

THE FEAR OF THE ‘OTHER’ IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION. THE IMAGE OF ROMANIAN MIGRATION IN THE BRITISH PRESS

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ABSTRACT: *The present study attempts to show that, in the age of declarative cosmopolitanism and globalization, the ancestral fear of ‘the Other’ keeps resurfacing under the form of nationalism and xenophobia, very often generated and fueled by the media themselves. In this sense, the paper presents a selection of news from major British printed media covering the event of the so-called ‘opening of the British borders’ for Bulgarian and Romanian workers in January 1, 2014, showing how they build into an aggressive anti-foreigner discourse that proves beyond doubt that the ‘European ideal’ still remains pure theory.*

KEY WORDS: *globalization, cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, national identity, the European Union, the other, migration, xenophobia*

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1. INTRODUCTION. GLOBALIZATION, NATIONAL IDENTITY AND COSMOPOLITANISM

Over the past two decades, mankind has been confronted with its own incapacity to comprehend the ongoing hectic events of contemporary history and capture them into a coherent and credible discourse. Ultimately, this void of discourse structure is the one that supports such phenomena as distorted perception, aggressive attitude and extreme forms of expression.

In this context, the economic, social, cultural and political discourses at the beginning of the twenty-first century display a quasi general tendency to approach globalization and national identity as opposed concepts, analyzing them either one *versus* the other, or one *against the background* of the other, and thus automatically inducing the idea that they exclude, or even endanger each other. Unfortunately, this comfortable, clear-cut distinction exposes us to the danger of shallow generalization

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which, in its turn, considerably narrows our perspective on reality and on the way in which we experience it.

A relatively new cultural and political concept, globalization is defined as “the process of international integration arising from the interchange of world views, products, ideas and mutual sharing, and other aspects of culture” (Al-Rodhan & Stoudmann 2006, p. 6). Although this definition is comprehensive enough to be valid, its operational value is limited by a certain ambiguity of its key concepts. Thus, such fuzzy phrases as *interchange of world views*, *mutual sharing* and *other aspects of culture* are susceptible to interpretations and conveniently elude the sore point of national implications.

On the other hand, the concept of national identity has always been a major source of cultural, political and philosophical debate, displaying as many definitions as there are approaches to this sensitive subject. Still there are certain recurrent ideas that can be detected in various discourses on the topic, namely: “the sense of belonging to one state or to one nation” (Ashmore, Jussim & Wilder, 2001, p. 74); “the sense of a nation as a cohesive whole, as represented by distinctive traditions, culture, language and politics”¹; and “an awareness of difference, a feeling and recognition of *we* and *they*” (Yoonmi, 2012, p.29). These definitions reveal the reason why the border between national identity and nationalism is so fragile. As long as the sense of belonging and the awareness of difference are not associated with such concepts as inclusion and acceptance, they become limiting factors likely to generate isolationist tendencies and xenophobic discourses, in utter discordance with the ideals of cosmopolitanism and globalization.

As we have shown above, the definitions of globalization and national identity induce their perception as opposing concepts, which limits our proper understanding of both. Under the circumstances, a more productive approach consists of abandoning the safe space of rigid separation and projecting them against the inclusive background of cosmopolitanism. This approach will provide a larger perspective on both concepts, focusing not as much on what separates them, but on what connects them on a deeper level.

The etymology of the word *cosmopolitan* (Gr. *kosmos*, i.e. universe, world; and *polites*, i.e. citizen) underlie all its dictionary senses, namely: “free from local, provincial, or national ideas, prejudices, or attachments; at home all over the world”; “belonging to all the world; not limited to just one part of the world”; “a person who is free from local, provincial, or national bias or attachment; citizen of the world”². The unifying factors of these definitions are the expanded horizon, whether geographical or cultural, and the absence of prejudice. Ultimately, these are the two pillars of postmodern ethics, which involves the open-minded acceptance of alterity, as opposed to both defensive aggressiveness and passive tolerance.

