

Apologia de Mediocritate

Arleen Ionescu

in Dialogue(s) with

Alexander Baumgarten, Dragoș Ciuparu, Petre T. Frangopol, Daniel
Funeriu, Vladimir Tismăneanu

Abstract

This section, which does not fall within the remit of a conventional scholarly paper, is built to bring together several academics and decision makers involved in the field of higher education, and gathers accounts of both personal and professional opinions on the state of mediocrity in the 21st century, with a particular emphasis on the present Romanian educational system.

Keywords: *mediocrity, excellence, exemplarity, education, Romanian higher education*

Having in mind Plato's metaphor of the Cave from his *Dialogues*, where people living in a cavern are only able to discern wavering shadows which are projected on the wall of external reality, I designed these dialogues accordingly in order to suggest the dualism of the concept of mediocrity: on the one hand, the Greek meaning of *aurea mediocritas*, the golden mean which was for Aristotle that desirable "average" between two dangerous extremes, one of excess and the other of deficiency, and, on the other hand, what Alexander Baumgarten defines here as the Christian meaning of mediocrity, which was the opposite of excellence. Recasting Plato's gesture of making his characters debate on a topic, I will let my readers see both the world of ideal forms and the world of everyday perception through the opinions of five exceptional thinkers and public figures coming from completely different backgrounds, trained either in the sciences and in the humanities, who reminded me of Plato's protagonists. My five respondents, who will be introduced briefly in a footnote when they are first addressed, will help both me and my readers discern, on the walls of the cave of mediocrity, reflections, challenging thoughts, sometimes contradictory attitudes and feelings.

In preamble if not quite by way of analogy, it should be recalled that Plato's *Dialogues* were grouped as follows: "Early" (in which Socrates' views were presented): "Apology" (including *Crito*, *Euthyphro*, *Ion*, *Lesser Hippias*, *Greater Hippias*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, *Menexenus*, *Protagoras*, *Euthydemus*, *Charmides*, [Lovers, Hipparchus, First Alcibiades]); "Middle," based more on Plato's own ideas (including *Gorgias*, *Meno*, *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, *Cratylus*, *Timeaus* and *Critias*); and "Late" (with a more didactic touch, longer, less dramatic: *Theaetetus*, *Parmenides*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Philebus*, and *Laws*).¹ My own material will likewise be arranged from an

¹ See Michael McGoodwin, *Summary of Plato's Dialogues* (1990, revised 2000), at <http://www.mcgoodwin.net/pages/otherbooks/plato.html>; accessed April 19 2013,

“Apology” or rationale, then move on to “Early”, containing general considerations about mediocrity and a few views on the Past, “Middle”, comprising thoughts about the Present, “Late”, including worries and hopes about the Future, and will conclude with my own Epilogue, called “Before It Is Too Late”. Starting with “Middle”, our discussion will proceed from more abstract meanings of mediocrity to more focused, concrete Romanian realities. “Late” is the part where we shall attempt to make our way forward, out of the cave of mediocrity, giving up the objects that appeared different because of the light of the fire, and reflecting our ideas against the real rays of our Eastern European sun.

Apology

When we conceived the Call for Papers for this thematic issue, we had in mind a challenging and perhaps provocative caveat: that even if “this is not an issue on performativity, mediocre people, even if they do not know who they are, need not apply”. This is why, with an obstinate faith in excellence—the obstinacy also comes from suppressing that more benign understanding of the mediocre that wends its way through other pages in this issue—I thought of bringing together in a (de)constructive dialogue on mediocrity several “excellent” characters, whose constant fight over the last few years was to promote quality at all levels. What is recast here as one continuous “polylogue” was originally conceived as separate interviews, yet my respondents’ thought-provoking answers gave me the chance to structure this case study in the way it is presented here.

