intensifying the force of

discriminatory utterances against culturally defined marginality).

Why focusing on popular music? As an essential social product, popular culture (and especially popular music) offers compelling insights into the social world we live in. Unlike the so-called high culture, popular culture based on experiences and views of the common folk may more accurately uncover the very fabric of the social world. Popular music is a social sign because it creates an effect in the perceiver that is not only aesthetic, but socially meaningful. Moreover, popular music is a sign because it appeals to the emotions of a generation, particularly a young generation (Matusitz, 2010). By that, popular music carries out cultural images and symbols that surround the music (Stratton, 1989). It can act as any other vehicle carrying images and symbols in order to generate a particular narrative. Popular music may also serve as vehicle for frustration, anger and protest against established values and norms (Adorno, 1980). Those norms can be general social norms, but they can also be openly political norms. That is why music is probably the most suitable way for young people to express not only their identity, but their political knowledge and orientations, in indirect or more direct manners (Matusitz, 2010; Baker, 2010).

The data of our research is drawn from a series of widely popular songs that we consider to be suitable vehicles for the expression of many young people's social and political knowledge and orientations. These songs, called 'manele' in Romania (singular: 'manea'), are widespread cultural items, especially among young people, since the beginning of the post-communist transition in 1990. Even if there also classical 'manele' exist, in fact, Turkish derived genre of dance music performed as early as the 18<sup>th</sup> century by Romani musicians in pre-modern Romania, the modern 'manele' are a mixture of Romani

music with Turkish, Greek and even Indian elements, combined using modern (especially electronic) instruments and beats. In fact, the mixture of music genres and the eclectic beats makes 'manele' to be related to other music styles in the Balkans, like Bulgarian 'chalga', Greek modern 'laiko', Turkish 'arabesque' and to a lesser extent to Serbian 'turbo-folk'. This mixture makes 'manele' relatively hard to clearly define, yet there can be seen as a mixture of complex local Romani and oriental Balkan, Turkish and Arabic influences over a pop tune.

In spite of the fact that 'manele' are often labeled by intellectuals as *pseudo-music*, *bad taste* or pure *kitsch*, they are to be seen more as valuable vehicle for the expression of a specific counterculture. In fact, its alliance with the new media technology founded a true counterculture community (Matei, 2005), with their members sharing new ways of expressing their individuality through this special kind of simple, but lively music, spawned by the meeting of many cultures and young urban subcultures. In this vein, 'manele' may express underground identity concerns, as well as social or more personal themes as *justice*, *equality*, *corruption*, *power* and *domination*, *fate* and *predestination*, in opposition to the official discourse on Romania's modernization and Europeanization. Through CDA, we will unravel those social concerns embedded in the discourse expressed by 'manele' in its effort to define in-group and out-group, to label social actors and to justify those labels, as well as to express the involvement of the speaker, its social status and values. This is also the case of rap music, who managed to largely increase the popularity of African-American youth styles among young people from various parts of the world as to become one of the most esteemed youth culture on the globe (Havens, 2001). As vehicle for symbols and images, rap music has helped in

defining black identity in the context of modernity (Gilroy, 1993). But it is the case of *hip-hop*, as well. Its rapid expansion into new social spaces forced social scientists to pay serious attention to the question of how specific youth audiences bring different reading formations and meanings to the culture (Riley, 2005).

Although music is an essential vehicle for various cultural images and symbols, we emphasize here less on other signs carried out by 'manele' and mainly focus on the lyrics. In fact, 'manele' composers and players have managed to create a distinct image on the local music scene, with their own fashion style, mainly composed of cheap, flashy jewellery and imitating luxury clothing brands, with singers driving expensive luxury cars and surrounded by series of young ladies in mini-skirts or in swimming suits. Lyrics are new features for 'manele', since classical 'manele' were played on classical instruments by a live band and had no text. On the contrary, modern 'manele' singers strongly emphasize their lyrics as an expression of their status, values and social orientations.

The 'manele' corpus used in our research was selected by using 'manele' top charts on internet.<sup>2</sup> As underlined below, 'manele' are so popular that one can easily find them on specialized radio and TV channels, as well as on specialized websites. Using as first criterion of selection the popularity of the songs, we avoided the selection bias that could have been produced by the second criterion, which were actually several tag words: *friends*, *enemies*, *'brothers'*, *'mean world'*, all of them pertaining to the social capital issue. In fact, except love and romance issues, the most frequent tags are especially related to social capital issues, namely social trust and the strong ties one sets up with close friends and relatives. From a couple of thousand of 'manele' featuring in a dozen of internet charts, using their

popularity ranking combined with the tag words, we selected 31 ‘manele’. Acknowledging that CDA is qualitative analysis and not (quantitative) content analysis, the selection of the material we made here is considered to be accurate for revealing the discourse strategy of constructing *in-groups* and *out-groups*, the way social actors are positively or negatively labeled, or the process of justification of positive or negative attribution by the *in-group* and the *out-group*.

