

MARTOR



Title: "Closures and Museums. Is a Non-Alterity Anthropology Possible?"

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How to cite this article: Cotoi, Călin Nicolae. 2006. "Closures and Museums. Is a Non-Alterity Anthropology Possible?". *Martor* 11: 203-212.

Published by: *Editura MARTOR* (MARTOR Publishing House), *Muzeul Țăranului Român* (The Museum of the Romanian Peasant)

URL: <http://martor.muzeultaranuluiroman.ro/archive/martor-11-2006/>

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Martor is indexed by EBSCO and CEEOL.

Closures and Museums. Is a Non-Alterity Anthropology Possible?

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I had a miserable day today. The natives held a big potlach again. I was unable to get hold of anyone...It is unfortunate that the work here has to stop for a while.

Franz Boas

Museum displays are never innocent ones. They are always revealing and hiding at the same time, always instituting an alterity between Self and Other, between the knowing subject and the known object.

Anthropological museums have acquired a bad name in social and cultural anthropology alike for quite different reasons. The crumbling of the evolutionist theoretical background and the perceived inadequacy of survivalist anthropology were important factors in starting one of the first "representational crises" of modern anthropology. Notwithstanding the differences between social and cultural anthropology the exemplarity of Malinowskian fieldwork shaped the identity and legitimacy of any anthropological endeavors for years to come. The "ethnographers magic" cannot be transported from fieldwork to the museums without the risk of dispelling the very magic that confers credibility to any anthropological enquiry.

Because of the recent, more or less postmodern, disappearance of this magic, the *Entzauberung* of anthropology's core may open up a

chance for a new articulation between museal display and contemporary anthropological discourse and theory.

We do not intend to engage in a comprehensive investigation, nor to give a concrete museographic recipe in this sense. Our goal is restricted to the discussion of the conditions of the possibility of a neo-Boasian anthropology, as a possible interlocutor for a renewed museum anthropology.

The neo-Boasians (Bunzl, 2004; Orta, 2004; Bashkow, 2004 etc.) are proposing a non-alterity anthropology. This paper tries to show that they are overly optimistic and that, in embracing a counter-Enlightenment tradition of thought, they are neglecting not only ambiguities but also nested alterities.

Towards a Neo-Boasian Anthropology?

In 1887, Franz Boas, at the time a relatively young and unknown anthropologist, launched a full-scale attack on American museum anthropology. The father-to-be of American cultural anthropology insisted that first one must place artifacts in the context of their original culture, and, by extension, that of their neighbours, before their true meaning can be revealed. In Ira Jacknis's terms he "shifted the goal of ethnography from the study of discrete objects, in a uni-

versal perspective, to a focus on their cultural context, in a local setting”(Jacknis, 1996: 187).

In the long run, Boas’s critique was due to disentangle the work of anthropology from its original “primitivist” and museum (Paul-Lévy, 1985) settings, even if his work is closely related to ethnographic museums. The tension between *Natur- und Geisteswissenschaften*, or, in Boas’s own terms, between the “aesthetic” method of the physicist and the “affective” one of the cosmographer/ historian (Boas, 1996: 11), transposed to anthropology, dissolved the old evolutionist paradigm. Nevertheless a tension remained. The shift from the *part* (seen on an evolutionist-universalist canvas) to the *whole* (seen as a dense but local cultural entity) was never complete. There is, in Boas’s works, a characteristic “delaying of closure,” an adversity towards formulating general laws and drawing early synthesis (Jacknis, 1996). Lately this boundary resistance of Boasian anthropology has been decoded as a precursory manifestation of postmodernism (Bunzl, 2004).

If the closure of evolutionist anthropological discourse was made possible by the general idea of unilineal or multilinear evolution, the Boasian one should have been articulated on the idea of the wholeness of culture. The problem is that “culture” as a discrete whole is not given but constituted inside ever-disappearing boundaries, as the openness of early Boasian anthropology shows us. Even if it is anachronistic to give this exact formulation to Boas’s ideas, this is a logical and historical outcome of his “affective” methodology and is one of the reasons why museums – as a display of “authentic” artifacts – were slowly removed from the core of cultural anthropology.