The choice of the five interlocutors was my own, therefore prey to *absolute subjectivity*, even as I assume the impossibility of giving an answer to the classic philosophical question of whether one’s self (the subject) is a transitory or a perpetual facet of existence, and thereupon the further impossibility of the reliability of any view. Derrida had defined absolute subjectivity as follows: “itself thinks itself, is for itself and near itself, has no exterior and it assembles, erasing them, its time and its difference in self-presence.”² My own opening to subjectivity originates from the fact that, like many others, I have experienced so many political attitudes to culture and education in Romania after the legendary ’89 Revolution and the effects of that event on time, difference, self-presence. The proximity and properness of my own subjectivity was built upon my relation to this Eastern European space (defined as *here*) and to the passage of time (experienced on the one hand as “lost”, irrecoverable time, and on the other hand as present/presence, therefore *now*). *Here* and *now* may make the freedom of my own choice an impossibility and its actuality an inevitability, but whatever the case might be there, selecting these people is, with the reader’s permission, my own way of thanking them (and so many other members of their teams) for what I consider that they built for research and education in a country in which democracy is still young (Alexander Baumgarten, Daniel Funeriu, Dragoș Ciuparu, Petre T. Frangopol), and for

² Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. with Additional Notes by Alan Bass (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982), 52.

the reconsideration of historical truth about Romania in an (East) European context (Vladimir Tismăneanu).

Early

ARLEEN IONESCU (to Alexander Baumgarten): By “*tradition of mediocrity*”, Curtius understood “*tradition of exemplarity*” (originating from Aristotle’s “*golden mean*”). It consisted of a canon of works that codified norms and maintained rules. The exemplarity of canonical works was both ethical brilliance (virtutes) and artistic meticulousness (ars). Do you think we can still see mediocrity as [the] “*golden mean*” in the twenty-first century?

ALEXANDER BAUMGARTEN³: Your question refers to a very subtle aspect of the history of culture we are participating in. When we speak of “mediocrity”, in the deprecating sense in which our world uses this term, we situate ourselves on a ground made up of two overlapping strata, yet with very different origins: one Greek and one Christian. These worlds met at some point, yet they often lived under tension. When we comprehend this tension, we can handle our daily mediocrity better. Here are my thoughts: first of all, I have in mind the cultural complex of the term “average”, whose celebration is deeply connected to the Greeks and which penetrates their whole culture—from the architectural proportion to the arithmetic one, to the diet of the Hippocratic medicine, to the average way or the concept of the “average” in Aristotle’s logic (“golden” only in Latin poetry), to the inscriptions from Delphi (“nothing in excess” and “Know yourself”, where the latter has nothing to do with the abyss we attribute to it, but simply means “Know your place”). From this perspective, to fight against the excess and lack of sufficiency is the maximum authenticity, in which “prudence” is the best guide, and far from invoking “the petit bourgeois” of the Heideggerian “Impersonal”, it sends us to the Greek “hoplite”, the element of a phalanx together with his fellow citizens who knows that victory presupposes first and foremost not to make a show of oneself on the battle field.

Things are completely different in Christian theology. One can bargain with a Greek God and in this way one’s welfare will be ensured as long as he/she keeps within

³ Alexander Baumgarten is Reader at *Babes Bolyai* University of Cluj and former Vice-President of the National Council of Research. A few days after this interview, he resigned as a result of the under-financing of research by the Ministry of Research. Specialized in Antiquity and Medieval Philosophy, Alexander Baumgarten is the author of *The Principle of Heavens The Eternity of the World and the Unity of Intellect within the Philosophy of the 13th Century* (Cluj: Dacia, 2002, and Bucharest: Humanitas, 2008) and of numerous articles on antique and medieval philosophy. He has translated several works from Greek into Romanian, and he is the Editor-in-Chief of the “Classical Sources” Series at Humanitas, the “Medieval Library” Series at Polirom, the “Cogito” and “Mediaeval Philosophy” Series at Univers Enciclopedic. He is also Editor of *Chora-Revue des Etudes Anciennes et Medievales*. and a member of the Advisory Board of “Neoplatonism” Series at Zeta Books Press and of other professional associations (among which The International Society *St. Thomas Aquinas*, *Société Internationale pour l’Etude de la Philosophie Médiévale*). As a member, then Vice-President of CNCS, he was in charge of evaluating research projects in the Humanities and of classifying Romanian journals and presses; the mission of CNCS was “to promote and stimulate excellence in scientific research in Romania”. (See the mission statement at <http://www.cnsc-nrc.ro/home/>, accessed April 2013.)

