
Book Review

Philo-Germanism without Germans

Cristian Cercel (2019) *Romania and the Quest for European Identity: Philo-Germanism without Germans*. London, New York: Routledge. 208 pages.

In May 2019, on Europe Day, two groups of protesters clashed at Iași. One group, members of a pro-governmental rally announced in advance, was organized by the Social Democratic Party. The other, a smaller but apparently spontaneous counter-demonstration, was comprised of people protesting the corruption of the governing party and calling for a ‘normal’ Romania. The acme of the moment, which went viral on social media, was when participants of the latter event started throwing money at the former, alluding to the fact that they had been paid by the governing party to vote for them, and to participate at the meeting.

The event encapsulates two important political processes. On the one hand, in the past decade the Romanian middle class has organized itself and become a stronger and politically more active group. The main ideological underpinning of this political mobilization juxtaposes the positive expectation horizon created by the dream of becoming a ‘normal country’ and part of Europe, and the current ‘oriental’ Romanian political realities. According to the former, any position can be obtained through meritocratic processes, and there is no corruption, while in the latter case corruption and patronage is quotidian. Klaus Iohannis, the current President of Romania, is the leader and main promoter of this ideological cleavage. On the other hand, these expectations have created a clear class-type detachment of the middle class from other strata (people living in rural areas, the less educated, members of the working class, etc.), who are pinpointed as those supporting the current state of affairs, thereby blocking Romania’s development and stopping the country from reaching its desired place in Europe.

Cristian Cercel’s book, *Romania and the Quest for European Identity: Philo-Germanism without Germans* offers deeper explanations of these processes, presenting a unique take on Romanian identity construction. It is a fresh contribution that goes against the mainstream current in Romanian political and social sciences that is captured almost entirely in the modernist, developmental idealist paradigm the book tries to deconstruct. In the following paragraphs, I first present the main argument of the book, its structure, and chapter-by-chapter content. Second, I make a few comments on its main strengths and weaknesses, as well as its style.

Romania and the Quest for European Identity deconstructs the main elements behind Romanian identity discourses, arguing that, throughout history, Romanian elites have constructed a ‘self-colonizing self-image’ of Romanians, which locates

Romania at the crossroads of the East and the West. A key element of this image is the interiorization of an utterly positive and uncritical image of Romanian Germans, which is contrasted with an Orientalizing self-presentation. In these discourses, 'Germans' are presented as the civilizing factor in Romania – as those who have brought and still bring the spirit of enterprise, work ethics, seriousness, and competence to the country. Interestingly, as Cercel argues, these discursive elements can be found in the narrative of German colonists in Eastern Europe and have been interiorized by modernist Romanian elites as early as since the eighteenth century. In their conception, the internal German other, and the positive Romanian-German relationship built on it, contribute to the construction of the positive auto-identification of Romanians, making it the most important legitimizing factor that proves that Romania is worthy of truly becoming part of 'Europe' and a civilized European culture. Before proceeding, an important comment needs to be made. For the sake of simplicity, I will use the terms 'Romanian Germans,' 'Germans,' 'Hungarians,' and 'Romanians,' as these dominate the discursive realm and topoi Cercel presents and deconstructs. However, the book is careful with these labels, and pays great attention to the meanings of the different terms.

The structure of the book reflects the main argument, with each chapter adding new layers to the deconstruction of the 'philo-German' discourse. After a brief introduction, Chapter 2 ('Between the West and East in Europe') functions as a critical literature review, laying down the framework of analysis. It introduces and analyzes critically terms like Ezequiel Adamovsky's 'Euro-Orientalism,' Maria Todorova's 'liminality,' and the construction of the East–West dichotomy through the centuries. Furthermore, it argues that the Eastern part of Europe has a very similar role in German identity construction to that which the Orient and Orientalism have to the French or the British: the 'Eastern other' is foreign and barbaric, yet familiar at the same time. In this context, 'German-speaking groups in the East (Transylvanian Saxons, Baltic Germans, etc.) [are interpreted] as agents of German colonization, endowed with a specific German cultural mission' (p. 15).

In Chapter 3 ('Germans in Romania: A brief historical background'), the author presents the history of the German presence in Romania, explaining in detail how the German community was constructed from 14 different locally relevant groups into one imagined and minoritized national group. It also emphasizes the meanings and connotations behind each label. From the rich historical analysis, two important ideas can be emphasized. First, it is argued that in the dominant discursive framework, Transylvanian Saxons (and occasionally Banat Swabians) are labeled as Romanian Germans – a picture which is too simplistic, as several other smaller German ethnic groups lived in Romania; and second, that the concept of Romanian Germans 'as a meaningful political category' (p. 28) became crystalized only in the aftermath of World War I, when the various German groups found themselves in a minoritized position.

