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Author: Vintilă Mihăilescu

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Foreword

The cultural market of traditions

Vintilă Mihăilescu

Tradition has to be distinguished from *custom* – Eric Hobsbawm claims at the very beginning of his celebrated text about „inventing traditions“ (Hobsbawm, 1983: 2). In this vein, it is not with „customs“ that we will be concerned in the following papers, but with tradition(s). Our interest will not be turned toward the so-called „traditional societies“ (which we prefer to call *customary societies* – Mihăilescu, 2003), but will focus on present day modern societies (mainly Romania) and their ways and reasons of producing and handling here and now what they explicitly consider to be (their) „traditions“.

The cultural creationism of tradition

But, if they are different from customs, where do traditions come from?

The „traditionalist“ answer would be – and actually is – that they are just there, they always have been there, and what we have to do is just to be aware of this „fact“ and collect them, promote them, conserve them, love them – or, if we prefer, hate them. In fact, traditions are relatively young, born while *Modernity* was trying to overthrow *Tradition*, the tradition of the *Old Regime*. As epiphanies of the Past, traditions were then invented in order to recapture this past modernity was rejecting, and to offer some

(s)elective roots to the young nations. Even a militant contractualist like Ernst Renan was convinced that nations could not survive without a selective heritage of their common past and one kind or another of the cult of the ancestors that free citizens would share in order to really make the nation work (see Poutignat and Streiff-Fernat, 1995: 36-37). Eventually using still existing or remembered customs as their raw material, traditions thus emerged in all modern nations as inevitable components of their very modernization process. Dismissed politically, the past had to be brought back in a domesticated way for the sake of the political functioning of the very world that has turned its back to Past and Tradition.

But if modernity in general indeed needs traditions in order to get rid of Tradition, different modern nations and modernizing social actors do not use them always and everywhere in the same way. Because of different contexts and histories we can not evoke here, different societies, different people and/or different elites have a more „fundamentalist“ approach to traditions we may call *traditionalist*. As militant ideology, this traditionalism is a reactive worldview, trying to offer a more or less transcendent then practical solution to a *mal de modernité* of a kind or

another – and changing its rhetoric according to the shifting moods of this feeling. In this respect, traditions are not just past events worthy of being remembered, but the pure and essential Past which has to be reproduced in order to make life worth living– or, at least, to soothe the injuries of modern life. This ontology of tradition is usually backed up by nation-building ethnologies (Stocking, 1982), offering the methodological counterpart of traditionalism. Instead of the Durkheimian kind of „social facts“ social sciences are used to study, they build and promote the *sui generis* category of *traditional facts* (Mihăilescu, 2007: 248). To study such a „traditional fact“ means, in this respect, to perceive and treat a social fact as an old and original phenomenon and, in the same time, as part and parcel of present social life, in the way of „a natural object“ (Bauman, 1992: 31). The „cultural survivals“ of evolutionist anthropology are thus turned to „cultural livings“.

Usually standing for historical disciplines, these national ethnologies thus replace, to a large extent, history with mythology (Bausinger, 1993). They are, in a way, the scientific equivalent of creationism, introducing traditions in the „great chain of being“, as part of the „plenitude“ the world enjoys according to this vision (Lovejoy, 1936). In this view, the contrary of „tradition“ was – and still is – perceived as being „innovation“, this opposition going hand in hand with another couple, „authentic“ and „kitsch“ (e.g. Bătcă, 2000-2002). In other words, real traditions are *ipso facto* authentic, any innovation leading more or less necessarily to kitsch, i.e. non-value. And only true experts can make an accurate value judgement in this respect.

It is no surprise then that the priests of this cultural creationism feel that nothing is superfluous and nothing should be replaced in this world of traditions, for the very sake of the Nation – and, of course, for their own sake... The labeling of traditions turns thus, also, to a power discourse, legitimating true folk products and producers.

Traditions as process

„The concept of ‘invented traditions’ – Hobsbawm remembers – started to interest some historians in the 1970s. They were impressed by the fact that some new social practices, ritualized or symbolically expressed, explicitly produced in a short and datable period, were claiming continuity with the past. (...) We tried to show that these innovations hidden beyond the appearance of an ancient origin were not rooted in what the theories of modernization call ‘traditional societies’ but were part and parcel of the present societies.“ (Hobsbawm, 2004: 7) Instead of a perpetual reproduction of immemorial products of „traditional societies“, this new paradigm was approaching „traditions“ as inventions of the modern societies in their effort to deal with their past. In doing so, „the ‘invented traditions’ were introducing a new historicity“ (Dimitrijevic, 2004: 10), challenging the old „cultural creationism“ in the way evolutionism had opposed classical creationism time ago.