his/her own “mediocrity”. There is no such possibility with a Christian God. His infinity, hidden into one’s soul, requires excess: the disciples’ running away from parents, the model of any conversion, etc. Christianity is installed by its “athletes” as a culture of excess or one of insufficiency, understood as ways to salvation. Christianity is interested in its “athletes” (the phrase is patristic), and one can get out of the average quotidian only by means of authenticity. Such a theme becomes challenging from the philosophical point of view, when it is transformed in Boethius’ *The Consolations of Philosophy* into the idea that only by means of suffering can one gain access to truth. Such a thing was never explicitly mentioned before, and this is why the idea was embraced enthusiastically, as it was deeply adapted to the emergence theological culture. From then on, it enjoyed a tremendous growth in our culture, from its appearance in Meister Eckhart’s *Divine Consolation*, to the model of exceptionality in German Romanticism, to Emil Cioran and the idea of authenticity in twentieth-century existentialism. The theme of “performance” in our scientific culture derives from these cultural roots.

Yet I cannot refrain from emphasising the beauty and importance of another text, a thought-provoking Christian critique of mediocrity. I refer to the German Sermon no. 1 of the same Eckhart, in which he reads the episode when merchants are banished from the Temple (Matthew 21:12). He had the sharp intuition of seeing the divorce between Christian and classical Greek cultures in this episode, in the terms I previously invoked: he claims that the merchants were not simple villains (some used to sell pigeons...), but people who were confused; they thought that they could make an exact and calculated exchange with the divine infinite. Eckhart responds in simple terms and asserts that the merchants’ mediocrity derives from their inability to do something for free (meaning in the name of grace). This is the definition we are looking for: the mediocre are the ones who cannot do anything out of grace. Therefore, mediocrity means overlapping the two strata, the Greek and the Christian, the conflict between the two, our own life after all.

ARLEEN IONESCU (to Vladimir Tismăneanu): *Is your own definition of mediocrity in line with the “tradition of exemplarity” or, rather, in the shade of Kant’s Critique of Judgment, according to which saying of a work “this is mediocre” is to condemn it to the “would-be”, to (pseudo)work ?*

VLADIMIR TISMĂNEANU⁴: I prefer to look into mediocrity from a slightly different perspective. I see it as the opposite of creative imagination, the expression of dullness, a

⁴ Vladimir Tismăneanu is Professor of Comparative Politics at the University of Maryland. He served as Chairman of the Editorial Committee (2004–2008) and as Editor (1998–2004) of *East European Politics and Societies*, an international journal which examines critical issues related to Eastern Europe; and as President of the Scientific Council of the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes in Romania between February 2010 and May 2012, when he was dismissed by the government. He was appointed Head of the Presidential Commission for the Study of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania, which presented its report to the Romanian Parliament in 2006. Tismăneanu’s numerous articles were published in periodicals such as *Times Literary Supplement*, *Times Higher Education*, *Contemporary European History*, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Journal of Democracy*, *Revista 22*, *Evenimentul Zilei*, *Ideii în Dialog*, *Orizont*, and *Apostrof*. His most important work is in the sphere of Stalinism and Neo-Stalinism in the Soviet Union and countries of the Eastern Bloc, with a special emphasis on the Romanian communist regime, while other topics such as Cold War history, Kremlinology and the Holocaust were explored by Tismăneanu over recent years. This dialogue concentrated especially on two of his recent works,

willingness to adjust and compromise, an indulgence of aesthetic and moral platitudes. The mediocre lacks what we can call the spark of genius, the hallmark of true originality. Mediocrity ignores psychological depths, navigates in quiet waters and cultivates an opportunistic submission to the status quo. Mediocrity means acquiescence with the world as is, not because of approval but rather as a result of political and moral cowardice. Mediocrity does not mean moderation, quite the contrary. The mediocre can simulate an appetite for values, yet he or she remains anchored in a tepid, lukewarm territory. Banality and mediocrity go hand in hand.