### Young people, ‘manele’ and social values

Despite the fact that ‘manele’ are widespread today among people of various age categories, they largely seem to be most enjoyed by young people in Romania. Back in 2006, a survey requested by the National Audio-Visual Council, the regulating body for audio-visual media in Romania, revealed that almost a third of youngsters between 11 and 14 years of age and more than a fifth of those between 15 and 18 years old mostly enjoyed ‘manele’,<sup>3</sup> yet these figures could be more important since ‘manele’ are socially labeled as bad-taste and pseudo-music by the established intellectuals, and therefore, not easy to publically assume as cultural consumption behavior. By sociological observation instead, one can notice that younger generations use to listen to them in various daily contexts, on a Sunday barbecue or while driving their cars. It is not unusual to hear ‘manele’ in buses or in railway stations, in taxis or in restaurants. They are so popular among young people, that media entrepreneurs in Romania, acknowledging their market potential, now offer not only numerous special internet web sites, but radio stations (Taraf FM) and even TV channels (Taraf TV, Mynele TV). Due to

their popularity, they have been even used on an impressively large scale by the populist Democrat Liberal Party on government (PDL) during his last electoral campaigns (2008-2009), in order to reach specific electoral targets among the general public. This is especially true for those targets inaccessible to other political competitors, namely the undereducated young people, which can hardly be mobilized by average parties. The use by populists of a strategy that brought in the use of ‘manele’ during their electoral campaigns acknowledges that young people are social forces that count, and that they actually compose a generation that has a wide variety of cultural, educational, political and ethnical backgrounds. In the same time, it is acknowledged that young people form a distinct subculture, similar with the tendencies that shaped Western democratic societies four decades ago (Inglehart, 1997), since new generations seem to display different sets of attitudes that their predecessors (Norris, 2003; Mazzoleni and Masulin, 2005; Norris et al., 2005).

In fact, young people’s social and political engagement is increasingly seen as an essential asset of an unconsolidated democracy, like Romania. They are the newest citizens, and in a couple of decades will form the bulk of the citizens. It is acknowledged today that, because of acute changes in childhood conditions in post-modern societies, even young children are to be taken into account (O’Toole, 2003; van Deth et al., 2011). Thus, their social and political values and orientations are critical for the future. No matter if they are seen as valuable assets for democracy, or potential harmful contesters that could undermine authoritarian political regimes and that have to be severely contained (Atwal, 2009; Hemment, 2009), young people are social forces that count. In fact, it is not clear, especially in Western settings, whether they can be seen as either

disengaged and disenfranchised, heralds of an incipient crisis of democracy (Banaji, 2008), or active and engaged in sophisticated new forms of politics (Barnes and Kaase, 1979; Amna et al., 2007; Li and Marsh, 2008; Juris and Pleyers, 2009; Farthing, 2010).

In East European settings, a large literature emphasize data supporting the idea that young people now face new challenges, in the context of marketization, democratization and increased labor migration (Baldwin-Edwards, 2007; Hahn and Logvinenko, 2008; Walker, 2010; White, 2010). As in Western democracies, the same dilemma occurs regarding their political activity, whether they have to be seen as disengaged in traditional forms of political action, or active and engaged in sophisticated new forms of politics. On the one hand, they can successfully mobilize and participate in regime change processes, as they did during the 'Orange revolutions' (Kuzio, 2006; Ó Beacháin and Polese, 2010; Tereshchenko, 2010). On the other hand, they are seen as distrustful and disengaged citizens, disconnected from the flow of political communication, and generally feeling powerless and pessimistic about their influence over the political system (Howard, 2002; Bădescu et al., 2004; Lühiste, 2006; Rose-Ackerman, 2007). During the transition period, young people seem to have been most affected by social shock in terms of resources (Berend, 2007). Moreover, young people avoid political participation because of lack of motivation. The general low trust in the political system turns political participation into a useless action for those who have no hope to influence political institutions and politicians. These institutions are generally seen as rigged against ordinary citizens and run by corrupt and irresponsible officials. Thus, young people feel politically powerless and disregard public issues (Dragoman, 2009). Additionally, they reject any kind of mobilization that reminds

them about the previous communist forced political mobilization (Grødeland, 2007). Even young people who desire to get involved in more significant political action don't always have the right connections for successful political activity. Often seen in Eastern Europe as vehicles for personal welfare (Roberts, 2008), parties in power are not accessible to everyone. Post-communist parties benefit, as other inchoate institutions, of a wide range of former social (in fact, personal) networks that are specific to atomized societies, which make more formal civil society organizations unattractive for many people (Gibson, 2003). The persistence of personal networks is a response to the organizational failure and to the corruption of formal organizations. Networks that individuals can invoke in response are anti-modern: forms of informal, diffuse social cooperation; begging or cajoling public officials; using connections to 'bend' rules or paying bribes that break rules (Rose, 1998). The uneasy access to public offices only adds to the general powerless feeling and the distrustful social environment.

