PARVULESCU, ANCA, and MANUELA BOATCĂ. *Creolizing the Modern: Transylvania across Empires.* Cornell University Press, 2022.

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Anca Parvulescu and Manuela Boatcă's book *Creolizing the Modern: Transylvania Across Empires* makes a significant contribution to critical transnational sociology. While it offers important theoretical interventions, it is also grounded in extensive research. The authors meticulously use historical records to analyse Liviu Rebreanu's *Ion*. This novel was selected not only because it is one of the most preeminent works in the Romanian language, but also because it is the first modern novel written in this language. Their approach to the novel is not limited to regarding it merely as a work of fiction, but also as a document representing Transylvanian village life at the turn of the twentieth century, a period when Transylvania was undergoing modernization.

Modernity in East Europe, particularly following the expansion of the European Union into the region, can appear homogenizing. However, how do we explain the modernity of multilingual and multicultural places like Transylvania, Ukraine, and Belarus, which inherently challenge this homogenization? Are they always outside of modernity? The authors argue that, first, by the turn of the twentieth century, Transylvanian villages were integrated into the "modern/colonial world-system" (49); second, this modernity must be understood as

a creole modernity within an inter-imperial context; and third (and this is their overarching argument), that this creolization — entailing mixing and adaptations — produces new, pluralistic forms of modernity, effectively challenging the homogenizing tendencies of modernity. Therefore, creole spaces should be cherished within modernity rather than homogenized to serve "modernizing" national projects.

Theoretically, the authors aim to "bridge" (5) three different scholarly fields: postcolonial theory, world-systems analysis, and research on inter-imperiality. While acknowledging the contributions of both postcolonial theory and world-systems analysis, and drawing on the work of theorists from both fields, they find their case to be most effectively explained through an inter-imperial lens. Given that Transylvania was not officially colonised in the same manner as the Asian and African colonies of European empires, the authors argue that it cannot be accurately described as a postcolonial region. Further, although they recognize Immanuel Wallerstein's characterization of Transylvania as part of the semi-periphery, they contend that East Europe represents not merely a semi-peripheral position within the world system but rather a space of inter-imperiality. This is because not just one world-system but various empires — including the Austro-Hungarian, Bolshevik, German, Lithuanian, Ottoman, Polish, and Tsarist — have "left indelible marks on both the socio-economic organization and the self-conceptualization of its subjects" (7). This complex history differentiates the region's relationship with empire from its relationship with Asian, African, or American societies. Furthermore, the continual shifting of East European societies from one empire to another, and the presence of multiple conflicting empires vying for control in the region, further distinguishes its historical and socio-political context. Even today, it is noteworthy that the region finds itself in the crosshairs of the competition for influence between the informal Russian empire and Western forces, which highlights the region's ongoing inter-imperiality.

While heavily influenced by Laura Doyle's concept of inter-imperiality, Parvulescu and Boatcă's primary contribution to this theory is the integration of the concept of creolization. Doyle (2020) conceptualizes inter-imperiality as the interconnectedness of different empires, emphasizing their competitions and complementarities. This framework primarily addresses the dialectical relations and power struggles among dominant groups. However, by shifting their focus from the empires themselves to rural life in Transylvania, Parvulescu and Boatcă illustrate how the localized processes and histories of inter-imperiality foster ongoing cultural transformations and the creation of hybrid identities, societies, and ways of being. This approach

not only centres the subaltern within the study of inter-imperiality, but also challenges ethnic approaches that claim the region for national projects, advocating instead perceiving it through "the frame of a multiethnic and multilingual entity across empires" (4).

Another significant contribution of the book is the methodology employed by Parvulescu and Boatcă, which seamlessly integrates literary and sociological analysis. To understand transdisciplinary analysis on a concrete example, students of methodology must read this book. The authors use the Romanian-language novel *Ion* as their primary anchor of analysis, considering it both "fictional" and "documentary" (11). By situating the small scale of textual detail in relation to the large scale of the world, they contextualize episodes of the novel within a world-historical framework. This involves utilizing diverse materials such as "debates in the Vienna and Budapest parliaments, legislative and court records, economic data, maps, literary texts, memoirs, and oral testimonies" (11). While some chapters may appear to conduct sociological and literary analyses in parallel, others, such as chapter 7, interweave the novel and its context beautifully, ensuring a compelling read.