ARLEEN IONESCU (to Dragoş Ciuparu): *What is your own definition of mediocrity, from your position as the former president of ANCS (The National Authority for Scientific Research)?*

DRAGOŞ CIUPARU⁵: I do not take into account the old definition of the term mediocre as “good”. I have in mind the opposite of “excellent”. A mediocre person is dull and bores us to tears.

ARLEEN IONESCU (to Daniel Funeriu): *How would you define mediocrity, in your position of a former PhD student of a Nobel Prize winner, and as a former Minister of Education?*

DANIEL FUNERIU⁶: Mediocrity is generated by people. It does not come out of “nowhere”. A stone cannot be mediocre, a sculpture can. Therefore I will refer, all

Stalinism for All Seasons (2003) and *The Devil in History* (2012); yet I feel indebted to mention many other remarkable books that Tismăneanu has published, such as *Fantoma lui Gheorghiu-Dej* [Gheorghiu Dej’s Ghost] (1995), *The Crisis of Marxist Ideology in Eastern Europe: The Poverty of Utopia* (1988), *Reinventing Politics: Eastern Europe from Stalin to Havel* (1993), and *Fantasies of Salvation: Democracy, Nationalism and Myth in Post-Communist Europe* (1998).

⁵ Professor Dragoş Ciuparu works within the Department of Petroleum Processing and Petrochemistry, UPG Ploieşti. In 1999 he obtained his doctoral degree at University Paris 7 – Denis Diderot, and in 2006 he was Visiting Professor at Yale University. Winner of several international grants, he is a member of several Professional Bodies (such as Sigma Xi member, the North American Catalysis Society, the American Chemical Society, AIChE). Professor Ciuparu’s appearance in a journal of critical theory is not incongruous, not least in view of his expertise as the former president of ANCS (The National Authority for Scientific Research) between 2010 and 2012, until his dismissal by the incoming government. The main target of ANCS under Dragoş Ciuparu was to promote excellence, which he sought to encourage through rewarding rigour in academic culture in Romania. ANCS enforced strict rules regarding conflicts of interest and preferment and it created a set of tough sanctions against plagiarism and other kinds of academic fraudulence. Consequently, through both national funds and EU structural funds, several programmes stimulated the contact between public and private stakeholders, attempting to stem the flow of promising young researchers leaving the country. (see Dragoş Ciuparu, “Power from People,” *Public Service Review: European Union* 23 (9 May 2012): 503). For more information, see also Dragoş Ciuparu, “A Crisis is a Terrible Thing to Waste,” *Public Service Review: European Union* 22 (15 February 2012): 486-487.

⁶ Daniel Funeriu is the former Minister of Education (2009-2012). After fleeing from Romania in its worst years of Communism, the late eighties, he received the Second Prize nationwide in the French Olympiad in Chemistry in 1989. In 1999 he became doctor in chemistry at Louis Pasteur University in Strasbourg under the supervision of Nobel Prize winner, Jean-Marie Lehn. After several years in research (at Scripps Research Institute, La Jolla, California, at National Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Engineering, AIST, Amagasaki, Japan), in 2006 he won the highest amount ever granted under the *Marie Curie Excellence Grant* and formed a research team at the Technical University of Munich. Subsequently he left an extremely promising career in research in order to become a politician. In 2009 he

along, to the source of mediocrity, i.e. mediocre people. My definition is: someone who behaves in a way that suggests abilities higher than her/his true abilities and who believes that (s)he is fully entitled to do so, while expecting from people around, above and below treatment that is not commensurate with her/his real attributes, for example through privileged access to resources and through favourable decisions that bear no relation to her/his actual achievements. Not being a top football player is fine. Not being one but behaving like one and expecting to be treated accordingly is the typical behaviour of a mediocre person. In politics, this reaches dramatic dimensions: one who is empowered with responsibilities way above her/his abilities leads to mediocrity whilst, in fact, excellence is needed.