Chapter 4 ('The self and the other'), focuses on the epistemology of the 'philo-German' discourses. It links their appearance to the Saxon narrative of superiority, promoted and constructed by Saxon authors, and interiorized by

Romanian political, cultural, and social actors, which thus became a constituting element of Romanian identity from the eighteenth century to the present day. As Cercel puts it, '[the] self-identification discourses [of Romanians] have constantly been interwoven with internal representations of otherness and with external representations of Romanianness' (p. 38). As early as the eighteenth century, in these representations Transylvanian Saxons always occupied the highest position of an imagined cultural hierarchy, and 'discursive distinction between things Romanian and things European start[ed] gaining momentum' (p. 40). The emergence of this dichotomy foreshadows the self-colonizing self-image of Romanians. In addition to the meticulous analysis of Romanian self-image, Cercel traces back how the self-identification of Romanian Germans was historically constructed, linking the positive self-image promoted by Saxons rather clearly to the legitimation of their economic colonization of the region.

Chapter 5 ('A valuable and unmistakable contribution to the life of Romanian society'), focuses on the post-communist period, presenting how the image of the German minority in Romania has been linked to EU accession or the Europeanization project of Romanian elites, which can be considered a contemporary reinterpretation of the 'Return to Europe' topoi of Romanian identity. As a result of this entanglement, Romanian Germans have received a special place in Romanian public discourse compared to other minorities: they have represented both a symbolic and geopolitical link to Germany. A further consequence of this tie is the emergence of the image of the 'Germans' as embodiments of expertise, technocracy, entrepreneurial spirit, and management. This image feeds on the self-image promoted by Romanian German actors (such as the German Democratic Forum or different local German business clubs), which link their liaisons to Germany and German capital to the entrepreneurial spirit and competence of Germans. These discursive elements, however, have important consequences for current political and economic processes and Romanian identity construction as well. First, an underdeveloped argument lurks within the text – namely, that this link between the economic interests and the positive self-image promoted by German actors has not changed in substance since the eighteenth century: the accentuation of the entrepreneurial spirit, German work ethics, seriousness, and competence is used to overshadow the rather strong neo-liberal ideology promoted by the very same actors. While presented as an example of entrepreneurial spirit, many of these actors are ruthlessly surpassing trade unions and exploiting their workforce. Second, references to competence, technocracy, and the German work ethic have become a constitutive element of the identity of the Romanian middle class. In other words, although not said explicitly in the book, such cultural and symbolic self-colonization reinforces a more palpable structural and economic one.

One of the most interesting chapters in the book is Chapter 6 ('They who have no Germans, should buy some'). The chapter analyzes in detail the memory politics associated with the German minority in Romania and how this is interiorized and amplified by Romanian remembrance politics. By embracing and accepting the narrative of German minorities, Romanian elites strengthen the

special discursive position and special status of Germans in the country. Cercel argues that the main narrative of Romanian Germans is victimhood. Mainstream Romanian historiography, and many authors of Romanian German origin, emphasize in great detail the deportation of Romanian Germans to the Soviet Union and the ‘human trade’ conducted between Romania and Germany in the 1980s, thereby instrumentalizing the exodus of Romanian Germans, but failing to confront the role of Romanian Germans (Transylvanian Saxons and Banat Swabians in particular) in WWII, and their relationship with the SS and the Wehrmacht. Most historical narratives start with the 1945 deportations, without touching on sensitive issues that occurred beforehand, or if the 1940s are to be discussed, Romanian Germans are represented as victims of both Hitler and Stalin. This identity and remembrance politics is interesting from two perspectives. First, as Cercel convincingly displays, ‘the integration of German suffering within Romanian memory discourses is possible and this integration can be construed as very much compatible with anti-communist and especially anti-Soviet discourses’ (p. 104). Thus, it can be used to legitimate and strengthen a Western-oriented identity politics, and, not surprisingly, it is used by Romanian political actors instrumentally in their quest to build closer ties with Germany. As Cercel argues, these political acts are conceived by Romanian political elites as symbolic and political steps toward Europeanization (p. 108). Second, it clearly takes a different arc than politics-of-remembrance debates in Germany. While Romanian German narratives are in a phase of denial and forgetfulness, in Germany most discourses have revolved around accepting blame for the role played by the German nation as a community in WWII, and the Holocaust has been recognized and interiorized (Romsics, 2019).

The seventh and last chapter (‘The rich villages around Sibiu and Braşov have been invaded by the Gypsy migration’) focuses on comparing the ‘image of Germans’ with the image of other minority groups in Romania – most importantly, the Roma, and Hungarians. Cercel argues that in Romanian identity discourses Germans generally appear in a positive context as the European better ‘internal other,’ while the Roma are represented as the ‘Orientalized, negative other’ of Romanians. These contrasts clearly emphasize the perceived liminal character of Romania, with the Western European civilizing influence symbolized by Romanian Germans on the one hand, and, on the other, the Roma, who symbolize an Eastern influence and disintegration, weakening the possibility of belonging to Europe. One of the most eloquent examples of this, which is presented by Cercel in detail to portray this dichotomy in Romanian identity discourses, is the case of depopulated Saxon (a German group mostly living in South-Transylvania) villages, a recurrent topic in the Romanian media. After the mass emigration of the Saxons, many of their villages were re-populated by Roma. Many authors label these processes forms of ‘unwanted population exchange,’ describing them as ‘an anarchic apocalypse’: in the ‘long alleys of the beautiful villages of yore’ there are now ‘gadders-about’ who ‘devastate, destroy, steal gates, windows, doors, walls even.’ Alas, some of them, ‘dirty and filthy’... ‘even took refuge there’ (see the analysis of the work of Sorina Coroamă Stanca in the book,