Another reason is related probably to the emergence of the Malinowskian paradigm in the Trobriand Islands. George Stocking Jr. has artfully situated this fateful event in the larger context of fieldwork in British anthropology from the early 1870s *Notes and Queries*, through Tylor, Haddon, Rivers, Westermarck, Seligman, the Torres Strait expedition etc. to the forced in-

ternment of Bronislaw Malinowski, as an enemy alien, for two years, in Australia, during World War I (Stocking, 1983). Malinowski’s achievement “helped to establish the special cognitive authority claimed by the modern ethnographic tradition” (Stocking, 1983: 71).

Even if the survivalist tradition could still be perceived in Malinowski’s famous exclamation: “Alas, there is little time for ethnology!” (Malinowski, 1984) from *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, the functionalist and structural-functionalist trends, but, even more prestigious, the fieldwork, the “ethnographer’s magic,” determined the retreat of museum-based ethnology from the cutting edge of anthropological investigation.

The field, the site where legitimate anthropologic knowledge is being produced, has been, in the last years, a largely debated zone of contention. George Stocking Jr., analysing the Malinowskian enterprise, calls it a “myth-making process” (Stocking, 1983: 108). With his analysis of *The Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Stocking unveils the traces of an “euhemeristic foundational myth” where “the divinized heroes are not the Trobriand natives”, but “the European Jason that brings back the Golden Fleece of ethnographic knowledge” (Stocking, 1983: 109).

For more than four decades “Malinowski’s mythical charter functioned to sustain the ethnographic enterprise, helping several generations of aspiring ethnographers to ‘get on with the work.’ By the time his diaries were published, however, changing colonial circumstances had fundamentally altered the ethnographer’s situation; and in the context of a protracted epistemological malaise (heightened no doubt by their publication), it has seemed necessary to many anthropologists to examine more systematically all that was so casually subsumed by that deceptive innocent charm phrase: ‘the ethnographer’s magic’” (Stocking, 1983: 112).

With the waning of the (structural) functionalist theories and the problematisation of the field as the place where anthropological knowl-

edge is constituted there is a certain resurgence of interest in the possibility of spelling a neo-Boasian, non-alterity anthropology.

We do not intend to present here the enormous debate concerning the ambiguity of ethnographic fieldwork, indigenous anthropology, “the ethnographic present” as literary genre etc. Our main concern in these debates is a critique of the reproduction of a paradigm of alterity even in the most self-reflexive anthropological discourses. The possible appearance of an anthropology that transcends this division, becoming, in Matti Bunzl’s terms, a “neo-Boasian anthropology” or a “historical ethnography of secondary explanations¹⁶⁸” (Bunzl, 2004: 441) could offer us a possible way out the methodological and theoretical deadlock binding power, knowledge and display in any ethnographic-museistic approach.

Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson have been quite radical lately in covering the ideology of the “Malinowskian field tradition.” In editing, in 1997, *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science* they have arguably presented a strong critique of the normative construction of fieldwork. This normative construction, that creates a “hierarchy of purity of field sites” by a clear cut separation between “home” and “field” (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997: 12), has been challenged most effectively by those threatened by it, by “native anthropologists” (Jackson, 1987, Messerschmidt, 1981, Geană, 1999).

Discussing Kath Weston and Kirin Narayan’s critiques of the concept of “native anthropologist,” Bunzl considers that “the program they enunciate fails to deconstruct the category of ‘native anthropology’ itself” (Bunzl, 2004: 436). In his view, even the most radical attempts to reconsider indigenous anthropology have not been able to deconstruct the foundational Self/Other divide “that organizes classical fieldwork and produces the native anthropologist as a virtual member of the discipline” (Bunzl, 2004: 436). Even James Clifford, one of the most lucid crit-

ics of contemporary anthropology proposes a “roots and routes” or a “traveling cultures” perspective (Clifford, 1997). In commenting on the fact that James Clifford underscores the role of travelling—understood mainly as “a detour [made by the native anthropologist] through a university or other site that provides analytic or comparative perspective on the place of dwelling/research” (Clifford, 1997: 206). Bunzl considers that in this way Clifford is “reinscribing cultural alterity as the privileged generator of ethnographic authority” (Bunzl, 1996: 437).