ARLEEN IONESCU: *It seems inevitable that mediocrity should be seen as a negative term. Is there any context you can envisage where this need not be the case?*

DANIEL FUNERIU: Mediocrity is negative by its effects, not as a mere word. But I may be biased in my definition by the too many examples of mediocrity that I have seen in public life that affect the existence of millions of people. A simple person is not mediocre. When there is a match between abilities and behaviour this is fine.

ARLEEN IONESCU (to Petre T. Frangopol): *In your own edited four-volume book, **Mediocritate și excelență - o radiografie a științei și învățământului din România**, mediocrity is perceived through this negative understanding. Do you think that in the twenty-first century we can still see it as aurea mediocritas?*

PETRE T. FRANGOPOL⁷: *The DEX (The Explanatory Dictionary of Romanian Language) defines mediocrity unequivocally: a mediocre individual is “a person lacking*

became Romania's Minister of Education and Research. His major contribution to Romanian education was Law no. 1/2011, which he managed to introduce after quite “a bitter and protracted fight” (see Alison Abbott, in *Nature*, 112 January 2011, <http://www.nature.com/news/2011/110112/full/news.2011.8.html>), a law which proposed changes in higher education which were radical, and therefore fiercely controversial, but which were in fact aligned with the European educational system. Among other major changes, the new law established a new form of baccalaureate, which resulted in the lowest pass rate (44.47%) in the last twenty years in Romania. The minister's public debates at that time showed that Romania was at a crossroads, and that the country could no longer countenance lack of rigour. In 2012, the law was amended by the new government.

⁷ Petre T. Frangopol is former Professor of Biophysics at the Faculty of Physics, “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași, and Honorary Member of the Romanian Academy. He worked as the Head of Laboratory at the Institute of Atomic Physics, Bucharest (1957-1993) and he was Senior Research Scientist. He was Post-Doctoral Fellow of the National Research Council, Ottawa (1969-1970), the beneficiary of a NASA contract at George Washington University, Washington, D. C., and the *Dozentenstipendium* at the Humboldt Foundation (1972). He was Scientific Counsellor of the President of The National Research Council of the Ministry of Education (2002-2010) and Advisor to the Vice-President of the Romanian Academy (1995-1998). He is also in the Distinguished Reviewers Board of the leading international scientific journals *Scientometrics* and *Journal of the Radioanalytical and Nuclear Chemistry* published by Springer. He is a member of several Professional Bodies (such as German Chemical Society, Romanian Chemical Society etc.). Petre T. Frangopol is the author of over 200 scientific papers in leading international journals. After retirement, Professor Frangopol remained active in campaigning for the implementation of good laws for education. His main contention is that irrespective of the party/ alliance that is in charge of the country's destiny, education should not be prey to political vicissitudes, and that education should not be overdetermined by politics. His latest work in

great intellectual qualities, lacking intelligence, abilities or culture, lacking spirit, having no value; who does not stand out, who does not make himself conspicuous, modest, and ordinary.”⁸ In the twenty-first century, a nation needs to aspire to a society of values, or meritocracy. Its social and educational system should be structured in such a way that it could select the ones who have talent, energy and, moreover, who have strength of character, to become the next generation of leaders for each segment of the society. The quality of a country is known to depend, to a great extent, on its elites and on the wisdom of the collaboration between its leaders and its citizens. Biologically speaking, it is genetically attested that people are not equally endowed with intelligence. The left reasons that what nature could not create can be attained by artificial means, therefore by laws that could compel equality between people. Nature refused uniqueness, for the simple reason that equality between people would have condemned it to disappearance; therefore it chose the diversity of the world, which guaranteed its perpetuity. Having in mind these arguments, I cannot interpret mediocrity as a position of equilibrium between good and indifferent.