p. 143). Cercel argues that by juxtaposing the glorious past and the apocalyptic present of these villages, these authors emphasize the liminality of Romania and the two possible roads it can take.

In contrast to the Roma, Hungarians are constructed using a mixed image. In Cercel's analysis, they are not perceived as either negative or positive on a civilizational dimension, but are juxtaposed with Germans on a moral one. Usually, Romanian Germans are represented as examples of peaceful cohabitation in Romania, while Hungarians are represented as the 'hostile' form. The example delivered by Cercel is meant to show that '[t]he reference to the flawless knowledge and use of Romanian – that one sometimes comes across in discourses on Romanian Germans – reinforces the representation of a particular German-Romanian compatibility. It can also function as an implicit allusion to other ethnic groups in Romania, particularly Hungarians' (p. 143). It is important to mention that Cercel does not oversimplify these relationships for the sake of his argument, even though the presented image of the 'Hungarian other' is not analyzed in similar detail to the 'German' one. A comparative analysis that focuses on how the 'Hungarian other' is related to the self-image of Hungarians and the hetero-identification of Romanians by Hungarians would be welcome in the near future, as this could contribute to a deeper understanding of Romanian-Hungarian relations in general, and the perceived rejection of minority rights in particular. Cercel cannot be blamed for not pursuing this track, though, it being far from the subject of his book.

A further layer to the book is added in its 'Conclusions.' While most of the chapters focus on the representation of the 'German other,' and how this is a core element of Romanian identity construction, in this final chapter the author provides an opportunity for contextualization. This specific case study on Romanian philo-Germanism is linked to the broader social realities of Romania, presented briefly in the introductory notes of this review. Cercel recognizes that these representations promote a liberal entrepreneurship that the middle class is trying to expropriate, and, as the author puts it, '[t]he implicit and explicit class dimension of the philo-German easternist representations in Romania is also telling of processes of social exclusion, intertwined with exclusion on ethnic grounds, as the case of the Roma suggests. Philo-Germanism and the nostalgia for a German past in Transylvania and Banat act as discursive legitimation mechanisms apt to make acceptable such positions and stances that ought to be regarded critically' (p. 167). In other words, the book can be read as an inquiry that deconstructs the modernist, developmental idealist paradigm in Romania. These discourses have dominated the public discourse of the past few years, having thus become the most important sources of political cleavage in the country. It is important to emphasize, and this is perhaps the most important shortcoming of the study, that the book was not written with this purpose. While all the pieces for such a frame are present, and even explicitly formulated by the author, unfortunately it does not go as far as to emphasize and further elaborate on such a contextualization.

This being a critical analysis, two notes on methodology need to be made. One of the main strengths of the book (beyond the well-written argumentation) is its rich empirical data. The author analyzes discursively a very large corpus of original texts, interviews, and newspaper articles to underpin his argument, giving the reader the feeling that he has looked up every document in which reference to Germans by Romanian authors has been made. This notwithstanding, the reader may have doubts about the social embeddedness of these narratives, as the book does not provide any macro-sociological empirical evidence of this philo-German attitude. A reader who is not familiar with Romanian social realities or the topic might rightly wonder whether these conceptions and identity constructions are shared by the public, or if they remain only at an elite level. The case studies that are used – the election of Klaus Iohannis as president of Romania, and a wide variety of articles in mainstream media – are good examples, but they do not prove how dominant the discourse in the Romanian public sphere is. The introduction of a short chapter or sub-chapter on empirical research related to the developmental idealism literature (e.g. Melegh et al., 2016; Kiss, 2017) could have resolved these shortcomings. In these studies, developmental hierarchies and attitudes toward modernism and perceptions about civilization are analyzed with the help of survey data, thereby making representative claims on the researched topic.

A last comment on style. *Romania and the Quest for European Identity* is not easy to read. Its essayistic tone, philological approach, and multitude of historical material are sometimes challenging, but on several accounts also give intellectual satisfaction to the reader. Witty remarks are scattered throughout the text, not as art for art's sake, but to help emphasize arguments.

All in all, *Romania and the Quest for European Identity: Philo-Germanism without Germans* is one of the most important scholarly contributions to the investigation of Romanian identity in the last couple of decades, and will hopefully spur scientific debate and a more reflexive approach to the processes, inter-ethnic- and class relations, and democracy and politics whose main driving forces it tries to deconstruct.

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