The Unbearable Virtues of Backwardness: Mircea Eliade's Conceptualisation of Colonialism and His Attraction to Romania's Interwar Fascist Movement

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INTRODUCTION

In studies of Romanian intellectual history, Mircea Eliade and his multi-faceted academic, literary, and journalistic work occupy a special place. As arguably the Romanian intellectual who is best known internationally, as well as due to his interwar political commitment to the "Legion of the Archangel Michael" (also known as the "Iron Guard"), Romania's native fascist movement, his work has benefitted from unparalleled attention, ranging in tone from unqualified acclaim for his erudition to outright condemnation of his politics, including his alleged anti-Semitism. Surprisingly though, especially given the relatively recent interest in exploring the applicability of post-colonial theory to the area of Central and Eastern Europe and the possible intersections and meeting points

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of post-colonialism and post-socialism (e.g. Wolff 1994; Bakić-Hayden 1995; Strayer 2001; Carey and Raciborski 2004; Kelertas 2006; Chari and Verdery 2009; Tlostanova 2009; Todorova 2010; Ştefănescu 2013; Parvulescu and Boatcă 2022; Kołodziejczyk and Şandru 2016), no studies so far have approached Eliade's work in light of his experience of colonialism and decolonisation in India. Even though Eliade was in India long before socialism, let alone its collapse, his experience of a pivotal moment in India's history, that of the civil disobedience campaign, would subsequently be linked in his reflections to Romania's own position of dependence and peripherality in ways that, I argue, markedly influenced both his scientific productions and his politics.

The few exceptions to this pattern relate exclusively to one of his novels: a semi-autobiographical fictionalised account of the love story of Eliade and Maitreyi Devi, daughter of the philosopher Surendranath Dasgupta, Eliade's host in India (Kamani 1996; Basu 2001; Cirstea 2013). While valuable in themselves for reasons which will be briefly addressed in this chapter, such studies concentrate exclusively on the reflection of colonialism in one of Eliade's literary productions, reaching conclusions that do not appear to be applicable to his scholarly work and, consequently, are problematic when brought to bear on Eliade's general attitude toward Indian society and the process of decolonisation. Furthermore, the lack of such studies is conspicuous for two main reasons. First, Eliade was one of the very few interwar Romanian intellectuals who engaged with research on non-European cultures and societies— even contemplating the establishment of a Chair in Sanskrit and Oriental Studies at the University of Bucharest, a project which eventually did not materialise, but whose very possibility was intended to break Romania's self-perception as peripheral and exclusively preoccupied with its East Central European context. Second, Eliade was perceived as the "leader" of the so-called new or young generation of interwar Romanian intellectuals, who are to this day revered as representing some of the country's finest in the field of humanities. By positioning Mircea Eliade in the context of interwar Romania and its cultural debates that consistently engaged with the country's alleged backwardness and peripherality with regard to mainstream European culture, I seek to trace the impact of his experience of India on both his scientific work and his politics, and, subsequently, establish a link between the two.

I argue that Eliade's vision of colonialism was reflective of the tension prompted by the epistemology of in-betweenness that he (and other

interwar Romanian intellectuals) developed as a response to Romania's marginality, translating in practical terms into a conversion of its peripheral status into a virtue (albeit one that remained uncomfortable) and a weapon directed against Western cultural and political hegemony. Eliade's epistemological stance corresponded, on the one hand, to his genuine cultural pluralism, support for decolonisation, and appreciation of non-European cultures and the challenges they posed to European hegemony, which he perceived as biased and grounded in a "superiority complex" (Eliade 1961, 1); and, on the other, led to his attraction to the legionary movement and its own, 'actualist' view of history (Fogu 2003; Cârstocea 2015). Consequently, the case study of the link between Eliade's scholarship and his politics appears interesting in light of his broader understanding of Romania's position within the global system, as well as of the parallels he drew between colonial scenarios and the historical legacies of countries in the region of Central and Eastern Europe, which he saw as also indelibly marked by their own experiences of empire. Such an endeavour would definitely far surpass the scope of a single essay. Therefore, my intention here is merely to sketch some of the potential lines of enquiry that my focus on the overlapping research and political engagements in Eliade's output can encourage, as well as their implications for attempts at establishing parallels between conceptualisations of different scenarios of dependence and domination, corresponding respectively, to the former Western European colonies and Central and Eastern Europe. The main sources used for this purpose are various diaries and memoirs in which Eliade described some of his experiences in India; the press articles published upon his return; and elements of his scientific work that illustrate the impact of his perceptions of Indian spirituality and of the beliefs of (East Central) European peasants on his theoretical approach to culture and religion.

Cultural Debates and Intergenerational Politics in Interwar Romania

Despite being written more than 70 years ago, a book that remains one of the most insightful analyses of the interwar Romanian economy, politics, and society opens with the statement: "Rumania is economically one of the relatively backward regions of the world. It is not as backward as vast areas of Asia and Africa, but like them it is faced with the problems of an agrarian society in the twentieth century" (Roberts

1951, v). In straightforward fashion, the author, Henry Roberts, placed Romania from the outset in a comparison with (former) colonial spaces and identified a certain similarity with the problems that countries in such spaces were facing. The explanation he invoked for this association was the country's ultimate dependency on "the West": "the conclusion reached is that the all-pervading influence of the West in the course of the last century or more is the decisive element in this problem. Not only do the outstanding features of the agrarian crisis in Rumania stem directly or indirectly from this influence, but the domestic political activity is understandable only as a variety of responses, involving the copying, modification, or rejection of Western political and ideological models, to the social and economic dislocation which growing contact with the West has brought about" (Roberts 1951, vi). His conclusions, drawn from an excellently documented economic history of interwar Romania, have numerous parallels in studies of Eastern European or "Balkan" culture. Maria Todorova's insightful analysis of the parallels, but also significant differences between "Orientalism" and "Balkanism," and of the implications of "the Balkans' semicolonial, quasi-colonial, but clearly not purely colonial status" (Todorova 2009, 16) represent an excellent starting point.