This is the general environment where we use CDA in order to unveil the social values shared by young people listening to 'manele'. The values that pertain to social capital as essential products of mobilized social resources (Lin, 2001) can be the central piece in youth-centered groups (Coleman, 1990) or they can be heterogeneous values among different groups (Putnam, 2000), helping 'bridging' those groups by mobilizing resources. The in-group resources of trust, commitment and reciprocity, on the one hand, and the positive attitudes of cooperation with the out-group, on the other hand, are essential for the way young people listening to 'manele' conceive their social ties. Of course, 'manele' is not the only genre young people listen to, yet it could better describe the values defining a marginal culture than any other cultural product.

***The self and the other, friends and foes: the discursive construction of in- and out-groups***

Identity is impossible without difference. Class, as well as religious, ethnic and other cultural groups in modern societies is constantly defined through differentiation processes (Gellner, 1987; Cohen, 1985; Luhmann, 2002). Notwithstanding that 'manele' singers and their public do not form a classical sociological group more or less homogeneous, 'manele' consumption could be seen more as a differentiation process in terms of marginalization. In this vein, their discourse is to be taken as an expression of identity concerns in a region undergoing profound social stratification processes (Enyedi, 1998; Heller, 1998), combined with social or more personal themes as *justice, equality, corruption, power and domination*. Thus, 'manele' are more to be seen as specific to young people with a common background that defines marginality, engaged in a social process of stratification that opposes social groups and individuals. That is why one of the most frequent and important issues in the texts under critical scrutiny, which lies at the core of 'manele' singers' conception of the social environment, is the dichotomy *friends vs. foes*. By its use, the individual is conceived as permanently fighting, in order to survive a harsh social environment.

'One leans like a tree during stormy weather,

Sadness sometimes accumulates,  
Even when he finally achieves to be happy,  
Everybody hates him.

Why people argue and look angrily to each other,

Oh God, they argue brother with brother,  
All one can see around him is hatred  
because of money,

Many have become arrogant and now hate each other.'

(Mario Buzoianu – *Hatred, hatred*).<sup>4</sup>

The CDA is able here to uncover the discursive construction of in- and out-groups, since the delineation of the Self and the Other, is the first step in the construction of individual and collective identity. In the process of nomination (Wodak, 2007), the enemy becomes a central figure in the imagery set up by 'manele' singers, as it defines the self by its bitter opposition. The enemy is powered by pure hatred against others and that feeling is mainly triggered by envy. Enemies are imagined as covetous with regard to one's success, possessions and advantages, and odiously plotting against him.

'My enemies die of envy; they are green with envy because my heart is strong,

Because I am cleverer,  
All my life I done anything I wanted to,  
Anything I wanted was a gift from God.

I never cried my eyes out when loosing something,

Yet I struggled three times harder,

When they were satisfied that I have fallen down

I made them cry when I rose up.'

(Florin Pește – *Long live my enemies*).<sup>5</sup>

From the perspective of covetous enemies, 'manele' singers often express the drama of the hero confronting the 'mean world'. In this vein, 'manele' texts might work like the much criticized television propensity for crime, war, disease and other plagues that make (propensity) viewers reasonably think that the real world is terribly cruel. It is a 'mean world' because people do not trust each other and are looking out primarily for themselves (Putnam, 1995; Uslander, 1998). The same logic of the 'mean world' is directly expressed by 'manele' singers. Their gloomy view of the world is mainly due to the powerless feeling one may experience when confronting it.

'Each time I behaved well, evil cursed me,

Because of others, with the most beloved fellow I quarreled.

How mean is the world, I cannot carry the burden no more,

They done so much harm to me, they pushed me to quarrel with my brother.

What a mean, pervert and hostile world,

They don't let you live peacefully,

Anywhere I go, they follow and gossip about me.

By enemies' fault, you suffer from your brothers' hatred.'

(Alex din Sălaj – *What a mean, pervert and hostile world*).<sup>6</sup>

The mean world is 'perverse and hostile', as it is the unique cause of one's quarrels with his best friends. The disputes that it constantly triggers by finding fault make one deeply suffering from breaking up with his 'brothers', who now despise and regard him as a selfish person. The 'mean world' is, therefore, a collective, harmful, remote and powerful enemy that overwhelms single individuals, no matter their efforts to conduct in a proper manner. It finally works like a contrasting Other, in a permanent interaction between the Established and the Outsider (Elias and Scotson, 1994), as expressed by the opposition between 'cool' guys and 'stupid' guys. Yet being 'cool' is not only an individual self-esteem motivation, it is a socially valuable asset when confronted to a 'mean and pervert world.'

