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INTRODUCTORY STUDY

or when the organizer/keynote speaker goes beyond the boundaries of an academic paper and sets the 'vibe' for a conference on propaganda, but then does not adapt the oral keynote to a traditional written form
(an academic paper per se)

ROMANIAN ACADEMIC
FACED WITH CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH
IN HUMANITIES: TRUTH OR HOAX?

LIGIA TOMOIAGĂ, Romania

In writing this mixed-genre introductory paper – which is a written form of the keynote address at the conference on propaganda – I started from a few 'new ideas' launched in the world of the Academia – especially in Western Countries and in the United States, that I considered as essential in understanding this subjective position I tried to put forward. Subjective or not, I think that I represent more than one Romanian Academic (and other Eastern-European ones, as well). By weighing those ideas¹, and

¹ There will be but few actual references and citations in this report, but it is largely based on a series of books and authors that I consider very relevant, and that I strongly recommend for those who are interested in finding out more about the current state of affairs in the academic and in the world of ideas and intellectual fashions. In the References, I have listed some such books. There are also a number of podcasts and podcasters that I refer to, but not necessarily at one specific show, but at ideas contained and heard on a long series of such podcasts – more than 500 hours of intelligent conversations with such personalities as Jordan Peterson, James Lindsay, Peter Boghosian, Helen Pluckrose,

contextualizing them in our universities, and by drawing a parallel between our vision on higher education before the Fall of the Berlin Wall and today, this paper based on my oral address tries to make the case that universities have to take a short breath, stop, and go back to some very good traditional customs, while adopting new ideas. The main traditional custom we found necessary and extremely important for today's Academia is that referring to exposing students to conflicting ideas, teaching them how to deal with difference of thought, how to formulate their own judgement only after listening to what the opponents have to say, by attacking the ideas they do not like and not the people that express them. This would give enough space in universities for research to be conducted on scientific, solid grounds, and not on slogans and newspeak (especially in the humanities), and would allow people express their thoughts freely, debate, keep the conversation going, instead of trying to cancel the others, of labelling people according to a very shallow analysis, and instead of replacing deep and solid knowledge with propaganda and activism. In laying out such ideas, though, I will not employ a specific (and required) academic style, as this is attacked as elitist and a mark of 'white privilege'; instead, I will write in a rather informal manner, employing an oral style, to make justice to my keynote address and to my subject. I will still refer to ancient thinking, to history, to rationality, to European culture, to Judeo-Christian thought (oh! 'woke' blasphemy!).

This being a written record of that speech, I will try to adapt the quote I started with in my address, as I need the reference: "There are few people who can play the violin, and almost everyone can speak. Still, there are more great violinists on the planet than great speakers!" (Dennis Prager, in one of his Fireside Talks available on YouTube). I really wanted to keep this reference in this written report,

Douglas Murray, Bret Weinstein, David Rubin, Darren Grimes, Camille Paglia, Christina Sommers, John Lennox, Janice Fiamengo, Ben Shapiro, Gad Saad, Heather McDonald, Coleman Hughes, Zuby, and the list may go on....

due to the way Dennis Prager is identified by the 'woke' media: a white supremacist, hierarchical, patriarchal, misogynist racist; and he is rich, too; and he owns the online project Prager University – a place where many other such 'horrible' people meet and talk about such offensive subjects as philosophy, religions, history, truth, science, classical music, literature, tradition, reality... If the reader takes his time (yes, I know I should have written his/her, or go for the bending of grammatical rules and used 'their', but I think generic 'his' can also be used, and nothing in the spirit and attitude of my traditional feminist view on things is lost) and reads this paper to the end, I will come back to Prager, and complete my logical circle with a reference to him, as well.

What does it mean to be a Romanian, especially a Romanian in her 50's, who was born in one of the hero-cities of communist Romania? Well, my university years – because my entire address tried to revolve around the academia – were very challenging: we were always hungry, always cold, we had food, electricity, central heating rationalized, there was no television to watch, most programmes were communist propaganda; in the meantime, as students in philology we did a lot of courses that were nothing but ideology: Political Training, Scientific Socialism, Political Economy, Marxism, and, the cherry on top of this cake was that once a week we got our army clothes and had our military training. Some of our professors were impostors – they had become university professors because they were members or informants of the political police; for example, my American literature professor who had his information about the authors he presented from dictionaries and encyclopaedias, and was not able to teach anything about the literary texts themselves; or, my methodology professor whose English was worse than ours at that time... The books we were supposed to read were mostly canon, presented from the point of view of socialist realism. We had almost no access to international literary journals. It was not as bad as in

the 50's or in the 60's – when only Russian authors were cited – but it was bad enough.