But not every change in the realm of what we call traditions should be considered under the label of „invented traditions“. Dejan Dimitrijevic is reminding us that „the frequency (of this notion) goes sometimes hand in hand with the lack of precision of its use. It is emptied out of its sociological and historical meaning: coined in order to handle the discontinuities and breaches produced by modernity, it is turned to some extent into a common place of the perpetual change of societies“ (idem: 9). Nor should this new category of „invented“ traditions be opposed to the „traditional“ traditions, thus building a new dichotomy. The actual display of traditions is not always and entirely a story of bridging the gap, discontinuity and continuity, remembering and inventing being intermingled in much more complex and diverse ways.

What should be then retained in first place is, probably, the approach of traditions as *process* (see also Constantin, 2007: 14), with its manifold negotiations between top down discourses

and constraints and bottom up practices and needs. In this view, classical taxonomies of folk artists and folk products could be opened up, overcoming such misleading questions like *are these still real folk artists?* or *are these products still really traditional?* Interest and research could then follow the social dynamics of traditions, describing and trying to understand just what is going on.

Market and the „democratization“ of traditions

A main trend of this process of traditions in present societies is its large democratization and marketisation. Traditions are less and less the interplay of only a bench of village based local elites of folk artists and a kind or another of national elites legitimating the „true“ traditions. The scene of traditions is opening up to more and more actors and its public is shaped by delocalized markets open to every kind of buyers. In this respect, the „peasant artisans“ Paul Stahl (1969) was speaking about in the 1960s, for instance, tend to become a residual category, much too restrictive in order to describe who the producers of folk art really are. This is due first of all to the death and dying of „peasant societies“. But also to the fact that other categories of people are getting involved, full or part time, in the creation of traditional artifacts. In a present day artisan fair one can thus meet actors ranging from entitled artisans, belonging to identifiable professional genealogies, to young village people trying to make a living as craftsmen after their failure in town or abroad, school teachers making some pocket money out of local traditions, or even young artists (re)discovering the beauty (and market value) of folk arts.

Asking such participants at folk fairs about their formal employment, Marin Constantin got a much longer list of professions of the actual „artisans“: „Among such professions are those

of ‘miner’ (APC, DC), ‘public administration student’ (AT), ‘medical assistant’ (DG), ‘printer’ (DM), ‘art-faculty technician’ (SB), and ‘turner’ (TBus). Sometimes, artisans of today describe their ‘folk’ practice as a consequence of the post-1989 economic restructuring in the national industry (such as the ex-milling-machine operator AR, the ex-engineer ZMB, and the ex-marble processing foreman SF). (Constantin, op. cit.: 24)

The gender structure of artisanship is also opening up, women being allowed in such manly professions as pottery and turning some household women’s products such as textiles into commodities, and competing on the market. No wonder that all this „democratization“ is confusing for the „peasant artisans“ who are not only in competition with all these new comers, but also feel challenged in their own status and turn to the state for protection: „We artisans are fairly disoriented because of the lack of [official] recognition (...) A law in the parliament should be passed to mention us in the state register of professions“ – one such artisan claims (apud Constantin, op. cit.: 22). In fact, this feeling of dismissing is part of a broader phenomenon: the marginalization and „political weakness of (all) those whose competence is specifically local“ (Herzfeld, 2004: 2).

In its turn, the state is also multiplying the sources of legitimacy by creating new laws and commissions aimed to frame the folk production. On a lower scale, ethnographic museums and county commissions of folk creation are all competing to impose their (more or less particular) vision of authenticity over folk producers. Most of them are also according a diploma or other kind of recognition to the artisans of their taste. New professional associations, indigenous or international, also arise, proposing models of „good practice“ together with different kinds of help to the artisans and other folk artists. Last but not least, the market is imposing more and more its own type of legitimacy: *it’s selling well...* From the museum expert to the foreigner

tourist, the sources of legitimacy are not only multiplying, but also competing, producing different clienteles and diversifying the market.

Finally, the marketization of traditions also brings in a relatively new category of actors, a species of „developers“ intermediating between producers and buyers, doing their own market researches and promoting accordingly the traditional resources they have found. Usually, they are working for the large world market, or at least for opening the local markets to the international trade. But in order to succeed on this mondialized market, they have to root these commodities back in their local environment – or at least to give this impression: tourists buy only „genuine“ folk art, i.e. guaranteed local. In a strange way, it is only the local specificity that has global value.

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One could thus conclude that the marketisation of traditions means, in a paradoxical way, the shift from *authentic* to *genuine*...

The Romanian market of traditions has not yet made this shift from *authentic* to *genuine*, but is actually divided between these distinct demands, with their different supporting institutions and policies of legitimacy engaging strong commitments and aggressive partisanship on both sides of discourse and practices. It is this very state of affairs that an international workshop organized in 2007 by the Museum of the Romanian Peasant tried to examine. The following papers are a selection of the case studies presented on this occasion.