'Get up, you cool guys, cool guys, cool guys,

Get down, you stupid guys, stupid guys, stupid guys.

Oh God, how pervert is the world,

They could take your life for some money,

How dangerous is the world,

They could harm and deprive you of your daily bread.'

(Nicolae Guţă and Roxana, the 'Princess of Transylvania' – *Get up, you cool guys*).<sup>7</sup>

### ***Predicating the difference***

The construction of in-groups and out-groups is always accompanied by norms

and values, and the most common strategy of predication is attaching positive values to the self and negative values to the other. Members of the group often think of themselves in human terms as better than the others, emphasize Elias and Scotson (1994, XV). In the predication process, 'manele's hero, who makes the assertions in the 'manele' texts and who makes the discourse representation, generally portrays himself as 'cooler', cleverer, richer, more hard working and better fit to overpass life's difficulties. He portrays himself as a 'world value'.

'I'm a world value and I have a good time.

From cool guys you ask for respect,

You have to prove that you are smart.

From cool guys you ask for respect,

You earn your money from the internet.

Everybody wonders how I get to have the money,

The Arab Mob and the Americans.<sup>8</sup>

I own millions in my bank accounts

While my enemies are starving,

I withdraw the interest from my current accounts

And use the whole life to count the money.

He is general Amar,

He knows how to make money,

He's the master of Oltenia and of whole Romania.<sup>9</sup>

Who is, who, who, who?

He is general Amar,

In the end of the week the manele singers gather,

And they sing his renown.'

(Nicolae Guţă, Alex, Zaku and Juke – *I'm a world value*).<sup>10</sup>

Enemies' envy acts as a powerful incentive for the hero. It makes him to keep going on his way, to largely defeat his enemies and, finally, to get accommodated with this way of life. These qualities and possessions are, generally, featured in texts by large sums of money, luxury cars and beautiful young ladies. The texts expressing them are always backed by video images in the clip, where the 'manele' singer is symbolically shown

expensing large sums of money (by throwing them in the air or over generously paying the instrument players) and driving new and expensive cars, often accompanied by good looking young ladies dressed in imitating luxury clothing brands. In this respect, 'manele' are similar to Serbian and Croatian 'turbo-folk', where its banality, consumerism and sexualized aesthetics are criticized from academic and cultural standpoints (Baker, 2007). In spite of the fact 'turbo-folk' is criticized as an aesthetic said to reproduce dominant social values as quick enrichment, conspicuous consumption, masculinity realized through violence, and femininity realized through sexual availability, underlines Baker, it carries cultural inclusions and exclusions that maintain group identities. This is rather related to a marginal identity that emphasizes outstanding social success. In fact, 'manele' singers and those who listen this music genre may be seen as emerging from marginal groups. Most of the 'manele' singers are *Roma*, although their public is not ethnically defined. As *Roma*, they still carry on social themes that remind us of their historical social exclusion, oppression and discrimination. Noticing that *Roma* people still face today severe social deprivation and exclusion in a general context marked by neo-liberalism in former communist Europe (Trehan and Sigona, 2009), it is not unusual to see them emphasizing social success as a mean of social integration, while still attached to their distinctive music as a way of incipient ethnic mobilization.

Quick enrichment is generally seen as in opposition to hard work, as it always raises questions about its mechanisms and ethic. This is also related to a marginal identity, especially to a *Roma* identity. As emphasized by Nicolae Gheorghe (2011), *Roma* people developed during centuries a different work-ethics due to different relationships to land. Since they were forbidden to own land, they were known as

service providers in a society that considered land as a major means for the legitimate accumulation of wealth. Service providers, underlines Gheorghe, need clients to exploit above all, and in order to succeed in this ambiguous relationship, they might also need to cheat. This is why 'manele' emphasize cunningness ('șmecherie' in Romanian), making the valuable distinction underlined above between 'cool' clever guys, and 'stupid' guys, those who cannot succeed, defined like an attitude: to be 'smart' with the clients for a short time, before moving to another place and use the same tricks with others (Gheorghe, 2011). Of course, this is not peculiar to *Roma* people, but rather defines a series of survival ideas and techniques of marginal groups as a response to social exclusion and oppression. This is why quick enrichment is highly valued as a sign of certain social success.

'I have a glamorous car, a glamorous car,  
This attracts so many chicks,  
While I count from one to three  
I drag who I want to.  
One, two, three, I have the coolest girls,  
Three, four, five, the sexiest chicks,  
Five, six, seven, one per night,  
Eight, nine, ten, I have no rival.  
My friends envy me because  
They are not so lucky,  
They don't have my talent and my money,  
And neither do they have my chicks.'  
(Babi Minune and Nek – *I have a glamorous car*).<sup>11</sup>

When it comes to compare with its enemies, the worse social decay the 'manele' singer wishes to them is to fall into a condition when they cannot anymore enjoy their money, their cars, when they are abandoned by everybody, sold out and, literally, starving.