Nevertheless, it was in university that we also studied literary theory, modernist literature, we did close reading, we interpreted myths and symbols, we studied the grammar of fairy tales, the theory of reading, we learned about the history of the arts, about natural and artistic beauty, about the avant-garde, about classicism, romanticism, about the infinite tragedy of human life in Shakespeare and Dostoyevsky, about utopias and dystopias; we learned about the Russian Formalists, about Plato and Aristotle, about Magna Charta and the American Constitution, about German fantastic stories, the gothic; about the adventure of ideas of all kinds, about *A Hundred Years of Solitude*, music and *Point Counterpoint*; we interpreted words and phrases, and we spoke about the degradation of the garden of Eden in Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, and we talked about Impressionism and the “proper stuff for fiction”... And...we asked questions!! We had mentors. My two mentors were Professor Ileana Galea, the official translator of Henry James in Romanian, and Professor Virgil Stanciu, the official translator of Iris Murdoch in Romanian.

Still, something was missing: we did not have enough books, there were authors we knew about and we could not find to read – James Joyce was translated into Romanian only in the 80's... We were not free to go and see the world, to see the paintings we were learning about, to see the plays, the theatre halls, the libraries. We were dreaming about visiting the British and American universities, where students were free, where they could study and do anything, where they had rights, where they did not get extra points for being active in the Youth wing of the Communist Party and get the better jobs for that reason (does this sound familiar to the ‘quota’ people today?); we were dreaming of having professors who would hop and sit on the desk, like we saw in American movies – the ones that we were allowed to watch. We dreamed of an academia that would

be more like the Akademos, where Socrates on a bench would be challenged and asked by students, and students would learn by the maieutic method: because questions are at the border between what we know and what we do not know.

There were a few authors, though, who were ‘indexed’: the Christian ones, the martyrs in prisons, the ones that did not look good for various political ‘sins’ in their youth, or because they had left the country and were living in exile. They were the ones that we tried to recuperate after the Revolution, and we did, to a certain extent. What happened after the revolution, though, was very surprising. I joined the university, after having taught pupils of all ages in various schools for eight years, and I was eager to learn, eager to express my thoughts freely, to share what I thought was valuable in my own education, and give freedom to my students to come with their own views, their own creativity. Besides actually being able to do just that, in a relaxed, post –revolutionary atmosphere, when the state was trying to get people's votes by giving away handouts, I also had a few surprises: a. I heard for the first time that literature did not matter in the formation of pupils and students, that if we taught English we should concentrate on just that: language and methodology, as literature was not important for a future teacher. Little by little, literature was eliminated from the students' curriculum, and we were told that this was because we tried to get in synchronicity with the study of languages abroad: if British kids don't do literature, why should we? b. I also found out that history needed to be reinterpreted, we could not consider Elizabeth I as a great monarch, or we could not speak about her father in appreciative terms; we could not refer to the founding fathers of America without referring to their owning slaves; we could not refer to our Judeo-Christian history without feeling ashamed, and guilty; there was no such thing as a historical figure that we were allowed to admire, unless he/she was someone who represented the victims, the margins, the oppressed.

To continue with the ‘developments’ after the Romanian Anti-communist Revolution in the academia, we were told that students should not read so much, that they should not have so many courses, that they should only do subjects that they needed in their future career – nothing extra, there was no such thing as general knowledge in the domain. Then, we had to struggle with what came: the Bologna system, which tends towards uniformity in European universities, but which also came with the requirement that our academic work – our research – be quantified. That means that you have to ‘score points’, to publish in certain journals, which ‘matter’, which are ‘visible’; to try and get your subjects ‘in sync’ with those published by such journals. Books we published in Romania were no longer important, books in general were less important than articles; participation in international conferences, with enormous fees, citing the right people, so they might cite you... all these came and smashed much of the dream of freedom we had entertained for so long. For us, Romanians – or, at least for me.... – what was also surprising and heart-breaking, was that such studies were mostly based on Marxist thought. After so many years of Marxist indoctrination, after having my family butchered in the name of ‘the class struggle’, for the ‘good of the people’, just because they were professors, priests, and historians, after being baptized in the cellar of our house by a priest who had three PhD’s but was a porter in the train station after twelve years in prison, after having my grades go down when I did not want to be a member of the Communist Party, I really, really could not get my head around this generally accepted Marxist inclination of the west. Apparently, whatever the Christians do good, it does not matter, because the doctrine is horrible and impossible to digest; on the contrary, whatever Marxism translated into practice all over the world does horribly wrong, it is just an accident, the doctrine is great! Karl Popper demonstrated that Marxism put in practice

will necessarily lead to totalitarian ideas², and that it is impossible to believe that a group of people know what is good for everybody else; what’s more, communists tell others that suffering is necessary for the time being, till we get to that good in the future. Read your Orwell! read your Soljenitin! I would tell those who have the inclination to believe such ‘idealists’.