It is in this context that we can place what has been identified by many authors as the major intellectual debate in modern Romania, one that has aptly been called "The Great Debate" (Hitchins 1994, 292–334). Starting at the end of the nineteenth century and continuing into the interwar period, it involved a split between the so-called Europeanists, also referred to as "modernists," and the "traditionalists" or "autochthonists" (Hitchins 1978, 1995; Jowitt 1978; Ornea 1980; Livezeanu 2002). While such a dichotomy obscures some of the cultural complexity and new distinctions (both cultural and political) that emerged after the First World War (Verdery 1991; Livezeanu 2002; Clark 2012), it is nevertheless useful for delineating two opposing conceptualisations of the Romanian "backwardness" that was a constituent part of this debate. Where the "modernists" were acutely aware of Romania's marginality and sought to redress it, mainly through speeding up the process of modernisation that would align the country with the more developed "West," the "traditionalists" were extremely critical of what they considered the indiscriminate imitation and adoption of Western cultural forms and models of development transplanted into a reality they viewed as distinct and by no

means inferior or backward. The latter extolled the peasant as the repository of the "authentic" values of Romania and rejected the Western model which they viewed as materialistic and decadent. While both positions were fundamentally secular before the World War I, Orthodoxy became an essential component of the traditionalists' view of Romanian culture during the interwar period.

Rejecting both these orientations and arguing for a complete break with the "old" cultural canons, be they traditionalist or "Europeanist," the self-proclaimed "new generation" of interwar Romanian intellectuals aimed instead at a synthesis that would combine the focus on the "authenticity" of Romanian culture (perceived as occupying a unique position between the East and the West) with the adoption of a radical modernism they viewed as synchronic with the European avant-garde. In doing so, they engaged the issue of Romania's backwardness in a much more complex manner, expressing the tension between the trauma it entailed and the view of Eastern Europe's peripheral status as an alternative challenging the hegemony of Western culture. The rejection of earlier cultural models was accompanied by an intergenerational conflict, where anything and anyone considered "old" was denounced as inauthentic—as Eliade wrote in 1927, "between the young and the old there can be no bridge, only the throwing of lances" (Eliade 1927b). Under the guidance of Nae Ionescu, professor of philosophy at the University of Bucharest and the initiator of a Romanian variant of existentialism known as "*trăirism*" (from the Romanian word *trăire*, experience), the "new generation" of young intellectuals denounced positivist rationalism as a product of the ""unnatural" institutions of "bourgeois Europe"" (Hitchins 1978, 146) and proclaimed the primacy of the spiritual over rational knowledge.

In this context, the 1927 article "Spiritual Itinerary," written by a twenty-year-old Mircea Eliade, was to become a veritable manifesto of the "new generation" and establish his reputation as its informal "leader." Its call for "pure, spiritual, absurdly spiritual values" and "the necessity of mysticism" (Eliade 1927a) entailed, however, a much broader, universal vision of spirituality than the focus on Eastern Orthodoxy of the traditionalists. Critical of Nichifor Crainic, the main promoter of Orthodoxy as a central feature of Romanian religious nationalism (Clark 2012), of the notion of Christian Orthodoxy as a unique path to authenticity, and of the Christian faith in general, Eliade was far more interested in religion as an individual experience and as an actualisation of the transcendental. The roots of his interest in non-European religious practices and rituals,

including studies of yoga, shamanism, and the relationship between religion and magic, can be traced to this period, between 1926 and 1928 (Țurcanu 2007, 69–72, 88–89), and it is also during this period that he published his first articles dealing with Indian spirituality and philosophy (Eliade 1926). In the course of a study visit to Rome, where he attended courses on Indian philosophy, Eliade came across the first volume of the *History of Indian Philosophy* by Surendranath Dasgupta and learned about the charitable work of Maharajah Manindra Chandra Nandy of Kassimbazar; after writing to both, he was accepted as a doctoral student by the former and obtained a two-year scholarship for studying in India from the latter (Handoca 1991, 6). Notably, during this period Eliade advocated an apolitical stance in his press articles and denounced the growing antisemitism of Romanian nationalists, particularly visible among student movements; unlike many of his contemporaries, he was also unimpressed by the fascism regime in Italy during his stay there in 1927–1928 (Eliade 1932; Țurcanu 2007, 208).

EXPERIENCING INDIA

On 22 November 1928, Eliade left for India, where he stayed for almost three years, returning on 10 December 1931 (Handoca 1991). His notes from these three years, spread across various diaries and memoirs (Eliade 1935a, 1991a [1934], 1991b), as well as the fictionalised account of his love story with Maitreyi Devi, the daughter of his Indian mentor Surendranath Dasgupta, all indicate Eliade's enthusiasm for his experience in India, from where he only returned following a desperate letter he received from his father, an army officer and veteran of the First World War, who urged him to come back to complete his mandatory military service, failing which he would have been considered a deserter by the Romanian army—clearly a dishonour for a military family such as Eliade's (Handoca 1991, 20). Determined to return in 1933, after the completion of his military service, to a place he identified as his "adoptive country" (Eliade 1991b, 253), Eliade eventually never went back to India. Nevertheless, the experience of the three years spent there had a profound influence on both his academic career and his political views. While delving into the details of his time spent in India would go beyond the purposes of this article, in the following, I will draw attention to some elements that are relevant for understanding the impact of his experience of British colonialism and the Indian civil disobedience campaign on his

conceptualisation of Romania's (and Eastern Europe's more generally) peripheral status and ambivalent position with regard to both Western Europe and its own history of empire.