Actually, the foundations of an articulate postmodern discourse on alterity were laid as early as the first decades of the twentieth century, with Emmanuel Levinas’ ethics and Jacques Derrida’s concept of hospitality. For Levinas, the

¹ www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/national-identity

² <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/cosmopolitan?s=t>

foundation of ethics consists in the obligation to respond to the Other with a sense of responsibility that involves goodness, mercy, and charity. Moreover, the encounter with the Other is viewed as an illuminating experience that does not endanger identity, but enriches it, since “the Other precisely reveals himself in his alterity not in a shock negating the I, but as the primordial phenomenon of gentleness.” (Levinas, 1969, p. 150). Jacques Derrida’s theory of hospitality, which translates into the readiness to welcome the Other into our home, relies on the same fundamental principle of embracing difference. Consequently, since our whole individual and national existence is a matter of negotiating identities, the more we open towards the Other, the more we expand our perspective on our own identity. This apparent paradox supports the genuine cosmopolitan attitude, which involves, as Ales Debeljak explains, “the separation of civic identity from the ethnic identity” (Debeljak, 2003, p.166). To go one step further, we should add that the concept of cosmopolitanism as international citizenship involves not only a distinction, but also a balance between the two identities, since being a citizen of the world is not equated with the denial of belonging to an ethnic group or a nation. According to Debeljak, we attain the civic cosmopolitan status once we have abandoned two extreme attitudes that he labels as manifestations of provincialism, namely nationalist self-sufficiency, a mentality by virtue of which we “...cannot, and will not [...] learn anything from the others [...] and liberal internationalism, which despises all the aspects of national cultural identity” (Debeljak, 2003, p. 171), resulting in the tendency to accept blindly anything that comes from ‘the West’ as superior in quality or more emancipated. Actually, the theory of two separate identities and the abandonment of two extreme mentalities pleads for a reconciliation between the national and the global as complementary identities.

In the next section we are going to identify the principles of cosmopolitan inclusion in the policies and practices of the European Union in order to prove that the distance between rhetoric and reality leaves enough space for the manifestations of xenophobic aggressiveness.

2. THE EUROPEAN IDEAL BETWEEN RHETORIC AND REALITY

Proclaimed in 2000 and imposed as a legally binding document nine years later, with the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union proclaims itself as the promoter of inclusive, cosmopolitan attitude, based on six concepts, namely: dignity, freedom, equality, solidarity, citizens’ rights, and justice.

In this sense, the Preamble to the Charter stipulates that “the Union is founded on the indivisible, universal values of human dignity, freedom, equality and solidarity; it is based on the principles of democracy and the rule of law. It places the individual at the heart of its activities, by establishing the citizenship of the Union and by creating an area of freedom, security and justice” (EU Charter, 2007, p.2).

From the cultural perspective, the EU projects itself as a space of common values, meant to guarantee the embracing of the Other by “respecting the diversity of the cultures and traditions of the peoples of Europe as well as the national identities of the Member States” (EU Charter, 2007, p.2).

Finally, from an economic and social point of view, "...it seeks to promote balanced and sustainable development and ensures free movement of persons, services, goods and capital, and the freedom of establishment" (EU Charter, 2007, p.2).

The six fundamental concepts of the Charter are presented in detail in specific articles. For instance, Article 15, entitled *Freedom to choose an occupation and right to engage in work*, stipulates a major right of the EU citizens, namely: "Every citizen of the Union has the freedom to seek employment, to work, to exercise the right of establishment and to provide services in any Member State" (EU Charter, 2007, p.6).

The provisions of Article 15 are reinforced by Article 21 on *Non-discrimination* that imperatively stipulates that "Any discrimination based on any ground such as sex, race, color, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation shall be prohibited." (EU Charter, 2007, p.7).

The two articles above are supported by Article 45 regarding the *Freedom of movement and of residence*, according to which "Every citizen of the Union has the right to move and reside freely within the territory of the Member States" (EU Charter, 2007, p. 11).

Moreover, in order to ensure that the articles of the Charter are complied with, the EU has issued specific pieces of legislation that combat discrimination, racism and xenophobia:

- the Framework Decision on combating racism and xenophobia, penalizing public incitement to violence or hatred on the basis of race, color, religion, descent or national or ethnic origin;
- the Race Equality Directive, prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of racial or ethnic origin;
- the Employment Equality Directive, prohibiting discrimination on any grounds in employment;
- the Audiovisual Media Services Directive, banning incitement to hatred in audiovisual media services and the promotion of discrimination in audiovisual commercial communications.

Unfortunately, the reluctance of the 'core members' of the EU to the admission of former communist countries, translated into drastic pre – accession criteria, which basically involved the surrender of economic independence, the monitoring of their progress and the application of sanctions in case of non-compliance generate a power relation that has nothing in common with the European inclusive, cosmopolitan discourse. Finally, the Western anxiety regarding the 'threat' of immigration from Central and Eastern European countries, expressed under the form of drastic defensive measures at the borders has nothing in common with the articles of the Charter and reveals them as hypocritical rhetoric.