In this book, toponymy is meticulously employed to convey subtle and sometimes overt political messages, a strategy for which the authors deserve commendation. Following Maria Todorova (2005), they opt for the term "East Europe" rather than "Eastern Europe" to describe the broader region. Although the authors do not explicitly discuss their reasoning for this choice, the term performs multiple functions within the text. On the one hand, it is a critique of the dominant West European narrative behind the creation of the term Eastern Europe, but on the other, it makes the region stand on its own, separate from its relationship with an imagined "Western" Europe. The linguistic expression "Eastern Europe" delegates the referent to a context that is always present, where for its own existence the region looks to the West — being "Eastern" to it. Additionally, the authors purposefully avoid using city names in a single language. They state, "we employ the three most widely used languages of Transylvania for each toponym, in no particular order." This decision exemplifies the praxis of creolization, an argument central to the book and ensures that Transylvania is read as a multi-ethnic space.

The initial three chapters articulate the authors' assertion that the Transylvanian countryside was integrated into the capitalist modern world-system at the turn of the 20th century. In Chapter 1, the authors conduct an in-depth analysis of the novel *Ion*, situating the dynamics of land acquisition — a central theme of the novel — within its historical and global contexts. They reveal how ancestral land rights in

Transylvania were disrupted during the 18th and 19th centuries under the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This process of land formalization marginalized numerous individuals who had previously enjoyed access to land under the traditional system, thereby embedding the Transylvanian land regime into the global capitalist world system. The chapter also delineates the parallels between colonial and imperial conditions, emphasizing how the Habsburgs, in their rivalry with the British Empire, exploited Transylvanian land — not formally colonized but part of the empire — for resource extraction, akin to British practices in their colonies in Africa and Asia.

Chapter 2 provides further substantiation for the claim that Transylvania was integrated into the world-system by the turn of the century. It also shows the profound implications this integration had on Jewish-Christian relations, ultimately contributing to the intensification of antisemitism in the region. The authors point out that the Transylvanian countryside became enmeshed in the world-system through three primary mechanisms: the exportation of peasant-produced goods beyond Transylvania, the peasants' reliance on loans from banks that were increasingly integrated into the global banking system, and administration by an imperial bureaucracy predominantly composed of individuals from outside the region. In this milieu, Jewish residents of Transylvania, precluded from land ownership, integrated into the world-system as financiers, small business owners and artisans. These professions, deemed lucrative in the new world-system by the Christian peasantry, exacerbated pre-existing antisemitic impulses. Consequently, Transylvania's integration into the world-system not only facilitated its economic and administrative incorporation but also intensified local racial dynamics.

Chapter 3 shifts its focus from land to labour and enslavement, specifically examining the experiences of Romani residents of Transylvania. This chapter demonstrates that the integration of the Romani into the world-system differed significantly from that of Romanian Christians and Jews, and that this difference is rooted in the Romani's history of enslavement during the period when Transylvania was under Ottoman rule.

Chapter 4 explains present-day ethnic strife in Transylvania by laying out the history of linguistic domination in the region. This happened as the modern nation-state based world-system was coming into its own. Transylvania, a multilingual creole region, was subjected to Magyarization by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which, among other measures, also mandated Hungarian as the language of instruction in public schools. This boosted Romanian nationalism, as the Romanian majority resisted this enforced assimilation.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the gender dynamics at work when Transylvania was "slowly and unevenly integrated into the capitalist world-economy" (115). The chapters show that "violence against women often sustains inter-imperial nationalisms" (115) as gender emancipation is ignored in the service of the nationalizing project. In Chapter 5, they utilize the character of Ana in *Ion* to substantiate this argument for a rural peasant woman. In Chapter 6, the focus shifts to analogous violence within the middle class, as exemplified through the character of Laura.

The seventh and final chapter, akin to Chapter 4, underscores Transylvania's "creole" nature, particularly its religious diversity and admixtures. Despite the Austro-Hungarian Empire's efforts to modernize and westernize the region by promoting Catholicism and secularizing institutions, Transylvania's religious landscape maintains its creole character. This is evident through practices such as the presence of married priests and the use of magic and charms in daily life — relics of resistance against the homogenizing forces of modernity.

