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Student-led demonstration, University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, February 4, 2015. Overpass Light Brigade, Joe Brusky photographer. Source: overpasslightbrigade.org/love-light-for-uw-fight-the-cuts/.

Anthropologists in/of the neoliberal academy

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The double bind of audit culture in Romania

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ABSTRACT: The paper focuses on the implementation of audit culture in the post-communist Romanian academic field, using a neo-institutionalist approach. The case of academic competition between anthropology and ethnology is scrutinized in order to illustrate the double standards, nationally and globally oriented, of the quantitative metrics promoted by state institutions.

The brave new post-communist world

“Transition” in post-communist countries was essentially a transfer of property and a reframing of the main institutions of the state according to good (western capitalist) practices. In the academic field, this institutional re-building was a kind of wishful shortcut of the “new management” trend which in Occident produced the «audit society» (e.g. Power 1997) – or what anthropologists prefer to call «audit culture» (e.g. Strathern 2000). A neo-institutional approach to this process can also be used in as far as it started to speak about «formal structure as myth and ceremony» forty years ago (Meyer, Rowan 1977), it devoted a lot of research on the educational field (e.g. Meyer *et al.* 1981), and also coined some concepts that fit into the description of early stages of neo-liberal restructuring of the academic field across the world (Schriewer 2009) we may find in post-communist Romania too. In this respect, one may identify a «coercive isomorphism» (i.e. a mechanism of isomorphism rooted in «political influence and the problem of legitimacy» – DiMaggio, Powell 1983) imposed by EU standards and regulations, later on internalized by the state and promoted at national level as a reformist ideology. «Rationalized myths» about what constitutes a proper organization (a central idea of neo-institutionalism, what Power described as «rituals of verification» and Marilyn Strathern referred to as such in her *Introduction* to the edited volume on «Audit culture») became an “ethical” must in the struggle to overcome “communist mentality”. In Stratherns’ terms of a policy-audit-ethics triad, ethics came first – but it was mainly ideology.

Audit culture is coming to Romania

In practical terms, this meant that some mimetic standards of “quality” had to be taken over from Western countries and imposed to academia, not as much for their own sake but rather in order to de-legitimize and thus get rid of the “old guys”, presumed

not to qualify according to these “real” meritocratic standards. A selection of audit culture means and rules of the game was thus instrumented as “audit cleansing” in an ought-to-be reformatted academic field. Joining the exquisite club of the Bologna process offered a prestigious frame of references and gave an impetus to this trend. In order to make it easier and more “objective”, quality control was in fact only quantitative, i.e. pure metrics, the same for all and everywhere. Even if asking for high impact of research, funding is still based only on the author(s)’ impact indexes (e.g. Hirsch) prior to the research project. As noted by Meyer forty years ago, this kind of practice «provides *legitimacy* rather than improves *performance*» (Meyer, Rowan 1977). And legitimacy is further used for accessing resources (positions, grants etc.)

«The impact agenda appears to assume that impact is by definition a good thing» (Mitchell 2014). Relying on this assumption, governmental institutions are authorized to decide who is to be included and who should be excluded from the redistribution of resources. Thus, «formalized accountability» (Power 1997) just «served to transform a political discourse into an essentially technical issue» (D’Ascanio 2014: 155). Behind it, power games go on. Thus, in the case of the Romanian academic field, “universal” rational criteria of value and legitimacy changed with the change of governments, ministers and groups of interest. On one side, Romania joined the European club of isomorphism¹ and shared audit ritualization, but on the other side, inner «decoupling» (DiMaggio, Powell 1983) and cluster isomorphism are huge: networks of power and interest compete for the most profitable taken-for-granted form of audit.

The post-communist reframing of the academic fields of ethnology and anthropology may illustrate this dynamic.

The ethnology/anthropology divide...

Following Stocking’s distinction (Stocking 1984), we may say that «diffuse ethnology» in Romania (Mihăilescu 2007), institutionally divided in ethnography and folklore, was entirely a «nation-building ethnology», deeply involved in the historical process of nation building; in recent parlance, we may say that it had a huge “impact factor”. On the other side, socio-cultural anthropology in the Western «empire-building ethnology» tradition was (almost) lacking in Romania till the fall of communism.

Being compromised to some extent by their implication in national communism, folk studies stepped back from the main academic scene just after the fall of communism, but recovered a decade later under the new brand of ethnology, and its association (The Romanian Association of Ethnological Sciences – ASER) was (re)launched in 2005. During all this time, even if losing power, the field kept its institutions and people. Most of the scholars regrouped, however, around the Romanian Academy, which

1. As noted by Meyer in 1981, «peripheral nations are far more isomorphic – in administrative form and economic pattern – than any theory of the world system of economy division of labor would lead one to expect» (in DiMaggio, Powell 1983: 152).

sustains both their knowledge production and legitimacy as promoters of the “real traditions” of the nation – an increasing state and public demand due to growing nationalist movements.

On the other side, lacking an autochthonous model and having to build itself from scratch, post-communist socio-cultural anthropology had to take over the western status and brand, and professionalize according to them. Even if a national association (The Society of Social and Cultural Anthropology – SASC) started in 1990, anthropology was lacking both people and institutions. Emerging anthropologists managed to take some strongholds mainly in universities, but have to look for their legitimacy abroad via international publications and conferences; there is not yet a real demand for anthropology in Romania.

The two academic fields do not communicate and «dissident» ethnologists, eventually embracing “anthropological approaches”, are not welcomed in the anthropological club. The profile of the two professional fields is striking different, as illustrated in the Table below:

	Members	Mean age	Affiliation	Publications		
				In Rom.	Foreign lang./Ro.	Abroad
SASC	96	36	Universities Doc and post-doc	36%	23%	41%
ASER	107	56	Folklore centers, Museums, Colleges	84%	10%	6%

In their competition for resources, (younger) anthropologists need at any price international audit culture standards in order to get their legitimacy on a broader academic market (e.g. two thirds of them are publishing abroad or in English edited Romanian journals). On the contrary, (elder) ethnologists are seeking for more nationally-rooted “quality control” and “impact” and fight for adapting international standards to local “real” needs (e.g. only 6% of them are publishing abroad, mainly in neighboring countries).

The double bind of audit culture

Audit culture myths and practices are an ideological must in Romania – but also in other “emerging economies” and/or “weak states” seeking for political reasons to line the neo-liberal global frame. But in doing so, the “audit culture kit” may changes according to national, local and/or institutional interests, sometimes favoring some categories of people, sometimes other. The new management of the university X, for instance, introduced some years ago a radical kit, taking over British standards. It was intended to move out “the old guys” and make room for younger, western trained scholars. The first goal was achieved, but the quality standards were too high for the young

scholars, unable yet to have a high “impact index”. The only ones to benefit were thus the leaders of this “reform”. With the next management, the quality kit became less exigent. But thus everybody could rank very high, so that the western publications of the higher-performing scholars lost their competitive advantage.

The dilemma around audit culture in such a context may be roughly phrased as follows: commitment to audit culture makes you its prisoner, but rejecting it makes you a loser. Adopting international academic audit standards helped the new generation of anthropologists to take advantage over some representatives of the older generation of less competent professionals, but put a strong pressure on their intellectual achievements. Rejecting such «rituals of verification» and fighting to adapt them to their own competences and interests, ethnologists gained a relative professional autonomy, but at the price of parochialism. In both cases, the production of knowledge is failing...

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