3. THE ROMANIAN 'INVASION' IN THE BRITISH MEDIA

Over the past two decades, the concept of multiculturalism has been used in all major EU documents as a vehicle for the progressive idea of understanding and

embracing diversity. However, the distance between rhetoric and reality has generated a space of ambiguity within which this concept paradoxically becomes the very source of ethnic and cultural stereotypes and, ultimately, of discrimination. In other words, diversity is accepted as long as it stays within its borders; the moment it tends to go beyond them, it is perceived as a menace, and migration is automatically equated with invasion.

A relevant example in this sense is provided by the reaction of the first two best-selling daily tabloid newspapers in the United Kingdom, namely *The Sun* and *The Daily Mail*, to the January 1, 2014 moment, when the UK lifted migration restrictions for Romanian and Bulgarian citizens, granting them the right to work on its territory, in compliance with the EU legislation. The aggressive anti-foreigner campaign initiated by these two newspapers cultivated a negative public reaction towards the Romanians and the Bulgarians, impersonally presented as the 'A2 migrants', long before January 1, 2014. The dramatic impact of this extreme, xenophobic discourse on the British public opinion has at least two explanations:

- they target the lower-middle class, which represents the vast majority of most contemporary societies;
- the level of education of their target public makes it prone to limited understanding of events, and, implicitly, to manipulation.

Therefore, it is unlikely that the general balanced, ethical and realistic approach of the event in the British press was able to counterbalance the fascination for the grotesque and the scandalous fueled by the two tabloids.

Thus, in an article dated December 31, 2013, entitled 'Cheeky Beggars', *The Sun* breaks alarming news according to which "The first coachload of Romanian migrants left for the UK yesterday — with some boasting of plans to beg and steal from 'generous' Brits."³ To enhance the effect, the same page displays a picture of poorly dressed people, some with clueless smiles, others with their faces partly covered, waving their bus tickets to a better life.

Moreover, a series of statements attributed to some of the migrants are added to reinforce the threat of the invasion and its devastating effects on the British citizens and on the country at large. Thus, such characters as 'a convicted thief and his apprentice son', and 'a poor 50-year-old gran' claim they are prepared to do anything once they set foot on British ground, from stealing scrap metal, begging and picking pockets to breaking into houses, going through bins and taking advantage of the British benefits system. The finishing touch belongs to another migrant, who proudly declares that "England is our country as well now", and promises that "... if it's making money, I'll bring my nephews and grandchildren." In this context, the conclusion of the article that "... we are powerless to stop poor migrants from Romania flooding in without jobs."⁴

It is necessary to point out, however, that this prejudice-ridden discourse did not come out of nowhere just one day before the lifting of border restrictions, since *The Sun* had started the distorted projection of Romanian and Bulgarian migration as early

³ www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/4637926/Wave-of-Romanian-and-Bulgarian-immigrants-is-threateni

⁴ Ibidem

as November 11, 2012, with an article that set forth the alarming theory according to which “A tidal wave of Romanian and Bulgarian immigrants is threatening to swamp Britain — and flood our overstretched jobs market. This time, everything starts from the statement of a Romanian illegal worker, who predicts that “All my mates will come in 2014.”⁵ From here, the fear that, beginning with 2014, there will be 29 million potential applicants for the right to work in the UK, threatening the jobs of the British citizens and burdening the country’s social welfare system.

The threat gains dramatic proportions when the British public opinion is presented with the following portrait of the two countries whose citizens are about to ‘invade’ their territory: “Bulgaria and Romania are among the most corrupt EU nations and share porous borders with equally murderous regimes. The countries were almost barred from joining the EU in 2007 because of mafia-style atrocities. They were given time to clean up their acts but have still failed to put gangsters behind bars.”⁶

Although based on certain social and political realities of the two countries, this is nothing but an example of a typically Western stereotypical perception of the Balkan area as a dark, barbaric region that represents a menace to civilization and democracy. On the other hand, the hyperbolic language used to depict the two countries betrays the obvious intention to blow things out of proportions for the sake of a shocking effect on the readers.

To the same effect, *The Daily Mail* promotes a theory of conspiracy according to which the British government has concealed from the population the real dimensions of the imminent economic and social disaster awaiting the UK after January 1, 2014.

