



Book Review

Creolizing the Modern: Transylvania Across Empires. Anca Parvulescu and Manuela Boatcă. 2022. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. 270 pages, ISBN 978-1-5017-6574-2 Paperback (\$34.95)

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Creolizing the Modern is a book about modernity and the global inter-imperial predicament, written from the perspective of a Transylvanian village. Boatcă and Parvulescu have produced an ambitious text, one that “crystallize[s] a methodology” (3) from its rural vantage point. Its theoretical sweep is expansive, its methodology horizontal, borrowing from Laura Doyle. Linking together sociology and comparative literature, the book also speaks to historians and historical geographers, scholars of capitalism, gender and critical race studies. Importantly, these interpretations take place in a particular geography, in spaces historically shaped by the competition of different imperial formations and the stratified forms of being that emerge in inter-imperial conditions. Whether in spite or because of the obstacles it sets for itself, *Creolizing the Modern* delivers. This book’s crowning achievement is its insertion of East Central Europe, with all its particularities, in the historical development of capitalist modernity.

The organizing axis of the text is Liviu Rebreanu’s 1920 novel *Ion*, which takes place in the latter years of Austro-Hungarian rule in the fictional village of Pripas. The village itself is a thinly fictionalized version of two real-life Transylvanian locations where the author grew up, the novel



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tracing the story of its titular character alongside a number of other persons living “within, between, and against empires” (10). Importantly, as the authors note, *Ion* is considered the first modern novel in Romanian. As they argue, its rural inter-imperial setting provides an important vantage point to our understanding of modernity/coloniality. In this case, the standpoint is in East Central Europe, the semiperiphery of the world system, key to its stability and structurally different from Atlantic Europe and its American colonies (7). Tracing the context, specificity, and silences of *Ion*, Boatcă and Parvulescu unravel from Rebreanu a methodology of creolization which upsets dominant ideas of (East) European uniformity.

Questions of creolization crystallize in the book, which effortlessly moves between the macro scale of the global, the median scale of national literature, and the micro scale of the text—right down to the ellipses. The seven substantive chapters explore the question of land, the role of Transylvania in the world system, racialization and enslavement of Roma people, inter-imperial politics of language, labor and violence against women, women’s education, and the ethnicization of religion. Each step relates to the next, as in the authors’ exposition of the Janus-faced racialization of Jews and Roma (61), whose modern form in Transylvania linked coloniality and inter-imperiality. Another fascinating contribution of the text is the notion of interglottism, “the central mode of creolization analyzed in the book” (93), which connects imperial order and its contestation through language, explaining the monolingualism of Rebreanu’s text as a national choice inflected by inter-imperial circumstances. The book offers methodological leap after leap, a useful example for other scholars of the semi-periphery, a space functionally positioned in and between empires.

Many sentences in *Creolizing the Modern* resonate far longer than their in-text length would suggest. A case in point is early in chapter seven (“The Inter-Imperial Dowry Plot”), where the authors introduce the question of “how modernist global debates about gender resonate when viewed through the country v. city lens in an inter-imperial framework” adding importantly “(there is no anonymity in the countryside)” (121). For urban scholars, the city is formative, definitional in our understanding of modernity—a line which runs from Baudelaire to Marshall Berman through Marx. Yet, such scholarship effectively ignores the exploitation of land and the labor around it, an indispensable part of capitalism’s origin story in the context of settler-slavery and second serfdom. In this context, the experience of modernity fundamentally differs between the city and the village. If modernity in the cities meant cosmopolitanism and anonymity, in the villages it meant the actuation of a number of pre-existing differences of stratification, the colonization of structures of power by capital. The last point is shown eloquently in the final substantive chapter which elucidates the end point of national-religious modernity in the monetization of peasant religiosity. In the authors’ eloquent words: “[s]imply put, God means cash” (180).

For much of its run, *Creolizing the Modern* is a book about society, about the relationship between various individuals who negotiate their own positions vis-a-vis greater structures. There is something modern in the book itself, with its iconoclasm of received wisdom separating Eastern Europe from the colonial world. Yet, even as the Austro-Hungarian, Russian, and Ottoman

Empires existed within a context of coloniality, they did so with their own specificities, irreducible to the theoretical matrix emerging out of the Atlantic and Indian oceans. In the authors' words, this is "sanctioned ignorance" (13), represented by theories and concepts developed in major languages and global centers of power. Relational, but uneven, Transylvania's existence in an inter-imperial world, this book argues, tells us something of the world beyond East Central Europe. In doing so, the text rethinks what literature in "minor languages" can teach us about the world system, its emergence and development. In this reviewer's vulgar interpretation, if modernity and coloniality are two sides of the same coin, inter-imperiality represents its textured rim, the site of friction where negotiation and movement take place.

After reading an expansive text, one is oft inspired to think of its absences, not as a cheap form of critique but rather a testament to the fruitfulness of the engagement. The opening scene of chapter one ("The Face of the Land") teases the viewer with a discussion of non-human inter-imperial subjects—cows and dogs, racialized and nationalized in Rebreanu's text. Historically, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were not only marked by the inextricable modernization of rural questions, but also represented the grand colonization of the "natural world." In the region, massive forest clearing took place between 1850 and 1890. The channelization of the Danube's Iron Gates enabled reliable shipping, but also destroyed the river's sturgeon and a regional ecology based on its roe, lasting over seven thousand years. The dominant imperial actor in *Creolizing the Modern*, the Habsburg Empire, defeated the Ottomans in several wars during the eighteenth century, colonizing the Banat and Transylvania through resettlement of officials from its New World possessions, the introduction of plants and crops, and new methods of managing nature.

In spite of this history, *Creolizing the Modern* remains primarily a human story, in which people relate to one another in and through nature. In doing so, Boatcă and Parvulescu replicate the colonial logic of separating humans from nature and a capitalist division between labor and raw material, social production and reproduction. Bringing East European knowledge to the global history of rurality is a capacious achievement, however, and the reader hopes further researchers might consider how creolization might play out in the changing network of human and non-human animals. This is particularly the case in the rural context, where land became globally-marked as a re-source and locally-inflected as an object of desire and trade. In other words, how do language and inter-species behavior change in the inter-imperial context of Eastern Europe? What do they elide? And does empire sit between humans and their environment?

Ultimately, the answer to these questions can only come from further studies, something for which the authors of *Creolizing the Modern* explicitly call (3). The book's framing may be limited to a small village, yet its ambition is appropriately world-historical. With care and nuance, Boatcă and Parvulescu tease out local agency only to deconstruct it further, highlighting the structural constraints that shape its directionality and the surprising vectors that emerge from multi-lateral, inter-imperial forces. Ultimately, this text will be useful not only to scholars of Eastern Europe and the Balkans, but also a wider audience interested in unequal power relations based on "dispossession, colonization, and enslavement" (4). That these relations frequently emerge in projects of translation is well-known to Caribbean scholars of creolization. What Transylvania

brings to this conversation is its inter-imperial position and its rural peripherality, both against an imagined European center. Multilingual, multinational, and inter-imperial, the Transylvanian village does not profess a unique standpoint in this regard. Yet, unraveling the threads of its predicament can teach us much about our world. *Creolizing the Modern* does precisely so.