Although arriving in India under the tutelage of two Bengalis, Eliade's entry point to life there initially followed the established pattern for a white European, a position of which he was all too acutely aware throughout his stay.[1] Following the difficulties he encountered in obtaining a British visa at a time of turmoil in colonial India, his first residence in Calcutta was an English boarding house on Ripon Street, which provided him with room and board in exchange for the monthly scholarship of 90 rupees he received from the Maharajah of Kassimbazar (Eliade 1935a, 17). His stay among the English of Calcutta elicited a number of critical comments in his diaries about the excesses of colonial life in India, from the stark inequality between the "Anglo-Indians"—whom he saw as doubly alienated, from India as well as from Britain—and the native population to the debauchery of the former, in which he occasionally participated (Eliade 1935a, 93–102; 1991b, 171–5). Throughout his memoirs, Eliade's perception of the colonial presence in India remained almost entirely negative, an experience he constantly sought to escape by prolonged contact with Surendranath Dasgupta and the pandit teaching him Sanskrit, as well as by travelling whenever his precarious financial situation allowed it. His account of life in Calcutta is in sharp contrast with the enthusiastic tone of the descriptions of his travels, first to Central India (Allahabad, Benares, Delhi, Ogra, Jaipur, Ajmir) and then to monasteries in the Himalayas (Handoca 1991, 11–12). The latter trip brought him to Darjeeling, the summer residence of the colonial governor, which he found "barbaric," with "its tennis courts, dance halls, cinemas. If it wasn't for the staff dressed in indigenous costumes, the hotels would seem European; that is, as hideous as in Europe" (Eliade 1991a, 83). He was quick to add, however, that he was "not disgusted by Europe – superb and immortal reality," but by "the stupid proselitism of Europeans," a term

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[1] In his diary entry about the trip to Jaipur, which was an independent state, he notes "you no longer feel embarrassed about your race" (Eliade 1991a, 71). This is just one of multiple occasions in which Eliade refers to his embarrassment at being a European in India. Additionally, the Romanian "Sahib" is keen to clarify to his many Indian guides and acquaintances that he is not English (see his answer: "No, thank God" to the question of an Indian student "But you are not English?" (Eliade 1991a, 157; also Eliade 1991b, 108).

by which he referred to the colonial transformation and misrepresentation of Asia—which rendered it "suspect and not tolerated in Europe not because of its own substance," but precisely because of European representations (Eliade 1991a, 83), thus anticipating what Edward Said would later define as "Orientalism." Professor Dasgupta's invitation to live with him and his family, which he did starting from January 1930, delighted the young Eliade, who wrote to his mother in December 1929 about the immense privilege of studying and living together with Bengal's "second national glory after Tagore," adding that his return in the evenings from Dasgupta's house to Ripon Street was "like passing from India to Europe, such is the difference. Living with him, beyond the financial and scientific advantage, I will also enjoy a more tranquil life, without the useless bustle of Western cities, breathing an atmosphere imbided by the spiritual and by art" (cited in Handoca 1991, 16). This period, which he fondly described in his memoirs as the best of his time in India, would eventually end abruptly, due to Dasgupta's discovery of the romantic involvement of Eliade with his daughter, Maitreyi, in September 1930.

It is this double experience, as a not-quite-Western European who was exposed to both the life of the British colonists and that of the native population without really identifying with either (despite his attempts to do so with the latter, wearing a *dhoti* and having his meals on the ground, using a palm leaf instead of a plate) that is reflected in the fictionalised semi-biographical account of his love story with Maitreyi, published in Romanian as a novel of the same name in 1933. The novel was subsequently translated into French in 1950 as *La Nuit Bengali* and into English as *Bengali Nights* in 1993, following a promise Eliade made to Maitreyi that it would not be published in English during their lifetimes (Kamani 1996). The exotic subject of the novel was very innovative for Romanian literature, rendering it an almost instantaneous bestseller with the public and earning Eliade a prestigious literary award. As he bitterly admitted in his memoirs, while the success of *Maitreyi* seemed to many of his friends to prefigure a prominent literary career, none of his later fiction would eventually parallel its popularity (Eliade 1991b, 254). Significantly, the novel is also the only detailed account of a very important period in Eliade's experience of India, those "happiest days" he spent in his mentor's house, when he contemplated the illusion of eventually integrating into Indian society. Outside the novel, there are only very few references in his memoirs to the real Maitreyi and the story is entirely omitted from his two other published diaries dealing with his

time in India. In his memoirs, the few notes regarding his banishment by Professor Dasgupta give the general impression of irreparable loss, of his "terrible suffering at understanding that, together with Maitreyi, I had lost all of India. [...] That this India I had begun to know, that I had dreamed of and that I loved, was definitively forbidden to me. I will never be able to acquire an Indian identity" (Eliade 1991b, 190).

Read in a post-colonial key, the novel appears as "blatant colonial-era prejudice and appropriation veiled as romance" (Kamani 1996), as "typical of the broader history of colonialism [...] an Orientalist fantasy and a male fantasy" (Fleming 1994), some "unapologetically European male chauvinist's assumptions about Indian women's customs and thought processes" (Wright 1994).[2] While some of the insights provided by such a post-colonial reading are undoubtedly true, the aspects they gloss over pertain to the novel's Romanian context and to Eliade's particular positionality in India, which is in many important ways distinct from the colonial one. As argued by Arina Cirstea, the novel can be better read as indicative of "the extent to which the traumatic encounter between two subaltern cultures was mediated (and possibly undermined) by patterns of colonialist discourse" (Cirstea 2013, 38). The literary choices made by Eliade seem to confirm such a view. To mention but one of them and recalling his "disgust" at colonial attempts to transform India, the substitution of a French engineer, Alain, for himself as the protagonist of the novel is revealing. When written by someone who came to India to study its culture and spirituality, which he viewed as superior to those of Western Europe, his protagonist's commitment to a Western civilising project is profoundly (self-)ironic. In his attempt to transform a reality he does not understand, Alain's perception that "my work on the construction of railway lines through the jungle seemed to me far more useful to India than a dozen books written about her" (Eliade 1994, 15) is the exact opposite of the drive that prompted Eliade to travel to India and epitomises the Western discourse he was most critical of. Not quite English but not Romanian either, the French Alain also stands for the

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[2] Maitreyi Devi, who had in the meantime become a famous Indian poet and novelist, had published a reply to Eliade's novel in which she presented her own version of events, in the form of a novel published in Bengali in 1974, entitled *Na Hanyate*, translated in English as *It Does Not Die*. Most of the comments mentioned above were prompted by the publication in 1994 of an edition including both novels by the University of Chicago Press.

culture that interwar Romanian intellectuals preferentially emulated. As Cirstea notes, "this choice of identity may be read as an ironical commentary to the subordinate status of his own." Indirectly, the conspicuous absence of "Romanian-ness" is a commentary upon the "invisibility" of a culture that has not yet produced an articulated "identity discourse" (Cirstea 2013, 54). Thus, far from expressing exclusively an Orientalist white male fantasy, the novel could also be interpreted along the lines of Eliade's reflection on his own positionality, indicative of the epistemological in-betweenness of his condition as a representative of a peripheral European culture in India. Unlike his contemporaries of the "new generation" in Romania, whose view of Romanian culture as a potential bridge between East and West was played out mostly in the abstract, Eliade could invoke the direct, practical implications of such a position based on his own experience.