The solution Matti Bunzl proposes is quite an ingenious one as it combines Boasian anthropology with Foucauldian genealogy. Grounding his demonstration especially on some “early” Boasian texts like *The Study of Geography* (1887) or *On Alternating Sounds* (1889), Bunzl is trying to re-legitimize an “ethnographic research program that derived from such German counter-Enlightenment figures as Johann Gottfried Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt” (Bunzl, 2004: 437). By emphasizing the uniqueness of values transmitted through history, articulated in the cosmopolitan framework of a *Humanitätsideal* (ideal of humanity), this tradition can help in constituting a different understanding of the epistemology of fieldwork. As this understanding does not rest on a distinction between ethnographic self and native other it can draw “its analytic leverage from a rigorous historicity that refigures the question of Otherness in terms of temporal rather than cultural alterity” (ibid.).

The recourse to Foucault is a recourse to a non-panoptical representation of fieldwork, and a focusing on the moment, and power context, of the invention of cultural differences. For Bunzl, a neo-Boasian anthropology is to be constituted as the ethnographic dimension of a Foucauldian project aiming at a history of the present (Bunzl, 2004: 441), a present constructed out of layers of “secondary explanations” where anthropologist and informant are united in a common epistemic position towards the real Other. This “Other” being, ultimately, the history that has

generated the present condition (Bunzl, 2004: 438).

We have insisted so much on Bunzl's attempt to lay, theoretically, the conditions of possibility for the emergence of a neo-Boasian (counter-Enlightenment) cum Foucauldian anthropology because it is one of the, not so numerous, radical attempts, to disrupt the hallowed "alterity paradigm." Nevertheless, the diverse counter-Enlightenment theoretical traditions Bunzl is trying to knit together with Foucauldian genealogy, have some historical complicities, sometimes quite difficult to disentangle.

Nation-building anthropology. Peasant anthropology and the Humboldtian tradition

George W. Stocking Jr. introduced a very important distinction between two different ways of "doing anthropology:" "nation-building anthropology" and "empire-building anthropology" (Stocking, 1982).

The fate of anthropology in Eastern Europe can be read through this bifurcation but also through its special way of reaching a closure of discourse. Even if this closure is sometimes evolutionarily backed or culturally tainted, the specific element is the national-organic one. The sociological/ethnological/ethnographical/folkloristic discourse has a national closure.

Notwithstanding the importance of this bifurcation in the project of a non-alterity oriented anthropology, as it can facilitate certain cross cultural and cross theoretical fertilizations, it should not be overstressed. Even if we can find here what Matti Bunzl calls "the Humboldtian tradition" and very important cultural sediments of the European anti-Enlightenment we have to "unpack" this anthropological tradition in order to deconstruct its specific, national closure and its administrative, state oriented trend.

Matti Bunzl is one of the most knowledgeable and sensitive historians of anthropology's Humboldtian tradition but sometimes he seems

to forget the political implications of that very tradition.

In Uli Linke's view both kinds of anthropology have their roots in the symbolic concern with otherness when it assumes, systematically, political dimensions (Linke, 1997: 99). "Social knowledge was transformed into an agent of power appropriated as an instrument of domination in the 'civilizing' and 'domesticating' efforts of the state. In England, the orientation of social inquiry was directed *outward*, influenced by the colonial encounter with distant peoples in the overseas empire. In other parts of Europe, such as Scotland or Germany, the quest for social knowledge was directed inward, motivated by problems of national identity and political disunity" (ibid.). Therefore, by participating in different political tasks, anthropology (*Völkerkunde*) and folklore (*Volkskunde*) became separate academic fields (Linke, 1997).

The study of folklore (*Volkskunde*), can be linked to two distinct political trends: *romantic nationalism* and *administrative particularism* (Bausinger, 1969, Brückner, 1987, Linke, 1997). The importance of the work of Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, for example, is not just that he represents "the culmination of a major alternative to the focus on methods of romantic folklorists" (Linke, 1997: 102) but that he represents a tradition that, as we will try to demonstrate in a Romanian case study, compliments the romantic one. If the romantics used folklore as an ideological discourse in their quest for national unification, Riehl saw a political application of folklore to the management of populations

"Political folklore is...the guarantee for our political future (p.5)... [because] a liberal and popular administrative policy is unthinkable without regard for all the natural characteristics of folk life. (p.10)... I would like to show... that a social policy, that is, the art of state administration... is based on the scientific study of the population through all its groups and estates (p.11)" (Riehl, 1851 apud Linke, 1997: 103).

