

In more ways than one

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It is no longer a secret in the history of thought that a theory, a thesis, a proposal is often both borrowed *and* accommodated; the transit of a set of ideas from one cultural place to another may be easy, but it isn't in itself enough for validation or, indeed, even for disgruntled acceptance. And it is even less of a secret that what it takes for a theory to catch on is sometimes so obscure or relying on such complex arrays of social, historical and intellectual circumstances that some have given up on defining them and have relegated them to *chance*. The book being reviewed here has a more optimistic outlook and, through the many contributions from its various authors, puts forward instances of how theories – literary, psychological, philosophical – are carried over the boundaries of nations or of political blocs, how they're being driven through the more pervious, but not always more accessible, boundaries of arts or art departments and disciplines.

A classification of the ways in which such theories penetrate a cultural space is already offered in the preface, alongside an interesting explanation of their failures to thrive. Titled "The Seduction of Eccentricity", the introduction argues that in marginal places, what first catches the eye of the innovative or novelty-seeking literary intellectual is the drift and the irregularity; he is captivated by whatever claims to be original in a manner not altogether different from the dynamics of the literary space itself. Theory (at least post-war theory), it is argued, although systematic, appreciates divergence, which also explains its inherent and, to the outside professional always doing back-breaking work in the sciences, chaotic and meaningless diversity: "Unlike the field of hard-science, with a much more homogeneous structure, in the field of the humanities, the dispersion of research topics and the local organization of theoretical reflection leads to the near incommensurate multiplication of novelties, often resulting not from an advance of knowledge (which in the humanities is difficult to document and measure), but in diverse and fluctuating positions" (10). The editors do make the prudent but no less true observation that the phenomenon has its downsides, with isolation being the most obvious, but also lack of coherence, ignorance regarding other traditions and practices, and a certain blindness to the fact that a theory may suit more realities than it can predict by remaining localized.

Which brings us to the core of the book's interest: how does one get back

what was lost, make up for what was never had, integrate a social reality in a theoretical field that ignores it or revive a discipline inside of an intellectual domain that has regarded it with indifference. Most of the papers in the book explore this process of encountering different outlooks and doctrines and the ways one has to fight or use the limits of the cultural field in order to accommodate and make those outlooks visible anew.

The first way to look at an intellectual transfer of this sort is, of course, geographically. Much of the second part of the book, little of the first part (Eichel's "Declensions of theory...") and also much of the last part are concerned with this aspect. Since this review lacks enough scope to talk about any of them in detail, a cursory glance will have to suffice. Many of the chapters are concerned with Eastern Europe, Romania in particular, and how the area can be (re)configured into existing cultural theories or how contemporary theories can be reconfigured around it. Anca Băicoianu and Bogdan Ștefănescu talk about similarities between postcolonialism and postcommunism, Ioana Bot, Ligia Tudurachi and Adriana Babeți about how certain intellectuals (Ioana Em. Petrescu, Lovinescu) or intellectual milieus (Timișoara in the sixties and seventies) have reacted to and their ideas grown out of encounters with Western works of theory, while Mircea Vasilescu gives a persuasive analysis of the way Romanian intellectuals have, in the last two decades, (over)reacted to media culture, by comparing this response to that of French intellectuals.

All these authors share a not so tacit assumption of writing from a state of marginality, or from a marginal state, an assumption that – with few exceptions – permeates the whole book (the metaphor of the map being recurrent). But it's not the somber postcolonial version, that laments the political mistreatment by the powers that be, but a version that both tries to describe the limits that are placed on a culture from the *verge*, but also shows that even in dire historical circumstances, communication is still possible, influence from the outside still exists, there is still a back and forth of important ideas and there's a slim, but occurring possibility of this dialogue being two-directional.

The second way to understand the transfer I mentioned is temporal, historically. Carmen Mușat discusses several definitions of theory from the last decades and insists on its practical, historical nature, while Adrian Tudurachi examines two instances when a specific author (Yves Citton and Roman Jakobson, in this case) decides to appeal not to theories from another contemporary culture, nor trespass into another discipline, but invoke a theory of someone from far enough in the past, a strategy of validation that, the author argues, makes for a "democratic relation to theory", allowing for sometimes unpredictable and fortunate mutations inside the field.

Lastly, the third way to look at intellectual transfer is transdisciplinary, which seems to be given the least space, although it may have merited more, especially when debating theory, which has always managed to stay at the

crossroads of numerous disciplines. Roxana Eichel talks about this theoretical need for the complementary in the very beginning, Ioan Alexandru Grădinaru about the use of the anthropological concept of “thick description” in Romanian religious studies and Magda Răduță gives an explanation for why literary sociology was viewed with skepticism in Romania in the sixties and seventies and talks about how it can and has been used in the east to understand local totalitarian realities.

Some articles do not necessarily fit these more or less ad-hoc categories, like the one by Laura Dumitrescu about *Le Roman de Fauvel*, which, although – to my mind – the most interesting of them, trying to single out the birth of the author in XIVth century French epic poetry, bears little connection to the rest. And those that fit are not so sure to agree among each other either, or concede to the assumptions that were laid down in the preface. One can't, of course, expect thorough agreement from a collection of articles and studies, especially since the metaphor from which it stems is that of variation, the to and fro, the interchange.

And, as a whole, the book honors this idea of theoretical diversity well, without harboring the overly optimistic notion – that is sometimes prevalent with some theoreticians – that there can be no limit to the transfer of ideas. If anything, the authors here are well aware that both geographical space, political state and historical period are, by themselves, in a sense, restrictions.