Middle

ARLEEN IONESCU (to Alexander Baumgarten): *Before Kant's Critique of Judgment, originality and imitation were indissoluble. Yet, in the mid-eighteenth century Kant introduced the notion of exemplary originality. Normative universality was dismissed and aesthetics divorced from the good and the useful. In the German philosopher's view, originality was impervious to comparison, while mediocrity represented a mere relational, comparative category. Saying about a work "this is mediocre" condemned the respective work to "would-be" (pseudo) art. Can we say that we still use the notion with a similar meaning nowadays?*

ALEXANDER BAUMGARTEN: Yes, beyond any doubt, understanding mediocrity in relation to the formal and understanding authenticity in relation with what goes beyond the formal (as this is its source, meaning the exemplary) is correct and comes from a tradition which is older than Kant's. The idea is actually Plato's. The Greek philosopher speaks of paradigms in order to save himself from a confusion of logic: what should things in our world do in order to benefit from ideas, in such a way that the ideas should become their source, without sending a message outside the sphere of this model? The answer is simple: ideas should become models. We call this "paradeigma" in Greek and "exemplar" in Latin. A beautiful history started from here (for instance, Plotinus claims that Gods are the cause of virtue, but this does not mean that they are virtuous). In this history, for medieval theologians, models in the divine mind are sources of things in our world, as they are "exemplary". We, Romanians, translated this word wrongly,

science policy consists of a substantial number of articles (sometimes pamphlets) published in the weekly *Aldine* supplement of *România liberă* [Free Romania], a newspaper of note; these were put together in a four-volume monograph, reviewed in this issue. At present he is the Editor-in-Chief of *Revista de Politica Stiintei si Scientometrie* (<http://rpss.inoe.ro>), which appears under the aegis of the Ministry of National Education.

⁸ See Ion Coteanu, Luiza Seche, Mircea Seche, eds., *Dicționarul Explicativ al Limbii Române* (Bucharest: Editura Academiei, 1975), 536.

confusing it exactly with what it was supposed not to mean; in our language, the exemplary is an illustrative item of a species. In fact, it means its model. Kant speaks of exemplary originality, which we can translate as “modelling originality”, which obviously involves above all the ones who imitate it. Kant’s idea is to desacralize an issue of theology. Hence the theme of exceptionality in artistic creation and, later on, the theme of kitsch.

ARLEEN IONESCU: *Nietzsche’s view on mediocrity was twofold: on the one hand, mediocrity was **mediocrization**, homogenization (equated to democracy, with its roots in Christianity), on the other hand, it was a mask that produced the conditions for some elite, exceptional individuals who were happy to hide their superior spirits under the mask of mediocrity. For Nietzsche, mediocrity was the “guarantor and bearer of the Future.” In his account of mediocrity, **Exemplarity and Mediocrity**, Paul Fleming ended his book on an optimistic note: “[t]he future may belong to mediocrity, but precisely for this reason it can be golden.” How do you interpret this statement?*

ALEXANDER BAUMGARTEN: My own interpretation seeks exactly the light of the conflict we were previously talking about. The “golden” mean of mediocrity is the ancient heritage by which we can judge the culture of excess as a simple alternative. Fleming defends it, Goethe defended it in *Poetry and Truth*, Noica defended it on the first pages of his *Despărţirea de Goethe* (The Separation from Goethe). The modern man (us?) is built upon this tension: the tension between the theme of exceptionality (“bigger, better, faster, more”, as a song asserts) and the “discrete charm” of mediocrity. Bovarism is only modern, for mediocre people, so is the Guinness Book of Records in its caricature of exceptional people.

What can save us and what can give us the dimension of a rational option is still Eckhart’s definition, which deserves our attention one more time: our capacity to do something for free, in the name of grace, letting our spirit enter the world by means of our disinterested effort. In other words, by keeping ourselves in a mediocre anonymity, yet by cultivating the gratuitous immensity of our deeds.