'I have a smart idea,  
To get the revenge on my enemies,  
To make them suffer by the words I say,  
To realize that they have no value.

Now my enemies are down, they are really down,

They don't have cars anymore, they have no money,

They starve now, my enemies,  
Once cool guys, they are now in a mess.'<sup>12</sup>  
(Vali G. – *My enemies are really down*).

All of these qualities and possessions mentioned above are important in the 'manele' texts. But the most emphasized issue is *money*. All the well-known stereotypes about money can be found here: they strengthen you in your social conflicts, they can buy you a privileged social status, and they offer you power and pleasure. It is to be noticed that conspicuous consumption and quick enrichment, however largely overemphasized by 'manele', are not at all peculiar to this genre of music. As cultural vehicles, 'manele' clearly express currently dominant social values, especially *consumerism*. One should have in mind that during the first years of transition in Central and Eastern Europe, the erosion and the collapse of the social safety net and the rise of permanent unemployment and poverty surprised the society (Berend, 2007). Living standards declined, while state economy collapsed. It took several years to witness the economic recovery, this time on new foundations. Managerialism (technocracy) and then, finally, capitalism fully replaced state socialism. Accompanied by its own logic, capitalism transformed not only property and work relations, but social and cultural values. In a social environment based on harsh competition, social success is first noticeable by the mean of material goods. Thus, the transformation of property (Eyal, Szelenyi and Townsley, 1998; Stark and Bruszt, 1998) was accompanied by new social values, including consumerism, in accordance with the victorious neo-liberal ideology. Alongside marginality, consumerism may explain the manele's vigorous emphasis on material goods.

'Money can't buy happiness,  
Yet, it is good to have money.  
When you have pockets of money you are someone,

You can face your enemies.  
Money make you achieve success,  
By their power, money can rise you up or get you down.

With no money, you have no reputation,  
You are despised by those who have money.  
Money can offer you pleasure and power,  
With no money, you are nobody.'<sup>13</sup>  
(Denisa – *Money, money*).

The preference for cash money instead of banking accounts is especially underlined by 'manele' singers, as you cannot make proof of the money you own by the only way of bank receipts, but by the cash money itself. This is another argument why cash money are very often present in the video-clips, being collected by the manele singer as a payment for his musical performance, or being over generously distributed to close friends.

'It's obvious who really someone is,  
He has money in his pockets.  
He doesn't claim, he makes us the proof  
That he owns piles of money.  
I have cash, I have money,  
To show off to my enemies.  
I have cash, I have thousands,  
Not just numbers on the paper.  
It's not enough to have money in your bank account,

Who would believe you?  
Show them all the money,  
Prove that you really own them.'<sup>14</sup>  
(Babi Minune – *Life's hard*).

### ***Close friends, 'brothers' and misleading friends: the argumentation of the difference***

After the nomination, the difference is predicated and then argued (Wodak, 2007). In the argumentation of the difference, the distinction between friends and foes is not always easy to make. This uncertainty adds new significance to the 'mean world'.

Sometimes, close friends (and even the very close ones that are called ‘brothers’) prove to be ungrateful, despite the efforts one makes in order to support and comfort them. This discontent often turns into frustration and bitterness in the ‘manele’ texts, when the ‘hero’ confesses his grief. But the worse enemy may sometimes prove to be one’s close friends and allies. One should therefore be aware of this kind of danger and feel a strong suspicion about close friends who attempt to coax. In fact, they might only want to seduce and dupe. Misleading friends are generally seen as flattering in order to take advantage of one’s material goods or social status, and finally maneuvering to despoil and discard him.

‘I’ll always be aware of flattering fellows;  
they certainly are the most pervert,

Those who only give you good reason to  
trust, they will disappoint you the most.

Thus is good in life to have bullets,  
To have financial bullets,  
That they know your value.

The flattering fellows are the most  
dangerous, the most dangerous,

Those who please you are the most pervert,  
the most pervert.’

(Petrică Cerceș – *Financial bullets*).<sup>15</sup>

Despite the ‘mean world’, there are also close friends that encourage and sustain you. Thus, they are priceless, and there is no sacrifice enough in order to keep them around. They are those who carry, comfort and shoulder you. By contrast, misleading, coaxing, flattering friends only add to the general distrustful social environment expressed by the ‘mean world’.

‘My brother stood by me  
When everybody else left me.  
He was really worried about me.  
How could I reward him?  
Just loving him is not enough,  
I wish I have the power  
To offer him my own life.’

