

Redefining Cultural Obedience

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Résumé: Dans une acception usuelle de l'obéissance, les dogmes culturels constituent une menace, tandis que les traditions revigorées sont un espoir. Les figures d'autorité légitimes confèrent à l'obéissance un modèle spécifique. Le but de cet article est de montrer comment l'obéissance est multivocale et non seulement univocale, comment elle stabilise et déstabilise à la fois le développement culturel, comment elle peut sembler une vertu ainsi qu'un vice. Dans la démarche obéissante, on doit éclaircir les décisions critiques ainsi que les décisions non critiques.

Key-words: cultural value, de-emphasizing, legitimate authority, stabilizing factor

Introduction: Unattractive Dogmas

Who makes of obedience a dogma? A humorous quasi-definition for obedience sounds like this (Cristian Ghinea in DV: VI, #266/ 2009): unghiute tăiate.../ little nails that got cut short neatly... Of late, Romania has been found to go ahead as if on an automatic pilot system: EU would come up with the recipe, then we adopted it, making laws, setting up institutions – even two of them for the same domain, if required. Odd times... yet, one thing worked for sure. If we obeyed and cut nails short enough, we could be accepted. And we were, indeed.

« Spre deosebire de alți politicieni, de toate calibrele, avea stilul universității, al studiului aplicat, al contemplativității angajate. În plus - acel aer central-european care îmi era atât de familiar și care unifica, sub o comună mireasmă, câteva figuri publice de aceeași "obediță": Václav Havel, Arpad Göncz, György Konrad, Adam Michnik etc. » (A. Pleșu about the Pole Bronisław Geremek in DV: V, #232/ 2008). In our translation: To mark a difference from other politicians, of all calibers, he used to don the academic style, the applied-study fruits, the committed type of contemplativeness. What is more – it was that central-European kind of familiar air that brought together, with much to share, a few public figures of the same “obedience”: Vaclav Havel, etc. The query arising here is: why should Pleșu need the salience of inverted commas round our key term? Probably, in order to take our dogmatic perception of obedience away from a routine understanding – that of slavish submission, shedding its negativism and replacing it by the positive interpretation of compliance. Wikipedia assures us that compliance takes place between peers – and this means a world of difference.

Advocates of authority in any form of exertion will make of obedience a dogma; parents of a despotic inclination, by the side of strong-headed managers at business, or puritanical natures in relation to their self-imposed constraints. Translators vacillating between domestication (a vocative like ‘partner’ sounds convincingly domesticated when becoming the informal ‘colega’ in Romanian conversations) and foreignization (with a handy example, the syntagm ‘lucrări de mentenanță’, as if ‘lucrări de întreținere’ could be unacceptable Romanian) have their peculiar impost to give towards dogma creation or destruction when a major culture meets a minor culture.

The question to make us look for answers in this article is the following: in cultural matters, is obedience to authority the norm (to be preferred) or the exception (to be cultivated)?

Perceived legitimate authority figures

This subtitle is inspired by a Wikipedia line saying: “Humans have been shown to be surprisingly obedient in the presence of perceived legitimate authority figures” (see References below). Hence, a variety of situations are apt to generate a variety of forms assumed by anyone’s tendency to follow ‘orders’: obedience to a spouse, to management in the workplace, to a social norm, to God, to self-imposed constraints, and so on. The cultural spectrum is wide and striving to be emphatically present in man’s daily experience.

Obedience is an educational matter: authority versus easy-goingness. Obedience is also compliance with the imperatives of the day: “the drive for making money”/ goana după bani, for instance, could be selected to reflect a strong form taken by obedience momentarily. Obedience as the cultivation of embarrassing inertia is the bad signal when “progress goes back on its steps” (the inspiration for this phrasing has been offered by a headline in Romanian, “Când progresul merge invers” in DV: VI, #259/ 2009).

The urge to focus on obedience is the effort to rationally understand the phenomenon. Once understood, the phenomenon may no longer haunt you. By understanding, humans are on a par with things they are unable to control. Only then can they fly in the face of tradition and not put themselves to shame.