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The emergence of the population as a target of folklore research finds its early beginnings in the pragmatic concern of the German states (and also partially of East European ones), and not, as is generally assumed, in the ideological concerns of the German romantics. In fact, neither Herder nor the Brothers Grimms ever used the term *Volkskunde* (Lütz, 1982).

In Uli Linke's view *Volkskunde* even remained "the verbal emblem of the administrative tradition until the second half of the nineteenth century, when the name acquired romantic connotations by association with the English term *folklore*, newly coined at that time" (Linke, 1997:108). The Humboldtian-Boasian tradition (Bunzl, 1996) should be connected, of course mainly with the anti-Enlightenment but we have to keep an eye open for early theoretical cross-fertilization and for a truly historical, contextual understanding of intellectual traditions.

The dichotomy sustained by Isaiah Berlin, in the *Introduction* to his book on Vico and Herder, between an Enlightenment and a Counter-Enlightenment tradition of thought (Berlin, 1999), even if very important in our understanding of the different lines of interpreting society and history, should not obscure the many influences, overlappings, the more or less faithful translations, the blending of different brands of positivism and romanticism in Western and also Eastern-European modernities.

In both variants of the *Volkskunde* it is as if the place of the "primitive" is occupied by an even more ambiguous figure: *the peasant*. The trope of the peasant is apt to sustain apparently adverse discourses. Between the hard core archaicity of non-European, "primitive" populations and the modern, urban euro-atlantic society, the peasant is an intermediary link. It is both too contaminated by primitivism to have a real chance of surviving as a viable social strata, but also European enough to be an important identity resource in most modern nostalgies.

The (neo)evolutionist discourse of modernization theories is thus not necessarily opposed

to the one talking about the authenticity of peasantry. At the same time as its dissolution and radical exploitation at the dawn of modernity in Eastern Europe, the peasantry suffered a symbolic transsubstantiation. Its authenticity was removed—sometimes in a scientific way, sometimes in a purely political one—from the real, concrete population sustaining that life, being used in the process of legitimizing social strata and political constructions totally different from the peasant ones. The nation was the idea, discourse, political setting, global effect etc. that was keeping these processes in check, that was creating a unifying background. The Ethnographic Museums were doomed to be both national and peasant at the same time. The East European peasant, as a disappearing real social character is fated to be the theoretical place of a re-encounter of the "nation-building" and "empire-building" anthropology. This disciplinary-historical process, with its difficulties and huge misunderstandings, is, we believe, the real stumbling rock for creating a non-alterity, "neo-Boasian" anthropology.

The East European peasant cannot be fully understood without an ethnography that reaches the zone where discourses about peasants are created, an ethnography of knowledge producers. These knowledge producers can, sustained by their imagined embeddedness into a genuine "different modernity," sometimes, in the Romanian case, a religious-Orthodox one, create various metadiscourses, "secondary interpretations" of that modernity.

The neo-Boasian current is possibly too optimistic in announcing the emergence of a non-alterity anthropology. The alterity of ontological and epistemological positions hidden in the Malinowskian field situation, tends to reappear—as peasant, as elite knowledge producers speaking about the "primitive" or the "autochthonous" etc.—every time we want to deconstruct it. This does not make the deconstruction process less legitimate or less urgent.

Instead of Conclusions. A Romanian Case Study

Probably the most interesting Romanian work¹⁶⁹ that we could integrate into this ambiguous neo-Humboldtian (Bunzl, 1996) national-ethnological trend mentioned above belongs to Ion I. Ionică and it is called *Dealul Mohului. Ceremonia agrară a cununii în Țara Oltului*, a complex research into the intricacies of a sewing rite from Țara Oltului.

This work is important, from my point of view, as it is situated, theoretically, in-between the context of German *Völkerkunde* and *Volkskunde*, and it shows the power of the national solution in apparently solving the uncertainties opened by the counter-Enlightenment version of the alterity paradigm and in “closing” scientific discourses.

In his work Ion Ionică is trying, not on an entirely new path to be sure, to fuse the *Kulturkreise* method of W. Foy, Fr. Graebner and W. Schmidt to the *Morphologie der Kultur* method of L. Frobenius and O. Spengler. However, there is an important difference. His aim does not consist in building ethnology as a “histoire des peuples sans histoire,” as quite poignantly M. Mauss was defining the German *Volkskunde* tradition’s main goal (Mauss 1974), but in understanding European cultural regions, as part of modern political societies.