I also found out that my feminism was not good enough. An American feminist, whom I once met, told me that it was due to the communist state that women started getting a university degree in Romania. I told her about my grandmother, who was a Professor at the University in Cluj, a scientist in chemistry, and how she had gotten her degree before communism, before the war, and that she had not been the only female student in those times! My American ‘friend’ called me a liar! She also told me that it was only Ceausescu who was a tyrant, but that everything else about communism was basically good – a view that many still hold. I am a feminist, though, I define myself as a feminist, I will always praise the women who fought for the right of women to be represented, for the right of women to equality of opportunity, for the right of women to decide for themselves. I am a traditional feminist, though, because I do not think that a book is good because it was written by a woman, on a feminist subject; I think a book is good if it is good literature. I do not think fiction written by homosexuals, transgenders, sexually non-binary individuals, people of colour, formerly colonized people, former slaves, formerly oppressed, disabled authors are good because their authors ‘deserve’ some kind of reparation – but because it is good literature. I do not care what people prefer in terms of food, clothes or sex, I teach history, literature, the adventure of story-telling, the adventure of so many heroes and heroines, whose lives help us travel around the map of human ideals and dreams and obsessions...

² Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Routledge, 2012, with a Preface by Václav Havel to the 2012 edition

Yes, I do teach gender roles in fairy tales – the evolution of gender roles from fairy tales to contemporary animated movies. My approach to gender roles, though, is non-ideological, non-activist; I want my students to see how fairy-tales are intended to teach young boys and girls about codes of behaviour, which have been accepted in various historical times. We try to contextualise these roles, to show that they were not the expression of relations of power, or patriarchy (or not entirely..), but the expression of the vision various peoples had in various historical periods, about nature and living in certain areas on the globe, about historical vicissitudes and how they affect family and community relations, and, of course, about totalitarian regimes and how these imprint their mark on such issues.

To demonstrate such a vision, let me take the example of *The Sleeping Beauty*: I tell my students that it is really horrible to think that girls are ‘pre-destined’ to a certain fate (be good, be beautiful but unconscious of your sex appeal, and sleep till a necrophiliac prince comes to abuse you in your sleep – you know that in the original Perrault story, the sleeping beauty actually gets pregnant while asleep; then she goes to the Prince’s castle, and while he is at war, his mother wants to cook her and her children...). Such codes of behaviour, though, *do not have only a feminist reading*. We could look at the historical aspects – the medieval times, when the climate changes were so severe in western Europe that people were actually starving, they had no property, they were unhealthy, most mothers died very young, in childbirth, or of the horrible diseases that were spreading all over. Most *men and women* were under the same predicament. So, such stories functioned like ‘survival kits’, to help children survive in difficult conditions: after becoming orphans, after losing one or both their parents. The only chance for boys was to join the army – they had to be brave, learn how to use weapons and, eventually, could dream of having a family. Girls had to be invisible in their new families, they had to become indispensable, not to tempt the new father sexually, to be hard-working, serious,

silent, and get an older man if they could, even if he looked horrible (like the Beast): older men were less likely to get you pregnant till you died from it, they were less likely to have a mother alive, they had a house, some money, you were protected, safe....

We could, then, look at these stories from the point of view of the mythical layer, with the Herculean works, with the extraordinary quest for perfect beauty, with the tragedy of human life at the mercy of whimsical gods, with the quest for knowledge under the form of a golden hen, or a special plant, or a superpower... We can, then, make the imaginary arch over time and understand superheroes, video games, etc.

We can read these stories for the beauty of their style – I am a strong believer in the reading of the original stories, be they horrible, grotesque, moralizing as they might be. The story about the Sea Princess is much better than the one about the Little Mermaid – in the initial story, the mermaid is shown on the bottom of the sea with her sisters, waiting for her time to come, for her coming of age, and having a beautiful garden... Mermaids lived longer because they did not have an immortal soul, when they died, they got transformed in foam on top of the waves. When she gets the chance, though, to get an immortal soul by killing the new wife of her beloved prince, she cannot, she becomes foam, but she is raised to the status of an angel, she is rewarded for her bravery, and selflessness... Beautiful story.

We can read the fairy tales from a Christian perspective, and see how good deeds are rewarded, bad deeds are punished in the end, and in fairy tales there is no gray area, good and evil are clear: when you have a little piece of evil glass in your eyes, you are doomed, you need a great soul to confront all hardships and come and rescue you...

There is the writing skill key to fairy-tales, in which we read for the beautiful language used, for the way the story is told, for the genres used, for the descriptions, the personalisation, the conducting of the narrative... And there is a philosophical approach, in which