Scholarly endeavours dominate in Eliade's diaries and memoirs from India. In the foreword to the first collection of his stories about India, the author announced that "this is not a travel diary, nor a volume of impressions or of memories. […] Adventure has been systematically avoided in this book" (Eliade 1991a, 25). He explained this by his suspicion of travel literature in general, and of a European's superficial perception of the realities he encountered once he crossed the Suez Canal. Confident that to his knowledge "no other European has so far spent six months in a Himalayan monastery; and if they did, they have not written anything about the life and people there," Eliade was declaredly not interested in writing a book about "picturesque and political India," but on "Indian humanism […], those eternal Indian values created to uplift and comfort man, or lead to his salvation" (Eliade 1991a, 27–28). While the fragments he collected in this volume (and his other diaries and memoirs dealing with his experiences in India) offer but glimpses of these values, his entire scientific work following his return from India can be partly read as a tribute to this pursuit. In his diaries, where his notes are consistently linked through interpretation to their "meanings" for the young Romanian scholar, one can observe many of the features characteristic of his later writings: the pervasive dichotomy of sacred and profane (where the two are seen as complementary rather than opposites); his interpretation of reality as hierophany, a manifestation of the sacred in profane form; the ambivalence of the sacred; the belief in the transcendental unity of religious experience; and, most importantly for the chapter, Eliade's perception of an authenticity preserved in so-called traditional cultures

(a term he however dismissed) that had been lost to a significant extent in the civilised "West." The latter was consistently depicted as decadent, "fallen," and "provincial," with the only remnants of authentic spirituality in Europe to be found not in high culture but in folklore, peasants' beliefs, and their "cosmic Christianity" (Eliade 1980, 13).

All other aspects of his experience in India appear to be subsumed to his pursuit of knowledge of Indian culture and tradition, not only quantitatively—"I worked 12 h a day and only on Sanskrit" he would later confess to Claude-Henri Roquet (Eliade 1978, 50)—but also qualitatively, in his constant attempts to understand India on its own terms. As such, the first-person narration of his diary is occasionally interrupted to allow Rabindranath Tagore to "speak directly" to the reader about what India could teach the Occidentals (Eliade 1991a, 144–8), or Srimati Devi to talk about the Indian concept of the woman as a subaltern response to its misperception in Europe and America (Eliade 1991a, 148–151). The deference and respect he shows in all instances to his Indian interlocutors, his laments about needing more time to listen, to learn, to try to understand the country and its people, as well as his pride at the praise he received on his progress (with Sanskrit from Professor Dasgupta, and with the practice of yoga from his Himalayan guru, Swami Sivananda) show a very different attitude from the Orientalist position of many European specialists in Indian studies.

Such an attitude also transpires from his intense correspondence with his colleagues of the "new generation," the many young Romanian intellectuals who wrote to him to express their support for his endeavours and to enquire about them. Like his diaries, the letters Eliade wrote to his Romanian friends focused mostly on scholarly topics: when recounting his experiences in India, when discussing cultural developments in Romania, or with the occasional request for books he could not access in India (Handoca 1991). In the diaries themselves, the very few references to Romania are occasioned by certain people, situations, or experiences that reminded him of similar ones in his country of origin; while often nostalgic, they relate exclusively to landscape, peasant life, or spirituality. A conspicuous absence from both his correspondence and his diaries is any reference to political developments in Romania. Based on the available material, one can assume that he had virtually no knowledge of Romanian politics during that time, and, given that many of his colleagues of the "new generation" with whom he corresponded were quite active politically, it is interesting to note that Eliade never asked them anything

about this subject. This aspect seems to confirm his commitment to the apolitical stance he professed before his departure, as well as occasionally reiterated when discussing politics in India. In a conversation with an Indian student he recounts in his diaries, when asked if he was not ashamed (as a European) of everything he had seen in India in the course of the previous year, Eliade answered that he did not have any sympathies for any cause and that he was apolitical (Eliade 1991a, 157).

However, the few notes that refer to the civil disobedience campaign of Mahatma Gandhi and its repression by the British administration indicate otherwise. All of his reflections on the political events unfolding in India indicate his unwavering sympathy for the cause of decolonisation, in line with the aforementioned contempt he felt for the British colonial administration and its incapacity to understand the culture and spirituality of the country it was ruling and oppressing. Describing with admiration the resolve of the Indians in their non-violent campaign, Eliade also expressed his outrage at the abuses carried out by the colonial police, and most of the (few) pages of his diaries that refer to "the revolution," as he mostly calls it, are vivid accounts of the violence of the colonial police, as well as of the violence of Muslims against Hindus, conducted with the tacit approval of the British administration (Eliade 1935a, 103–115). He mentioned that some of the Indian students he knew sustained serious injuries from the police while protesting peacefully, and that one student was even attacked in her home. In addition to the stories he heard from his Indian colleagues about various instances of police brutality, he also described in graphic detail the cruellest episode he witnessed personally, on 22 April 1930: a cavalry charge of "the glorious mounted police" against peaceful protesters, many of them women and children. The wounded were brought to the library where he was studying, and the sight of them prompted Eliade, who was all too familiar to the customary brutality of the police in his native Romania, to exclaim in outrage: "Cracked heads and broken limbs – these one can see everywhere. But what you can see only in British India: children trampled under horses, children bloodied by hoofs and police batons" (Eliade 1991a, 156).