Therefore, these organic areas are actually the countries (țări, *pays*) differentiated among themselves by objective features, economic, cultural and spiritual functions but, most importantly, by the existence of a “local conscience.”

The unitary life of regions appears under two different registers:

- At first, it is about the “regional collective participation facts,” i.e. the pilgrimages to sacred places, the big annual fairs, *nedei*, and the life of the most important regional towns.

- Secondly, there are “regional facts of repetition,” i.e. homogenous series of economic, technological, cultural, religious, ritual facts that

reveal the uniformity of the regional life, or patterns of change (Ionică, 1996: 12).

This series of facts, more exactly, series of “clusters of facts,” have different connections to the region’s centre or nucleus. It is not very clear what Ion Ionică understands by this nucleus that is sometimes defined as “the meaning nucleus of regional unity” and other times as “the principle of the unity of regional life” (Ionică, 1996: 13). The fuzziness of this concept has to do, I believe, with the dual way of constructing the regional types who are exterior cartographic intersections of series of social facts, on one side, and originary forms of the same intersections on the other side.

The hierarchization of regional social phenomena according to their distance from a certain “nucleus”—a unit of signification but at the same time a unit of social life—engenders a research concerning historical origins. The ongoing continuity of certain aspects of regional life it is connected somehow to their centrality that appears as being not only functionally but also historically construed:

“They all (the social institutions of rural society – our note) live, on one side, in the mainstream of contemporary social life, connected to its main functions, but, on the other hand, they still participate, even if behind the level of today’s people conscious life, to old unities of meaning. Behind every fragment of actual social life, there is an immense stratification, an object for social archeology (Ionică, 1996: 13).

It is essential to combine these two aspects, the functionalist one of present day life and the historical one, in any regional understanding of social life, because “the reality of [...] social life [...] is the result of a historical evolution with a unique unfolding and a certain spatial extension” (Ionică, 1996: 14).

The European theoretical position to which Ionică explicitly attaches himself is German cultural diffusionism with its concepts of

Kulturkreis and *Kulturschicht*. He also quotes Fr. Gräbner with his *Methode der Ethnologie*, Heidelberg, 1911 and W. Schmidt with *Handbuch der Methode der Kulturhistorischen Ethnologie*, Münster, 1937. According to Ion I. Ionică, applying this kind of approach to European rural life, notwithstanding all the complications that appear when you study European instead of exotic populations, can be very important. The main problem consists in the fact that there is a multiplicity of meanings and functional registers of the concept of “people” (popor), popular, and of the conceptual connections between popular culture and national culture and identity.

“We are far nowadays from considering the world of popular cultural values as a homogeneous reality, expressing a unique and atemporal origin, so, we consider the artifacts of its culture and his specific forms of life as stemming from well determined historical processes and specific spatial circles – *which does not exclude the problem of the national specificity, but gives it another perspective and another depth*” (Ionică, 1996: 14, emphasis added – C.C.).

The old dichotomy between Folklore and Ethnography, which dominated the study of “popular life” in Romania, seems “unnatural” and “devoid of long-term value” (Ionică 1996: 16) as it differentiates between a field of the studying and collecting manifestations of spiritual life—songs, beliefs, customs etc. (folklore) and another similar field for the products of material life—arts, traditional techniques etc. (ethnography). The theoretical poverty of this position cannot be resolved by simply transforming folklore into a province of ethnography—as suggested for example by G. Vălsan or A. Vuia. The solution, in Ion Ionică’s view, consists in the sociologization of the ethnographic approach¹⁷⁰ (Ionică, 1996: 19).

Even if this sociologization is to take place, the dualism folklore-ethnography is to be surpassed and from folklore as a study of popular

antiquities, of venerable traditions and survivals, we are to gain a new anthropological and sociological vision of popular reality there remains a huge ambiguity. The very notion of “popular” remains indeterminate even in a sociological perspective of the actual, ongoing life of “the people.” Ion Ionică is quite aware of these drawbacks and tries to discriminate amongst the meanings of “popular:”

“Popular” has, in Ion Ionică’s view, at least four different meanings:

- what belongs to the people, to the nation as a social corpus, as a whole
- what belongs to the popular class, to the “small people”
- what became a common good, or a common usage amongst the people, but has its origins elsewhere
- a thing or a deed with its finality in the people, e.g. a work of popular, social assistance (Ionică, 1996: 19).