(Florin Salam and Florin Purice – *I have a true brother*).<sup>16</sup>

### ***Strong ties, weak ties: intensifying social uncertainty***

Social uncertainty largely expressed by ‘manele’ singers can be reduced by the close range of social ties. Whereas the cause of the strong ties experienced during communist times is to be found in the tight ideological and police control set up by the totalitarian regime (Völker and Flap, 2001), the current strong yet close range ties’ cause is to be found in the very social uncertainty. In fact, the general distrustful environment expressed by the ‘manele’ texts causes the propensity of these strong ties with close friends and relatives. It largely disables the spread of heterogeneous values among different groups, as underlined by Putnam (2000), who might help ‘bridging’ groups by mobilizing resources. In the same time, the distrustful culture that ‘manele’ texts express and even help consolidate turns against in-group resources. The values that pertain to social capital as essential products of mobilized social resources prove not to be the central piece in youth-centered groups, as underlined by Coleman (1990). Trust, commitment and reciprocity are not present on a large scale not even in groups connected by strong ties, since those strong ties may be elusive in a ‘mean world’, dominated by social uncertainty and profound hatred. In this social environment, violence against enemies is not unusual, as expressed by the intense discourse below.

The problem of trust is even more acute in the case of young people. On one hand, they tend to inherit distrust from previous generations that were confronted with the ideological control of the totalitarian state, since trust can be culturally determined (Newton and Norris, 2000). On the other hand, they learn distrust from their current social experience, since trust is also influenced by other social values as equality, reciprocity, fairness, honesty and

the respect of legal norms (Uslaner and Bădescu, 2004a, 2004b). In a society dominated by pervasive corruption, inequity and inequality, citizens, and especially young people simply cannot afford to be trustful (Uslaner, 2007), since trustworthiness may reduce their chances for social success. In this respect, young people with lower income and less educated, the have-nots of the Romanian transition, are the most distrustful citizens (Bădescu et al., 2004).

I had yesterday an idea, a great idea,  
To dig some ten war trenches,  
To put my enemies inside, my enemies  
inside,  
They caused me so much trouble, so much  
trouble.  
I dig trenches for you, my enemies,  
If I get angry, I even call for three  
mechanical diggers.  
I can even put my enemies to dig, to work  
hard,  
In the end, I just finish with a shovel and get  
rid of them.’  
(Nicolae Guţă and Mr. Juve – *I dig war  
trenches*).<sup>17</sup>

Social uncertainty largely favors the persistence and consolidation of previous, communist era social ties when it comes to get access to social resources. The strong powerless feeling in front of the ‘mean world’, combined with an overwhelming distrustful feeling once engaged in various social interactions, largely encourages specific defensive reactions as pervasive corruption, free-riding and social intolerance. Since one does not trust the others, since one expects others to be free-riders, one will be a free-rider. One will bend the rules, strongly believing that one’s social competitors would do the same. One will use bribe and personal connections, instead of using the impersonal forces of the free-market, when it comes to look for social opportunities. As times goes by, no one will express his willingness to do one’s shares in collective endeavors, and one will

find less and less collective endeavors that worth one’s effort. With no interactions with people with different ethnic, religious, cultural and social backgrounds, one will value less equality and express less tolerance. By this, the range and intensity of one’s social ties will rapidly decrease, adding to the general feeling of social uncertainty and disengagement. That is why family is the most important social value in Romania, as it offers comfort and support. In the same time, this kind of familism turns out to be socially undermining, since people tend to limit the range of personal helpful interactions, moral values and desirable behavior to the narrow social boundaries of the family.

The critical discourse analysis of ‘manele’ has clearly indicated the dominant social values in Romania, but also has shown the mechanism of differentiation and the construction of *in-groups* and *out-groups* in a social context marked by increasing stratification. Emphasizing the dichotomy *friends* vs. *foes*, ‘manele’ consumption could be seen as a differentiation process in terms of marginalization, while ordinary people confront a ‘mean world’ by testing their social ties in a social environment defined by increasing uncertainty, which forces them to rely on previously tested strong ties, such as close friends and family.

## Conclusions

Romania faces, today, one of the final stages of post-communist transition to democracy. Yet, transition does not limit to the institutional design and the transformation of the economy. In fact, a couple of generations will experience the transition from the communist ideology-style culture to a fully civic culture. Even if Romania managed to build democratic institutions and to transform its economy, the

Romanian society still makes important efforts to consolidate a free and democratic public sphere. The public sphere is a space free of all kinds of constraints, that encourages people to freely express and interact. By large scale cooperation in this open environment, citizens engage in collective action and may use common political resources in order to control elected officials and finally to preserve the autonomy of the public space itself. Yet, cooperation needs interpersonal trust, reciprocity and commitment (Bădescu, 2003). Grouped under the large umbrella of social capital, these prerequisites for cooperation are generally considered to be essential resources for democracy.