Initially more moderate in his assessment of the Indian struggle for independence, Eliade eventually became ever more committed to its cause. The instances of appalling racism he encountered among the British (one of whom rejoiced at the prospect that, if the revolution escalated, all the English population would be given weapons, "as in 1925," which would allow him to satisfy some "innocent whims," such as randomly

shooting "negroes" on the street) gradually led him to abandon his neutral stance—he confessed to barely managing to contain his anger and the desire to slap the British who aired such comments (Eliade 1935a, 115). Reprimanded by a character he only identifies as "D" (and whom one assumes from the context is his mentor, Surendranath Dasgupta) for his participation in one of the peaceful protests, where his Indian colleagues passed him for a French journalist reporting on the revolution, he was joyful when someone threw a clay pot at him one night in the street or when Indian children threw stones and shouted "white monkey" at him, laughing happily when telling his mentor how lucky he was "to witness the dawn of a new India" (Eliade 1935a, 109). He explained that he rejoiced at the attacks against him because they "attest the hatred against the oppressors" and that he understood "what an invincible force this hate represents, this supreme collective struggle against a foreign civilisation, against a barbarian race and a barbarian domination. From this struggle a new world will be born" (Eliade 1935a, 109). He was convinced that "British power will weaken when the confidence of the administrators will perish," and, noting that "Indian boys spit in front of 'Europeans' in trams," felt that this is "a truly revolutionary change. The prestige of the whites is crumbling. And the English rule India through prestige" (Eliade 1935a, 109). In an argument all too familiar in postcolonial scholarship, Eliade was convinced that colonial rule rested on the image of inferiority it projected and imposed on the colonised, and that its erosion would inexorably lead to the collapse of colonial power.

As with most of his observations, Eliade ascribed a deeper significance to the non-violent campaign he witnessed than the merely factual one, one which was attuned to his consistent preference for the spiritual:

> This extraordinary madness of India, to come unarmed in front of European tanks and machine guns... If it wins, as I wish it from all my heart to win, a new era begins in history. The spirit will prove once again invincible. Because Indian nationalism draws its force from the instinctive confidence in the spirit, in the magical power of suffering, of non-violence. (Eliade 1935a, 109)

His views received further confirmation from the Indian nationalist he encountered in the library during the cavalry charge he witnessed: the latter told him that

our struggle for independence, *swaraj*, is the necessary conclusion of our entire metaphysics. [...] That is why it is not a political struggle but a mystical one: we reach freedom, as Mahatma says, through purification, through renouncing the individual, through non-violence, through agony. Our politics is an ascetic initiation. (Eliade 1991a, 157–158)

It is by carefully considering these views, and their importance within Eliade's philosophical system, that one can begin to understand his attraction to the legionary movement upon his return to Romania, as the movement also proclaimed its own spiritual and Christian revolution, spearheaded by an elite that cultivated asceticism and martyrdom as its "weapons." The apparent paradoxes of the ambivalent combination of genuine cosmopolitanism and Romanian nationalism in Eliade's political thought or of the frequent parallels he later drew between a legionary movement that was notorious for its extreme violence and Gandhi's non-violent politics can only be untangled by delving into his experience of colonial India, with all its personal, philosophical, and political implications.

The Return from India—Scholarly Work and Political Commitment

Following his return to Romania and the completion of the compulsory military service that had brought him back, Eliade published more than 100 scientific articles dealing with Indian culture, philosophy, and religion. He defended his doctoral thesis on yoga—heavily indebted to his practice of it during the six months spent in the Swarga Ashram in the Himalayas that followed his departure from Calcutta after the fallout with Professor Dasgupta—in 1933 and published it in French in 1936 as *Yoga: Essai sur les origines de la mystique indienne* (Eliade 1991b, 313). His first major scientific work, the volume was to become a reference one in the specialist literature, and many of the ideas he introduced in this study anticipate his later hermeneutics of religion, elaborated in his monumental *History of Religions*.[3] He also lectured extensively on subjects related to

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[3] As it becomes immediately clear to a historian, Eliade's work is not exactly a "history" of religions in the methodological sense of the term. This is in line with Eliade's criticism of the application of analytical or historical methods *sensu stricto* to the study of religion, and his view of this field as more than a discipline, rather "*a total hermeneutics* [...] called

India. Although the Chair of Sanskrit and Indian Studies he kept hoping for throughout the 1930s was never established, his Romanian mentor Nae Ionescu secured a position for him as his assistant in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Bucharest. There, Eliade taught courses on "Dissolution of Causality in Medieval Buddhist Logic," "The Upanishads and Buddhism," and "Yoga," among other, more general courses dealing with "The Religious Symbol" or "The Subject of Evil in the History of Religion"; he also held conferences on Indian subjects at Radio Bucharest (Gligor 2014, 181–183).

As he later confessed in his conversations with Claude-Henri Roquet, Eliade "became sensitive to politics in India" (Eliade 1978, 108). The available evidence seems to confirm it, as upon his return to Romania Eliade became much more politically engaged than he had been before his departure. The transformation was gradual rather than abrupt, and as late as the spring of 1935 he argued for an attitude of political non-engagement that intellectuals should adopt (Eliade 1935b). However, in an article published on the occasion of Romania's national day in December that same year, Eliade wrote his first acclamation of Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, leader of Romania's fascist movement, the "Legion of the Archangel Michael", arguing that "a political leader of youth who had said that the purpose of his mission is "the reconciliation of Romania with God"" carried a messianic message, entailing "first and foremost a transvaluation of values and the clear primacy of the spiritual" (Eliade 1935c). The formulation is strikingly similar to the ones he employed to refer to the Indian civil disobedience campaign, and the parallels would indeed continue throughout the articles he wrote in support of the Legion, which he frequently compared to Gandhi's movement.