What means then and how can be circumscribed a popular reality? Is village life popular in the same way that the poor neighborhoods of the large or small towns’ life are? How homogeneous is the field of phenomena called popular? And finally, how can we legitimately extrapolate the cultural forms and practices of a social category to the level of the people-nation as a whole?

The answer to all these disturbing questions is to be found, for Ion Ionică, in “the sociological point of view:”

“Folklore stopped at a few manifestations from the uncertainly determined field of ‘popular’ life, which were understood as cultural products of an inferior social stratum, valuable through their age (ancientness), their traditional character, then their collective or ‘popular’ traits; ethnography – as it was understood in Romania – oriented itself to the consistent artifacts of rural social life [...] sociology embraces in an organic way all these aspects, reaching deeper to the immensely complex and delicate interior network that sustains the whole superstructure of

social manifestations an to the fluid processes of the social life” (Ionică, 1996: 20).

This “sociological” answer to ethnographic troubles even if it sounds very good is, in itself, more of a verbal than an actual solution.

We tend to believe that this sociological turn in ethnography is part of a larger and less well-articulated project. Ion Ionică is trying to create a hybrid sociology – ethnology that can be, in the same time, national and regional and, in close connection to this objective, to find out a way through which “sound objectives and trends of folkloric studies are organically integrated into a sociological approach” (Ionică, 1996: 21).

The sequences of facts and phenomena, torn apart from the social unit, in which they are functionally integrated, transform themselves into various typological sequences, connected to various units, “circles” of social life. The correspondence between types and these larger social units is never perfect. Nevertheless, in Ion Ionică’s view, connecting typological sequences with various socio/cultural entities remains the only way we can meaningfully go, from small and very concrete social units, like the villages, to larger and more abstract ones, like “țări” or regions.

It seems that we are confronted with a special metaphysics of entity (Wolf, 2001). The social units, the entities, are broken into typological sequences just in order to be reconstructed, remerged into larger, more abstract and more fuzzy-bordered entities: the unities of regional life. This process of abstraction and progressive indetermination of the borders of social units has an implicit *terminus ad quem*: the nation and its synthetic science. Using the certitude of the national border grounded on national identity but also, implicitly on the state apparatus (Barth, 1969, Delanty, 2003) the regionalist fuzziness and incertitudes can be tamed from within.

The whole background against which the dy-

namism: small community–region–nation is played, in a kind of nationalized “chain of being” (Lovejoy, 1964) connecting long series of social units, consists in the existence of a kind of meta-organism, the nation (*neamul*), this being seen as able to sustain, undamaged, the tension abstract–concrete, to absorb and heal the breaches between tradition and modernity, past and present; to be, on one hand, the object of a new synthetic-analytic science and, on the other hand, its grounding and its warranty.

“There is [...] in this direction, only one large social science, *that of the Nation (neamului)*, with its unity of life, ethnically, historically and functionally conditioned. Its parts are constituted on the analytic moments brought by the study of the morphological groups forming the nation. This science can give, relying on data from the present, an abstract image of the total function of social life, of the interconditioning of internal processes etc., but it can also try, relying on data from the past, on the same organic foundation, to reconstruct the historical forms of life of our Nation, that are continuing, via different routes, until the present time, constituting the colorful image of his concrete life” (Ionică, 1996: 20).

The nation is understood as having a strong natural-organic setting and as existing behind scientific discourses. Thus, the primordial national community is implicitly constructed as a substratus that sustains and nurtures the scientific discourses; in this process they become tainted with meanings different from the explicit arguments. These un- or under-formulated stances can be seen and deciphered in the context of arguments, or in the context of unexpected agreements between different scientific positions, behind which one may surmise this diffuse, common ideology, of the organic, primordial character of the nation.

Notes:

¹⁶⁸ The “rationalization of customary behaviour whose origins were lost in tradition, but that were highly charged with emotional value” (Stocking 1974: 6 apud Bunzl, 2004: 439).

¹⁶⁹ We chose a Romanian case study as the author is more familiar with Romanian folklore studies than with other East European cases.

¹⁷⁰ A quite Durkheimian-Maussian solution.

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