Obedience can be otherwise worded as resilience of senior users of cultural values defying juniors that are mostly go-getters who need the new culture and the new language supporting it. Are successive generations trying to outdo their predecessors? Will a badly-ailing economy reshape our tastes and habits? And, by “we”, the reference goes to “populația neaoșă” and its newly created funny bilingualism like in the following randomly-chosen newspaper sentence: “Evoluția audienței postului tv se înscrie în *trendul* firesc impus de public *neaoș*”. The emphasized words, the Anglicism and the Romanian lexeme made to accept each other co-textually, point to slip-ups, some might say, but a different viewpoint could be that international words help show our obedience to linguistic globalization. We commit ourselves to further examples below.

In January last year, city mayor Oprescu had to face educational challenges with a fresh idea – the introduction of a so-called “buton de panică” in schools, as long as students no more feel safe there and parents and students call for measures of protection, on the one hand, and measures to reduce levels of violence, on the other hand. (Then, in early September last year, “butonul de panică” was advertised as a matter of proud achievement for a number of schools in Cluj, in TV news). The alternative expression “butonul roșu de urgență” sounds to us a clearer proposition for youngsters to have a handy device and – in real time – let the community police force know there are threatening incidents going on. Our old-day “semnal de alarmă” probably lived its day and a button is a description closer to what may exist nowadays, whereas the twin words R. *alarmă*/ E. *panic* loses the contest with the twin words R. *urgență*/ E. *emergency*. The former is a picture of the emotions and the latter a picture of the outside situation for which somebody is summoned onto the spot. Thus, the latter variant seems more correct.

The other day, on the radio, someone passed on information about an “expert trainer” in a certain project. The embarrassment was caused by (1) the combination of a Romanian lexeme and an Anglicism; (2) the reading which came out Romanian-fashion for the former word and English-fashion for the latter; (3) the apparent mishandling of syntax for radio listeners, since premodification of the noun is against Romanian usage. This is somewhat similar to a case we have already discussed elsewhere: words were identical graphically speaking, but stressed and syntactically ordered with a difference when television channel Antena 1 broadcasted the show “Secret Talent”, striking the eye with an epithet preceding the noun, English syntax differing from ours. Besides word order deciding in favour of English,

the shift of stress also marks a difference, as long as in English stress falls on the first syllable for both items. Romanians could easily have adapted that title to a perfectly equivalent *talent secret*, uttered normally with a second-syllable stress and avoiding clouds of wonder about how to handle the un-Romanian presentation of *secret talent*. We can add the fact that the cultural information is the same: celebrities compete against each other in areas that differ from their normal professions, and viewers are to vote on the most talented of them. Have the Romanian producers feared the loss of connection with the American format, because theirs was a short-lived CBS reality show? The confusion and misunderstanding being promoted by the identical spelling and meaning of the two words in English and Romanian could have found an acceptable solution in pluralizing terms so as to make the name of the show completely Romanian, *Talente secrete*, since it was a matter of putting together the performance of several contestants anyway.

In transferring cultural values to better or worse effects underscored by the media, we come to the conclusion that a few of the main authority figures for regulating our contemporary fragility in cultural matters are: the well-dressed socialite (upgrading the proverb *The tailor makes the man*), the ‘manele’ musician (we are still lucky to hear from time to time about *cantautori* and not songsters!), the sitcom male and female leads, the popular blogger, the spa owner and fitness coach, the journalist who takes serious notice of the work of others, and so on. With all of the above, we seem to be moving in-between tendencies descriptive of an individualist culture on the one hand (a proverb teaches us that *one shoe will not fit all feet*), emphasizing the importance of freedom and the consequences of independence, and, on the other hand, tendencies telling of collectivist cultures, capitalizing on the preeminence of social groups (proverbially, *there is no good accord where every man would be a lord*).

Trying to de-emphasize what?