ARLEEN IONESCU (to Vladimir Tismăneanu): *In the same Nietzschean context, would you say that, generally, it is the ideology of the century we live in to facilitate and reward mediocrity?*

VLADIMIR TISMĂNEANU: Nietzsche was right in foreseeing the rise of mediocrity, and so was Dostoyevsky. The advent of masses in politics can lead to the elimination of distinction: we can notice, globally, a decline of quality among prominent politicians. It would be enough to compare François Hollande to François Mitterrand. To deal with non-mediocrity is a difficult, often excruciating exercise. Mediocrity emphasizes likeness, similarities, accessibility. I read recently a review of Andrei Pleşu’s admirable book, *The Parables of Jesus*, in a Romanian cultural weekly. Instead of scrutinizing Pleşu’s insights, the reviewer accuses him of “elitism”. Mediocrity is narrow-minded, simplistic and resentful.

ARLEEN IONESCU (to Daniel Funeriu): *Would you compare the conditions to facilitate and reward mediocrity in Nietzsche's time with those of the century we live in?*

DANIEL FUNERIU: No. I would rather say that mediocrity has better life conditions than in 1880 due to the general rise in living standards. But there is also hidden a lethal danger that must be well managed: since life is now more facile for mediocre people, their access to decision positions is also easier.

ARLEEN IONESCU: *Attempting to transpose these points to our country, are we to conclude that mediocrity shapes a frightfully ordinary twenty-first century Romania? If yes, what are we to do, and where do we start? Or is it a case of accepting that this is a stage in the country's cultural history that must be endured before it can be exceeded?*

DANIEL FUNERIU: Yes, it is a huge risk. Mediocrity has two characteristics that excellence does not have. It is very solidary and it has an incredible power for self-regeneration. Nowadays it is also very aggressive. When mediocrity has power, dangers are everywhere. Can anyone tell me a single wise measure implemented in the last year?

ARLEEN IONESCU (to Vladimir Tismăneanu): *I will attempt to make you elaborate on the present of Romania. I do admit that my own reasoning would be somehow prey to what in your most recent book, **The Devil in History**—based on a challenging comparison between fascism and communism—you equated with the liberal view that history is determined by the process of human progress; yet it is not the thought that history must mean only progress that makes me fall into this possible trap, but rather the very hope that at some point we will learn our lesson (the famous metaphor of the light at the end of the tunnel). I also have to admit the fact that from this point of view, I see the notion of mediocrity as negative and I exclude any vague aurea mediocritas connotation: therefore, if you do not agree with my view, please feel free to contradict me and ignore this question. Yet, I cannot help asking, if we accept that mediocrity shapes a frightfully ordinary Romania nowadays in which the spectre of the famous invocation from University Square, “death to intellectuals”, comes back under different forms (and indeed let us recall those intellectuals, including you, recently dismissed from various structures where they had been previously appointed on account of their merits and replaced with others whose merits, we could say, lie in a different direction) — well, should we accept that this is a stage in the country's cultural history that must be endured before it can be exceeded?*

VLADIMIR TISMĂNEANU: Common sense and decency do not mean mediocrity. The myth of progress as a foundation of one form of liberalism does assume a teleological development that I don't regard as necessarily confirmed by facts. This is the thrust of John Gray's most recent book *The Silence of Animals*. The myth of progress derives from positivism, scientism and historical optimism. Communist regimes instituted mediocrity as a required and rewarded “value”. They were mnemophobic, axiophobic, and noophobic. In other words, they opposed unadulterated memory, genuine merit and the nobility of spirit. The liberalism I embrace is one defined by the awareness of the pitfalls of modernity, including the possible descent into

the totalitarian inferno. I share the anxieties of the late political thinker Judith Shklar who coined the term “liberalism of fear”.