The reasons accounting for his gradual "conversion" to legionary ideology—one that is still subject to intense debate in Romanian historiography (e.g. Laignel-Lavastine 2004; Gligor 2007; Țurcanu 2007)—were partly conjunctural. The Legion, in 1928 still a minute dissident splinter group from another far-right organisation with an exclusively anti-Semitic political platform, The League of National-Christian Defence, was by the time of his return a force to be reckoned with, having weathered its first official ban in 1931 to send its first members to Parliament in 1932 (Cârstocea 2011, 83). Eliade's return to Romania in 1931 also

to decipher and explicate every kind of encounter of man with the sacred, from prehistory to our day" (Eliade and Partin 1965, 5; see also Allen 1988, 545–565).

entailed a reintegration with the "new generation" of young intellectuals who had eagerly awaited the return of their informal leader, and who, under the mentorship of Nae Ionescu, started to enthusiastically support the legionary movement or even join its ranks in the course of the same year. Nae Ionescu, who had argued as early as 1930 for the demise of parliamentary democracy and "the instauration of the dictatorship of the masses" (Ionescu 1930), exerted considerable influence on the young Eliade—the dedication of *Yoga*, was, in addition to the memory of the late Maharajah of Kassimbazar, to Surendranath Dasgupta and Nae Ionescu, "the only people I considered my 'masters'" (Eliade 1991b, 313)—and his support of the legionary movement was beyond any doubt. Finally, the background of precarity that young interwar Romanian intellectuals were exposed to, and that Eliade was not spared despite his literary fame and reputation as a promising young scholar, led to his increased disillusionment with the Liberal Party government, and with the corruption and growing authoritarianism of King Carol II and his camarilla (Ţurcanu 2007, 299–314).

Other reasons had to do with some of the peculiarities of legionary ideology: the self-representation of the movement as a spiritual one, its incorporation of elements of "popular Orthodoxy" (Haynes 2006), the peasant spirituality Eliade himself was so fond of, the asceticism of its leadership, the legionary cult of youth, but also of suffering and martyrdom in the service of the cause, and the movement's success at projecting itself in the interwar Romanian political space as the only radical alternative to the corrupt political establishment. None, however, were perhaps more important for explaining its seemingly irresistible attraction to the vast majority of young Romanian intellectuals—so much so that by the late 1930s the list of those who *were not* legionary sympathisers or members was far shorter than that of those who were (Petreu 2009)—than its redemptive promise to abolish (and avenge) what Eliade would later term the "terror of history," and the suffering of an eternal, mythical Romanian "nation" under its reign. In more concrete terms, the typically fascist palingenetic promise of rebirth (Griffin 1993), rephrased by the legionary movement into the Christian trope of "resurrection," promised an escape from the unbearable burden of the typically Eastern European "backwardness," experienced simultaneously as a developmental lack and a temporal lag (Todorova 2005), by recasting it as a virtue, acting as an impulse for a modernist revolt against the decadent Western civilisation that was rooted in tradition and the alleged "purity" of the peasant toilers.

As I have argued elsewhere (Cârstocea 2015), the alternative legionary temporality (or rather temporalities) that the movement put forth, accelerating time toward an imminent redemptive and transformative watershed moment that would inaugurate a bright future of quasi-eternal plenitude (similar to "the thousand-year Reich"), corresponded in many ways to Eliade's understanding of "sacred time" and thus accounted to a significant extent for his unqualified support of the movement in the second half of the 1930s. One of the conclusions of my earlier study was that rather than denoting some form of "fascist political vision," "the correspondences between Eliade's vision of temporality and the legionary one are rather indicative of fascism's ability to convincingly tap into the inexhaustible reservoir of myth and manipulate it for political purposes" (Cârstocea 2015, 96). In the following sections, drawing on the material presented above, I will attempt to put forth some tentative conclusions regarding the relationship Eliade saw between his experience of colonialism in India and his perception of Romania's peripheral and dependent position vis-à-vis Western European culture, as well as its own history of empire, placing them in the broader framework of his scholarly work. In doing so, I seek to explore the ways in which this relationship can account for a politics that accommodated genuine cultural pluralism and support for decolonisation with support for a fascist movement.

Eliade's Reflections on Colonialism and Romania's Peripheral Position

As shown earlier, the position of the "new generation" of interwar Romanian intellectuals rested on the notion of Romania (and the space of East Central Europe in general) as a bridge between East and West. In doing so, they were not only demonstrating their awareness of the constitution of this space through the West's discourse about it—the trope repeats textually Maria Todorova's remark that this metaphor of "a bridge between East and West, between Europe and Asia" has been so commonly employed that it "borders on the banal" (Todorova 2009, 16)—but refashioning it into a cultural position meant to challenge the civilisational model of Western Europe, to which Romania was bound to remain backward and peripheral, and to propose an alternative that was simultaneously culturally specific and attuned to Western critiques of modernisation. Simply put, this position entailed a refashioning of the backwardness of an agrarian society into a virtue, standing for an

authenticity that had been lost in "the West" in course of the processes of modernisation and secularisation. Given the perception of a profound crisis of Western civilisation (à la Spengler) and the ensuing alienation in a modern, technologically-driven "disenchanted" Europe, the fusion of this "authenticity" with some of the more respectable bases of "European culture" were to provide a solution to this crisis. Such a narrative exposes the cultural trauma engendered by a peripheral positionality and the attempts to tackle it, translating into the formulation of an alternative that would challenge Western hegemony.