Popular culture offers compelling insights into the world we live in. Popular music, as an essential vehicle for various cultural images and symbols, and especially a very popular genre called 'manele', has been analyzed, in order to better understand youth culture. Despite they are often seen as a marginal culture, specific to undereducated young people from the periurban areas, 'manele' express, in fact, identity and social concerns. The social environment they depict is a distrustful and problematic one, dominated by distant social forces rigged against ordinary people. Contrary to the official discourse on modernization and Europeanization, 'manele' express serious concerns regarding social equality and solidarity, power and domination. They largely emphasize mechanisms of social differentiation, based on material dominant values, status and prestige, echoing the undergoing broader social stratification processes during capitalist consolidation. Moreover, the values they carry, as *banality*, *consumerism* and *sexualized aesthetics* (Baker, 2007), are a marginal response to socially widespread

consumerism, quick enrichment and individualistic hedonism.

The gloomy social environment labeled by 'manele' as a 'mean world', dominated by deep social distrust and uncertainty, largely encourages specific defensive reactions, as pervasive corruption, free-riding, social intolerance and violence. Far from being specific to a marginal subculture, these features depict a society making efforts to rebuild social ties and consolidate democracy following decades of totalitarian rule. Confronted with social distrust and low civic engagement, Romanian society has to build a new democratic public space. Thus, it would enable citizens to freely express and to defend their rights and freedoms, to control irresponsible and corrupted elected officials who seem to have captured the state (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2003), while pursuing other values as equity, social equality and tolerance. It finally has to limit corruption, impunity, free-riding, social domination and violence, those common elements so vividly depicted by 'manele'. In this respect, 'manele' are to be seen not only as accurate expressions of dominant social values, but as a pervasive discourse of distrust and disengagement that could further undermine the consolidation of the public sphere. Influenced by social constraints that force ordinary people to bind legal norms, to refrain reciprocity, fairness and honesty in a social environment dominated by harsh competition, 'manele' could, in turn, deepen those social norms and behaviors, in an vicious cycle of distrust and apathy. Thus, their impact on young people's values and norms is to be further investigated in a separate research, alongside other relevant issues unveiled by the present study, namely, the *sexualized aesthetics*, *marginality* and *consumerism*.

## Notes

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- <sup>2</sup> The charts were selected from the following websites: [www.topmanele.net](http://www.topmanele.net), [www.topmanelenoi.com](http://www.topmanelenoi.com), [www.best-manele.com](http://www.best-manele.com). Many lyrics are available at [www.versuri.multe.ro/versuri-manele/](http://www.versuri.multe.ro/versuri-manele/) and <http://versuri.manele.com/> (all web-sites have been accessed between 22 February and 30 May 2011).
- <sup>3</sup> [http://arhiva.cna.ro/paginaindex/int\\_cna.pdf](http://arhiva.cna.ro/paginaindex/int_cna.pdf) (accessed 30 May 2011).
- <sup>4</sup> ‘Se apleacă omul ca pomul când e ploaie și furtună,/necazul și supărarea câteodată se adună,/chiar dacă-i ajunge o dată să fie mai fericit,/atunci când îi merge bine de toți este dușmănit./De ce oamenii se certă și cu ură se privesc,/se ceartă frate cu frate, Doamne, și se dușmănesc./peste tot vezi numai ură pornită doar de la bani,/pe mulți i-a orbit mândria și au devenit dușmani.’ (Mario Buzoianu – *Dușmănie, dușmănie*).
- <sup>5</sup> ‘Mor dușmanii că am tare inima din piept,/Și că sunt cu trei minute ca ei mai deștept,/Am făcut o viață întreagă numai ce am vrut eu./Ce am dorit mi-a dat tot timpul bunul Dumnezeu./Eu nu am plâns niciodată după ce am pierdut,/Că am făcut că mi-am pus mîntea de trei ori mai mult,/Când se bucurau dușmanii mai mult că am picat/I-am făcut apoi să plângă când m-am ridicat.’ (Florin Pește – *Trăiască dușmanii mei*).
- <sup>6</sup> ‘De câte ori am făcut bine, răul a căzut pe mine,/cu cine mi-a fost mai drag, din vina lumii m-am certat./Câtă răutate e pe pământ, e o povară grea pe care nu pot s-o mai duc,/mi-au făcut atâta rău, m-au făcut să mă cert cu fratele meu./Câtă lume rea, perversă și dușmănoasă,/nu te lasă să trăiești liniștit în viață,/oriunde mă duc mă urmăresc/și numai de rău mă vorbesc./Din vina dușmanilor câștigați ura fraților.’ (Alex din Sălaj – *Câtă lume rea, perversă și dușmănoasă*).
- <sup>7</sup> ‘Sus șmecherii, șmecherii, șmecherii./jos fraierii, fraierii, fraierii./sus cu jmechereimea./la pamânt cu fraierimea./Doamne perversă-i lumea/pentru bani ți-ar lua viața/ce periculoasă-i lumea/ți-ar da-n cap să îți ia pâinea.’ (Nicolae Guță și Roxana Prințesa Ardealului – *Sus șmecherii*).
- <sup>8</sup> In fact, the American government investigated through the FBI many internet frauds perpetrated by Romanian citizens during the last decade.
- <sup>9</sup> Many of the perpetrators of those internet frauds proved indeed to be living in Oltenia, a southern province of Romania.
- <sup>10</sup> ‘Am valoare mondială./Și eu mă distrez prin țară./Printre șmecheri vrei să ai respect./Trebuie să arăți că ești deștept./Printre șmecheri vrei să ai respect./Banii îi faci acum pe internet./Se întreabă toți cum fac eu banii/Mafia arabă și americanii./Am în conturi milioane./Iar dușmanii mor de foame./Scot dobândă de la bancă/Număr o viață întreagă./Asta e Amar generalul/Și știe să facă banu’/Jupân în Oltenia/Și-n toată România./Cine oare, cine, cine, cine./E Amar general./La sfârșit de săptămână lăutarii se adună./Să îi cânte la valoare că Amar e cel mai tare.’ (Nicolae Guță, Alex, Zaku și Juke – *Am valoare mondială*).
- <sup>11</sup> ‘Am o mașină de fitze, de fitze,/aspiratorul meu de agățat fetițe./numai când număr de la unu până la trei,/agăț ce vor mușchii mei./Unu, doi, trei am cele mai tari femei./trei, patru, cinci, cele mai sexy gagici./cinci, șase, șapte câte una pe noapte/opt, nouă, zece nimeni nu mă întrece./Prietenii mei sunt un pic invidioși./că ei nu sunt la fel ca mine norocoși./că nu au talentul meu și nici banii mei/și nici baftă la femei.’ (Babi Minune și Nek – *Am o mașină de fitze*).
- <sup>12</sup> ‘Ce idee șmecherită mi-a venit în minte./Să mă răzbun pe dușmani, să-i fac din cuvinte./Și să le spun vorbe grele să-i doară mai tare./Să vadă cu adevărat că nu au valoare./Dușmanii s-au dus de tot, s-au dus de tot la vale./Nu mai au mașini, le bate vântu în buzunare./Urlă foamea în ei, în