Firstly, by trying to emphasize the opinion that obedience is univocal, we de-emphasize the description of multivocal phenomena. Yet the truth is that it *is* a multi-vocal contribution when, for instance, a young Romanian film reviewer, symptomatic for his generation of highbrows, chooses to shape discourse as our excerpts pointedly reveal. The following quotation from his film review (A. Gorzo, DV: VI, #266/ 2009) speaks in an Englishman’s or American’s voice with the parts in bold: « Dar de ce s-au apucat englezii Daldry și Hare să facă filmul ăsta? Ei nu s-au încleștat ani întregi cu aceste lucruri și, în mod previzibil (filmul fiind un medium mai asertiv – mai puțin bun la ezitări – decât cuvântul), n-au reușit să găsească un echivalent pentru tonul cărții – pentru acea presiune neîncetată a interogației și autointerogației. » Rather than turn into an approximation of English this wayward rhetoric, we can try and express our assumptions as to the voices subduing the young critic for every passage printed in bold. Thus, a first suspicion of clumsy transposition of an Anglo-American critical idea is found in “a se încleșta”, for which the dex-online paraphrase, “a se lupta corp la corp cu”, is somewhat far from the intended meaning rendered by a possible choice of vocabulary in English, maybe by the English verb “to grapple with” followed by inanimate grammatical objects (to hold fast to *something*). Next, the noun “medium”, not contained by Romanian dictionaries, has three possible paraphrases leading to distinct meanings: an agency by which something is accomplished; a person thought to have the power to communicate with agents of another world; a surrounding environment. Apparently, the intended meaning in the Romanian review is the first one, but it might have been expressed by an exact term such as “instrument” for instance, to be also suitably qualified by the upcoming epithet: “assertive” in English happily overlaps this time with the Romanian *asertiv / cu caracter de aserțiune*. However, we believe the use of the adjective *ferm* would have been a far better

option, the more so as we dispose of a meaning explication between dashes. The parenthetical contribution proceeding with pragmatic caution to prefer ‘less good’ to ‘worse’ (in other words, toning down/ hedging/ litotes as stylistic device) is interesting in its second half as well: “bun la ezitări” is un-Romanian, so to say, but does not uncover (at least to me) the origin of its stiltedness. Eventually, “autointerogație” suffers from the same artificiality: it is not mentioned in dex-online, while it strongly tells of *self-questioning* in English. This reference to the scrutiny of one’s own motives and behavior is perhaps more correctly expressed in Romanian with the word ‘introspecție’.

The ending of the review is equally hard to process, but has links with the passage reproduced above; we can continue looking out for new blunders in a hotchpotch in which the only safe element is a Faulknerian intertextual presence: « Povestea nu se mai chestionează pe sine (ce vrea să însemne?, pînă la urmă înseamnă ceva?, ce emoții ar vrea să producă?, emoțiile acelea sînt oare adecvate?) și, pînă la urmă, nu mai chestionează nimic. Ce rămîne nu-i o melodramă. E clar că Daldry și Hare disprețuiesc acest gen; ei au cultul „frumosului rafinat“. Numai că ce înțeleg ei prin „frumos“ (vezi scenele lor erotice, care sînt de fapt o expoziție de nuduri de bun-gust) neutralizează orice interogație, orice meditație, la fel de sigur cum ar face-o melodrama; diferența e că n-o îneacă în zgomot și furie, ci o cloroformează. Ce rămîne e o greșală. »

The whole of the critical text demonstrates the superiority of a book, the novel *The Reader* (1997) by Bernhard Schlink, over the movie (an Oscar-nominated film that came out in 2008). We draw the line and ask ourselves: what, more exactly, are the voices prescribing obedience? Our answer is: a foregoing critic writing in English, German psychoanalysts, movie-makers versus fiction writers with their specific resources of graphic accounts

Secondly, if we emphasize the complete effects of obedience, we can also paradoxically de-emphasize completeness by upholding that - fortunately or unfortunately, as the case stands - obedience is incomplete. For example, a theological perspective will point towards the day’s disjunction between piety and culture: it flaws a Christian’s sense of completeness in obedience. The lay forms of culture for the vulgar rich of today blur a big religious vision. Thus, piety and culture as undivided and unseparated is a utopian thought for a society of failed Christians disobedient of the Bible teachings.

Obedience can also be projected as incomplete if, within an individual’s axiological systems, one adopts Schwartz’s model of two dimensions in culture, *openness to change* versus *conservation* and *self-enhancement* versus *self-transcendence* (for more information, see H. Rusu, apud Voicu, 2008:238 ff).