However, such conceptualisations, while acute and insightful when it came to "the West," often invoked an "East" that, in the absence of actual direct contact with it (the Romanian intellectuals who actually travelled to Asia or the Middle East were very few), was little more than an abstract, reified notion following the Orientalist representations put forth in the Western cultural canon. In practice, this meant that in the absence of actual cultural reference points about the invoked "East," the "new generation's" proclaimed "drive for synthesis" did not advance much beyond the declarative level, and cultural positions eventually fell back on the familiar Western canon. The existentialism of Emil Cioran and Nae Ionescu, despite their autochthonous elements, paralleled closely that of Martin Heidegger, while the philosophy of Constantin Noica came much closer to German idealism than to any "Romanian authenticity" it invoked. Not so for Mircea Eliade. His in-depth knowledge of Indian culture and familiarity with India provided him with specific insights into the "Orient" that distinguished his cultural output from those of his generational colleagues. The result was his commitment to a universalism that would benefit from the contributions of non-European cultures, expressed in his idea of a "new humanism" that, instead of viewing other cultures from an exclusively Western perspective, would recognise and provide a space for expression to their "autonomous value" (Eliade 1961). This was the "solution" that he saw to what he insistently exposed as the "provincialism" of Western culture. As such, his humanism was not envisioned as the benevolent gesture of an enlightened European "recognising" the inherent value of the voice of the subaltern, but as a historical necessity that would deliver Europe from its (potentially catastrophic) limitations: "With us, it is an old conviction that Western philosophy is dangerously close to "provincializing" itself (if the expression be permitted): first by jealously isolating itself in its own tradition and ignoring, for example, the problems and solutions of Oriental thought;

second by its obstinate refusal to recognize any "situations" except those of the man of the historical civilizations, in defiance of the experience of "primitive" man, of man as a member of the traditional societies" (Eliade 1959, xii).

In Eliade's mind, the dangers posed by Western domination were by no means limited to philosophy. Reflecting in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War on the Holocaust and the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which he identified as the greatest horrors in human history and as the destructive consequences of Western modernity, Eliade saw modern man as fully exposed to the "terror of history": "And in our day, when historical pressure no longer allows any escape, how can man tolerate the catastrophes and horrors of history – from collective deportations and massacres to atomic bombings – if beyond them he can glimpse no sign, no transhistorical meaning; if they are only the blind play of economic, social, or political forces, or, even worse, only the result of the "liberties" that a minority takes and exercises directly on the stage of universal history?" (Eliade 1959, 151). The latter aspect touches on Eliade's pervasive anti-elitist attitude that rendered him a staunch defender of the "common man," be it a Romanian peasant or a colonial subject, his belief that the development of "high culture," in Western Europe and elsewhere, was an instrument of subjugation serving the interests of the ruling elite, ultimately responsible for the desacralisation of the world and its "fallen" state (Eliade 1987, 152). As a result, since he believed that the very notion of scientific analysis was inextricably linked to colonialism and Western practices of domination, the only path he saw to the "new universalism" he proposed was through a re-valorisation of spiritual experience as the common ground where different cultures could meet. This argument was supported by his belief in the transcendental unity of the experiences of the sacred and acted as the impetus prompting his interest in developing the field he called "history of religions" (and others "comparative religious studies"). "Religions, if they were many, would be the *same*; but because they are *one*, they are different. And the unity of "religions" will finally be seen when each man has his own mode of approaching God, when the Supreme Being is revealed to each one directly, without the precedent of tradition or collective experience" (Eliade 1991c [1932], 59).

The necessity for a "new humanism" was occasioned by decolonisation, the "historical moment" when "the people of Asia have recently entered history" and "so-called "primitive" peoples are preparing to make their

appearance in the horizon of greater history (that is, they are seeking to become *active subjects* of history instead of its *passive objects*, as they have been hitherto). But, if the peoples of the West are no longer the only ones to "create" history, their spiritual and cultural values will no longer enjoy the privileged place, to say nothing of the unquestionable authority, that they enjoyed some generations ago" (Eliade 1961, 2). This prompted a need for dialogue, but one that, in order to be authentic, could not be limited to the "empirical and utilitarian language" of the colonisers, but would have had to be on an equal footing, taking note of the "central values in the cultures of the participants" (Eliade 1961, 2). By rejecting what Tlostanova (2009), following Sandoval, calls "the asymmetric translation of all *others* into the language of western epistemology" and valuing instead the others' epistemic traditions, Eliade's concept of "new humanism" appears close—save for its insistence on the over-arching importance of the sacred—to a decolonial perspective. The development of such a perspective was not only a reflection on decolonisation and his experience in India, but also profoundly related to the ambivalence of his position as an Eastern European intellectual and the ensuing epistemic position of in-betweenness.

The two elements appear actually as inseparable both in Eliade's scholarly work and in his political views, and both are pervaded by an anti-Western attitude that was simultaneously in line with that of his Romanian contemporaries and articulated differently due to his first-hand experience of colonialism. With regard to understanding Romanian folklore, he was convinced to have come "closer to the very roots of Romanian popular genius by studying the symbolism of the temple in Borobudur, yoga, or Babylonian cosmology – than my philosopher-colleagues who were studying, for instance, Kant. Because no one has yet identified the hidden links between the Javanese or Mesopotamian archaic symbolism and the one residing in the deep layers of Romanian folklore" (Eliade 1991b, 221). Politically, he was equally convinced that by casting in his lot with the legionary movement, he was supporting a "revolution animated by the idea of self-sacrifice," without any parallel in the modern world outside of "Gandhi's national and social revolution, traversed by a Christian and Tolstoian spirit" (Eliade 1937a). In Romanian politics, his aforementioned opposition to the ruling elites took the form of a wholesale condemnation of the entire interwar political class, identified in his homonymous 1937 article as "blind pilots" who were leading the country through "the most stormy, tragic, and dangerous epoch that

Europe has known" toward certain catastrophe (Eliade 1937d). The same anti-establishment attitude was characteristic of the legionary movement, as was the valorisation of the Romanian peasants as "authentic" repositories of the "true," "essential" values of the nation, yet another feature that Eliade was very sympathetic of.