dușmani mei./Din șmecheri ce au fost au ajuns vai de ei.’

(Vali G. – *Dușmanii s-au dus la vale*).

- <sup>13</sup> ‘Banii nu aduc fericire, dar e bine/să-i ai la tine, tot mai bine-i să ai bani./cât ai buzunarul mare ai valoare./ești în stare să faci față la dușmani./Banii, banii te scot în față./banii, banii îți fac loc în viață./banul ce putere are/el te face mic sau mare./Fără bani n-ai nici un nume/și ce glume fac anume cei cu bani pe seama ta./banii pot să îți ofere și plăcere și putere./fără bani ești nimenea.’

(Denisa – *Banii, banii*).

- <sup>14</sup> ‘Se vede cine-i om mare./Are bani în buzunar./Nu se laudă, ne-arată/Că ține banu grămadă./Am cash, am bani./Să le-arăt la dușmani./Am cash, am mii./Nu cifre pe hârtii./Degeaba ai bani în bancă./Nimeni nu vrea să te creadă./Arată bani cash la lume./Arată că ai pe bune.’

(Babi Minune – *Viața-i grea*).

- <sup>15</sup> ‘Mă feresc până am să mor de omul lingușitor, că ăla e capul perverșilor./Pe cine îți dă numai calde, ăla cel mai rău te arde, ăla cel mai rău te arde./D’ăia în viață este bine/Să ai gloanțe mereu la tine./Să ai

gloanțe financiare/Să vadă că ai valoare./Omul care e perios e cel mai periculos, e cel mai periculos./Omul care e periuța e cea mai perversă ființă, cea mai perversă ființă.’

(Petrică Cercel – *Gloanțe financiare*).

- <sup>16</sup> ‘Fratele meu mi-a stat aproape/Când toți s-au dat la o parte./Plângea mereu de mine/Când vedea că nu îmi e bine./Cum să fac să-l răsplătesc./Nu e de ajuns cât îl iubesc./Mi-aș dori să am putere./Să îi dau din zilele mele.’

(Florin Salam și Florin Purice – *Am un frate adevărat*).

- <sup>17</sup> ‘Mi-a venit ieri o idee, o mare idee./Să fac vreo zece tranșee./Să-mi bag dușmanii în ele, dușmanii în ele./Că mi-au făcut zile grele, numai zile grele./Fac tranșee de război/Dușmanilor pentru voi./De-mi vine damblaua mare./Chem și trei excavatoare./Să pun dușmanii să sape./Să-i treacă o mie de ape./Și eu să vin cu lopata/Să mă scap de ei și gata.’

(Nicolae Guță, Mr. Juve – *Fac tranșee de război*).

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