Thus, in an article dated December 29, 2013 and bearing the eye-catching headline ‘Exposed: What they DIDN’T tell you about new wave of migrants heading for booming Britain’, the newspaper claims to have gained access to a ‘secret report’ by University of Reading academics, according to which “Bulgarians and Romanians will flock to Britain in far greater numbers than forecast”⁷ and lists a number of disrupting effects on the British society, such as:

- the jobs of Britons and previous Eastern residents alike will be threatened, since the A2 migrants will accept much lower wages;
- the whole British tax system will be affected negatively, as low-paid Bulgarians and Romanians will pay less tax;
- community tensions are likely to surge as the Britons and the previous Eastern residents are driven out from their jobs;
- the educational system will face oversubscribed schools caused by the children of the migrants;
- the health care system will have to cope with overcrowded hospitals;
- the housing crisis will get worse, alongside with growing homelessness;
- British taxpayers will be overburdened to support the growing state handouts.⁸

⁵ www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/5350243/first-coachload-romanian-migrants-head-to-britain.html

⁶ Ibidem

⁷ www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2530503/Exposed-What-DIDNT-tell-new-wave-migrants-heading-booming-Britain.html#ixzz3xcEgVGn2

⁸ www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2530503/Exposed-What-DIDNT-tell-new-wave-migrants-heading-booming-Britain.html#ixzz3xcEgVGn2

In spite of its ambiguous sources and somewhat far-fetched predictions, the article would remain within the limits of the typical Western anti-migration discourse if it weren't for the last details that push it beyond the limits of minimal professional ethics, and even of common sense. In its closing section, therefore, the article warns the Britons that, on top of all the issues enumerated previously, the A2 migrants are also likely to start an epidemic, since they have "... high levels of diseases such as tuberculosis, mumps, measles and rubella."⁹ Needless to say that the statement is not documented in any way, and there is no quoted source to confirm or take responsibility for these so-called 'facts'.

A previous article, published on November 10, 2013, under the elaborate headline '*In January, the Only Thing Left Will Be the Goat: Romanian father-of-seven boasts as mayor says half the population of his villages are on their way to Britain for the higher salaries and generous benefits*', anticipates the disastrous effects of migration in a grotesque key. The so-called 'investigative report' quotes the mayor of Sacoșu Turcesc, a poor village in western Romania, who claims that half of the locals are prepared to move to the UK and 'get the benefits' the moment labor market restrictions are lifted. Once again, the article is interspersed with pictures of squalid clay huts, with dirty, ragged children squirming in the muddy roads in front. What is worth noticing, however, is that neither the images, nor the accompanying information according to which as many as twenty people live crammed together in each hut, and the monthly state benefits for raising a child represent the equivalent of £9 are presented to stir compassion or humane indignation. On the contrary, they are simply defined as 'abject poverty' and meant to be perceived as something abominable that should be kept at safe distance and ignored. Ultimately, they are meant to give substance to the menace represented by those who 'do not have anything'.¹⁰

4. CONCLUSIONS

Despite the EU rhetoric of inclusion, the Europeans of the 21st century are still haunted by the primitive fear of the Other, which makes them prone to prejudiced judgment and discriminatory behavior. Obviously, these are precisely the concepts that undermine the European ideal of embracing diversity, especially when aggressively promoted in the media. This study shows that the two samples of anti-migration discourse derive their aggressiveness and dramatic effect mainly from two sources:

1. the use of such nouns as 'thief', 'beggar', and 'convict', accompanied by verbs and phrases from the same semantic area ('to steal', 'to pick pockets', 'to break into houses'), which induce the idea of promiscuity and arouse a defensive attitude;
2. the predilection for hyperbolic phrases ('tidal wave') and verbs ('to flood', 'to flock') pertaining to the concept of massive invasion;
3. the use of matching images to enhance the shocking effect.

⁹ Ibidem

¹⁰ www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2498479/In-January-thing-left-goat-Romanian-father-sevens-boast-mayor-says-half-population-villages-way-Britain-higher-salaries-generous-benefits.html#ixzz3y0ErJyQS

Given the massive number and the lower education level of their target public, the tabloids quoted above had a huge contribution to the shaping of a negative attitude towards the Romanians and the Bulgarians. The thousands of aggressively defensive reactions stirred by the online version of the papers among their readers validate the statement that "... EU citizens are conflating anti-EU sentiments with anti-immigration feelings. Mixed with an increasing distrust of politicians and a debate on the welfare state, this creates a *perfect storm*"¹¹.

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¹¹ 'The Gates Are Open', *The Economist*, January 4, 2015, www.economist.com/news/europe/21592673-rich-eu-countries-fret-about-social-benefits-tourism-after-lifting-restrictions-free