His profession of faith in the legionary cause lays bare the cultural trauma related to Romania's peripherality and backwardness, as well as the desperate attempt to overcome it: "I believe in the destiny of the Romanian nation – that is why I believe in the triumph of the Legionary Movement. A nation that has proven immense creative powers, at all levels of reality, cannot founder at the periphery of history, in a Balkanised democracy and a civil catastrophe" (Eliade 1937e). Glossing over the movement's extreme violence and its virulent antisemitism, Eliade viewed it not only as aligned with the other revolutionary movements in Europe and elsewhere, but as *superior* to them (as we have seen, in its alleged similarity with Gandhi's movement), operating a fantasy reversal of the Romanian complex of inferiority toward "the West": "Today the entire world stands under the sign of revolution. While other people live this revolution in the name of the class struggle and the primacy of the economic (communism), the state (fascism), or the race (Hitlerism)— the Legionary Movement was born under the sign of the Archangel Michael and will triumph through God's grace. That is why, while all other contemporary revolutions are *political*—the legionary revolution is *spiritual and Christian*" (Eliade 1937e). Typically for Eliade, who related all contingent reality to the universal, in accordance with his concept of hierophany, he attributed to the movement a significance that transcended Romania, its "meaning" seen as "different from everything that was done in history until today. And the legionary triumph will bring not only the restoration of the virtues of our nation, a worthy, dignified, and powerful Romania – but will create a new man, corresponding to a new type of European life" (Eliade 1937e). Against the traumatic reality of a semi-colonial dependent condition, Eliade believed that the "rebirth" of Romania through the Legion's "Christian revolution" entailed a "spiritual imperialism" legitimating its "historical mission" (Eliade 1937c). This alleged "mission" consisted of the fact that "Romania allowed itself the "madness" [recall his identical formulation for the Indian civil disobedience campaign] to show to the West that a perfect civil life can *only* be fulfilled through an authentically Christian life and that the most superb

destiny a nation can have is *to make history through supra-historical values*"
(Eliade 1937b).

In retrospect, such statements appear ludicrous and, for some authors,
cast doubts on Eliade's entire oeuvre. Similarly, at another interpre-
tive level, in the field of fascism studies, Eugen Weber's association of
the rituals employed by the legionary movement with those of African
messianic cults and cargo cults (Weber 1965, 523–525, 532–533) have
been ridiculed by virtually every serious scholar writing on the Romanian
native variant of fascism. Yet both Eliade and Weber were authors who
were very familiar with the colonial context (this is actually imputed to the
latter for drawing such "wild" associations) as well as with Romania, and
perhaps such a reading of the legionary movement might help to partly
explain Eliade's attraction to it. As mentioned above, the movement's
skilful employment of elements of folklore, its appeal to the "cosmic
Christianity" of Romanian peasants, replete with pre-Christian elements,
was certainly attractive to him, all the more so as he believed that "this
mysticism, which is not *new*, since it has been in our lands since the times
when the Romanian people was being born, coincides with the will of
the entire nation for a spiritual renewal" (Eliade 1937b). The "will of the
nation" might not have been for "spiritual renewal" but for an improve-
ment of the dismal conditions prevailing in Romanian agriculture, where
more than 70% of the population was employed as late as 1941 (Roberts
1951, 360–361), but the promise of such an improvement in a rhetoric
that simultaneously appealed to popular Orthodoxy must have been a very
powerful one indeed for Romanian peasants, who were otherwise patron-
ised or simply ignored by the mainstream democratic parties. At the same
time, despite its many peculiarities related to the Romanian context (a
feature that is characteristic of all fascist movements), as recent studies
have convincingly shown, the Legion was well within the mainstream of
European fascism (Iordachi 2004; Clark 2015; Cârstocea 2020). Unlike
the democratic parties that imitated the West and the communist one that
followed the orders of the Soviet Union even when these virtually decreed
its undoing, the legionary movement could not only claim to belong to
the fascist party family, but even proclaim its superiority over the two
regimes in Italy and Germany (in line with its valorisation of spirituality
and criticism of the latter as too materialistic), which it did at the cost of
compromising cooperation with and support from them. In the absence
of other feasible political models, this appeared as promising to intellec-
tuals tormented by the trauma of their peripheral, semi-colonial status as

the notions of social justice (within national limits) did to peasants and workers.

Conclusion

Eliade's reflections on patterns of domination and dependence, clearly differentiated in his scholarly writings, were unfortunately often unreflexively lumped together in his polemical political ones. His re-coding of an ultra-nationalist exclusionary fascist organisation as a liberation movement from foreign domination (despite the fact that the elites he and the legionaries were militating against were ethnic Romanian) appears easier to understand when taking into account his reflections on Romania's peripherality and its condition as a "victim of history," not unlike colonial India in this respect—a view also shared by Rabindranath Tagore, who had himself visited Romania (Eliade 1991a, 156). It is thus in the framework of his long-standing opposition to Western political and cultural hegemony that one can understand Eliade's cultural pluralism and support for decolonisation, as well as his attraction to Romania's interwar fascist movement. In turn, instead of seeing Eliade's interest in India as prompted by typical European Orientalism, as some of his post-colonial critics have done (Basu 2001), this chapter argues that it might be more fruitful to understand his fascination for India as an attempt to escape the ambiguity and ambivalence of Romania's position in East Central Europe by embracing not the civilisational model of the West, but its "wholly Other," Rudolf Otto's (1959) *ganz Andere* that Eliade cited profusely, the Orient.

In doing so, he articulated a much more sophisticated conceptualisation of Romanian peripherality than that of his contemporaries and made East Central Europe's inherent ambivalence and ambiguity into the essence of "the sacred" to the study of which he dedicated his career. Suspicious of the insistence of most Romanian nationalists on the "uniqueness" and "superiority" of Christian Orthodoxy, which he viewed as a "provincial" response to the "provincialism" of Western culture, he was however ready to embrace its mystical, peasant variety as the localised manifestation of "nonhistorical, universal, mythical structures" (Allen 1988, 561). Finally, the analysis of his political choices also serves as a warning about the ease with which notions associated with a genuine commitment to cultural pluralism and intercultural dialogue can be reifying and essentialising in their anti-hegemonic

impetus against a "Western" modernity. The case of Mircea Eliade adds another tragic chapter to the long history of instances when defensive and anti-imperialist emancipatory rhetoric was converted into exclusionary nationalism—and if Eliade left behind that legacy after he left Romania, its long shadow never left him. When viewed also in the context of contemporary Central and Eastern Europe, promises to empower the silent "masses" that share a fate as victims of a Western capitalist-driven process of modernisation, arguments for local or national specificity allegedly suppressed by European—or global—structures of domination (whether the European Union or transnational capital) are still to be found both within the academic literature exploring the potential nexus of post-colonialism and post-socialism, as well as in the discourse of far-right parties

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