It is interesting to see at least the fact that, by pushing the analysis in that direction, instead of studying obedience, one arrives at the study of permissiveness. Moreover, if we take guidance again from tapping the world of ideas in proverbs, one recalls the following: *he that teaches himself has a fool for his master*.

Thirdly, the current view is that obedience acts like a stabilizing factor; the reverse would be that obedience *can* be destabilizing. The following illustration is a small-scale destabilizing occasion, but it serves our point. In substance, recent Romanian snobbery dictating the shopping spree that compels customers to step into malls has been bitterly painted in an article (DV #313/ 2010) entitled “God save the(m) (m)all!” In form, this textual presentation is very likely to destabilize the reader who is not conversant with (1) English grammar, to produce one reading, *God save them all*, and a second one, *God save the mall*, sapping the meanings separately; (2) rebus-games to unpuzzle the destabilizing form of this message; (3) culture patterned according to the trend known as foreignization, particularly in translatology.

The other side of the story

We can redefine obedience in totally different contexts, to show it can get other names, such as 'being populist' through the language used, for the sake of acquiring a better public image. This situation calls for attention turned to catch-phrases in particular. They have a life of their own, yet, with all their ephemerality, the thinking to be guessed in between the lines is seen to avoid a rhetoric which could be equaled to a struggle against a previous cultural notion or value. A telling example may be the fading-now catchphrase *war on terror*, a favourite with the American President at the time of the fateful attacks (9/11). Even if new political administrators came to power in the States, they have the same bent for opposing forms of terrorism and extremism on the one hand, and for carrying on with the idea of repairing the US image among Muslim nations, on the other hand. In a presidential transition from Bush to Obama, there has been a lexical transition in wording: the immense effort presumed to be 'war' has been indicated as 'struggle'. This deliberate replacement while referring to either an 'enduring' or an 'ongoing' struggle shows that thinking has evolved. Publicly stringing words together is not a trifling matter by far. Barack Obama shifts from the combative tone at least symbolically: he understands that a speech must be worked at, since it is "not just a series of sound bites" as journalists heard him to say. Mass media has also memorized his clarifications in his first days in office that he is courting the Muslim community somehow, talking to them broadly, and by implication. We understand this 'obedient' commitment to come from a triad: community, solidarity and belonging (analyzable in the Romanian literature as *presiune de uniformitate*, alternatively *presiune de apartenență*, for psychologists).

Another redefinition of obedience could be as 'virtue', though at this turn of pen we disclose nothing new: in many, if not all, traditional cultures, obedience has been regarded as a virtue, similarly to children being always expected to be obedient to their elders. As P. Tufiş (apud Voicu 2008:222) explains, "age is the most important control mechanism (among variables in measuring parental values, our note). Either because older parents have had more experience (both life and parental experience), or because effects are due to differences between cohorts, this category of parents tends to place more value on conformity in children and to de-emphasize autonomy values" (our emphasis).

The elegant redefinition of obedience in a totally different area is what pragmaticists make their plea for: something which is not exactly submissive, yet not exactly aggressive either, can be called a capacity for assertiveness. It consists in the impact one makes on others without encroaching upon their personal space. It is a call for obedience with gloves on: it is the skill of finding means of influencing others without damaging interpersonal relations. Others need not be overwhelmed or abused (the least so in words). Submissive people, on the other hand, are caught between two aspects that become equally embarrassing. If they are assertive, they threaten the face of the powerful and may easily suffer disastrous effects. If they are not assertive, they suffer loss of face and of personal power. Either way is an advantage on the part of power-detainers.

By way of conclusion

We have worked along the lines of cultural obedience understood as uncritical adoption - almost without adaptation - of the foreign cultural element. Owing to the illustrations given above, we can round up the discussion by saying: "cultural obedience is not always a slap in the face of conservative natures", and thus we can now make the final statement. It holds good or it is true on condition voices rising in favour of (temporary) obedience will follow a certain reasoning course. It may run like this: if we eliminate cultural

obedience, we allow for no growth, no evolution, no promise for us to be part of an open and vibrant system in cultural terms.

References

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