Although the authors claim that their book is based on "the standpoint of a small village in Transylvania" (3), the validity of this assertion warrants scrutiny. Ultimately, *Ion* is a work of fiction created by a well-placed, middle-class urban intellectual. The villagers lacked the habitus necessary to produce a best-selling novel. The authors note that Ion Boldijer, the individual on whose life the character Ion Glanetaşu was purportedly based, wrote to Rebreanu in "an oral language rife with grammatical and spelling mistakes" (65). Rebreanu himself regarded the novel as a work of fiction, not based on real personalities. This reader perceives a tension between the authors' claim that *Ion* is a work based on document, and the characterization of Ion Glanetaşu as a "fictional character" (65). Even if parts of the novel can be understood from a historical lens, the "vantage" of the novel is certainly the writer's standpoint which remains the dominant position in *Creolizing the Modern*, in addition to Parvalescu and Boatcă's of course. The villagers seem to have no space in the book. Oral histories and other means of including the villagers' standpoint in the publication would have greatly benefited the analysis.

I also find myself intrigued by the theoretical implications of inter-imperiality as articulated in this book. The authors could have focused exclusively on imperialism, yet they chose to emphasize inter-imperiality, which suggests a nuanced perspective on the interactions between empires. The text successfully positions Transylvania as an inter-imperial space; however, Doyle's assertion that inter-imperiality involves "multiple interacting empires" (9) seems underdeveloped. Most chapters predominantly explore the Austro-Hungarian Empire,

with the Ottoman Empire receiving some consideration in Chapter 3. Other empires highlighted in the introduction, such as Poland-Lithuania, the Russian Tsardom, the Russian Empire, and Prussia, receive scant attention. Consequently, the inter-imperial processes associated with these empires remain insufficiently addressed. This raises questions about the book's broader theoretical framework and whether a more comprehensive examination of these empires could have enriched the analysis.

Despite these minor considerations, the book opens new vistas of analysis in both East European studies and sociology. It challenges scholars of Belarus and Ukraine to rethink the concept of decolonization. Drawing from this book, it is precisely the intermixture of Belarusian, Bulgarian, Crimean Tatar, Hungarian, Jewish, Moldovan, Polish, Romani, Romanian, Russian, and Ukrainian people and histories at the intersection of various empires that imbues these countries with the potential to challenge a homogenizing modernity. What would happen if Belarus and Ukraine began to imagine their decolonial futures from the perspective of their creole histories? What would decolonization look like then? This approach has the potential to suggest a departure from monolithic national narratives, proposing a more nuanced, layered and creole understanding of identity and history in these countries.

I read the book as an invitation for scholars to reconsider the ways in which they conceptualize and study empire, postcolonialism, and the formation of subjectivities in regions shaped by multiple imperial influences. For scholars of postcolonialism and empire, this book serves as a corrective. For example, my work examines the formation of subjectivity in Afghanistan under the U.S.'s neo-imperial occupation. However, Afghanistan is also an inter-imperial creole space. It has not only contended with multiple empires over the last few centuries, but subject positions have also been formed at the crucible of inter-imperial interactions. Adopting the approach suggested by this book provides me with compelling ideas for advancing my research. The shift in focus suggested by this book can lead to innovative research directions, contributing to a more comprehensive and dynamic field of study in postcolonial sociology and the sociology of empire.

It is challenging to do justice to Anca Parvulescu and Manuela Boatcă's nuanced and complex work in a few short pages. Their call to focus on the creole nature of Transylvania not only unsettles and reframes the concept of Europe, but their emphasis on the inter-imperiality of the region argues that decolonization is not merely about unseating the dominant power but also about rethinking the complex and intermixed nature of domination itself. Furthermore, their

interdisciplinary approach, blending literary studies and sociology, provides a robust framework for scholars to rethink decolonization and the intricate dynamics of power and identity. *Creolizing the Modern* is an essential read for scholars seeking to deepen their understanding of empire, modernity, and the ongoing processes of cultural and historical hybridization in East Europe. It serves as a vital reminder of the importance of considering imperial, class-based, gendered and racialized dominations in a diverse and intersecting milieu. In short, this is an excellent book.

References

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