ARLEEN IONESCU: *Still in **The Devil in History**, you mention an error of Western-led policies, committed without any foundation in history: one which believed that after a brief period of economic shock therapy, the states from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe would revert to development. Indeed, we can see how terribly wrong such scenarios were. We are still somehow in shock therapy not only economically, politically, socially, but also morally. Can you relate this to a sort of ‘idealized’ mediocrity of our nation, sold (on the free market this time) under the form of excellence and superiority?*

VLADIMIR TISMĂNEANU: Post-communism started with the euphoric moment, with high expectations of pluralism, prosperity and universalization of liberal values. As we know, this was a rather simplistic scenario, based on wishful thinking, revolutionary exhilaration, and underestimation of deep-seated non-liberal and even anti-liberal passions. Long-denied emotions resurfaced once the lid of totalitarian pressure was removed. Think of Hungary, where the liberals lost much of their prestige, whereas conservatives have moved more and more towards populist traditionalism. In Romania the liberal, pro-Western direction is now under siege from a conglomerate of forces grouped around an agenda that I call, in agreement with political scientist Dragoş Paul Aligica, kleptocratic authoritarianism.

ARLEEN IONESCU: *In your book **Stalinism for All Seasons**, you considered that Ceauşescu’s personality cult, ascending to the highest paranoid proportions, in which people considered their leader a great thinker, almost a philosopher whose “precious indications” had to be followed by “the multilateral men”, is “evocative of Romania’s ambiguous Byzantine heritage”.⁹ You rightly claimed that “an increasing (and ineluctable) incompetence smothered the decision-making process, while the general secretary urged his underlings ‘to do their best’.”¹⁰ In the spirit of Derrida’s **Specters of Marx**, may I ask: to what extent can we control, so many years after Ceauşescu’s death, the comings and goings of this ghost of incompetence that pretends to bring us ‘exceptional merits’ (to make use of your terms), but in fact brings us anti-intellectual routines setting in against intellectuals in Romania?*

VLADIMIR TISMĂNEANU: Communist regimes everywhere promote conformity, duplicity, mendacity, mediocrity. Leszek Kolakowski said the “lie is the immortal soul of communism.” The Iliescu system, as H.-R. Patapievici called it, did inherit these features. Moreover, Iliescu himself is the embodiment of *Homo Sovieticus*. If we try to discover his true professional credentials, it is obvious that he is nothing but a seasoned, consummate, vindictive apparatchik. No surprise that he has encouraged like-minded individuals to pursue political careers under his patronage. One of the major problems in post-communist societies is the adversity to risk-taking, the yearning for the false

⁹ Vladimir Tismăneanu, *Stalinism for All Seasons. A Political History of Romanian Communism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 208.

¹⁰ Tismăneanu, *Stalinism for All Seasons*, 209.

stability of authoritarianism. In the 1930s, political philosopher Erich Fromm detected “fear of freedom” as a symptom of crisis within liberal democracies. Individuals enjoy negative freedom (freedom from, to use Isaiah Berlin’s term), but are reluctant to engage in positive freedom (freedom to). The latter involves initiatives, will, determination, courage.

ARLEEN IONESCU (to Alexander Baumgarten): *With your permission, Alex, I propose to step further from philosophy directly to the twenty-first century Romanian playing out of the tensions between mediocrity and excellence. I remember our 2011 meeting at CNCS (National Research Council), when, as the Head of the Commission for the Humanities, you spoke to journal editors about how many efforts they needed to make in order to become visible and in order to be taken into account by colleagues from other countries of the European Union or the United States. It has been long since but at that moment, I, like many others, was doubtful about your ideas—which seemed extremely good, but slightly utopian. Looking at some journals in Romania nowadays, I can say that lots have progressed and the top ones maintained their positions. I do realize now that you were not utopian, but that you were right and in a way our own journal heightened its quality a lot due to your example and your standards. There are Romanian academic journals which are very good and whose editorial boards fought to acquire recognition and to make contributors understand that quality matters dearly. If you look back at the state of some journals and compare what kind of material they used to publish in the past with what they publish nowadays, do you share my opinion? And if not, why?*

ALEXANDER BAUMGARTEN: I would not leave the ground of philosophy yet, but I would reply through it in its concrete sense: paradoxically, our mission in this council is to impose formal rules in order to select exactly the ones who, by means of the grace/gratuitousness of their spirit, can overcome the formal. This is the logical conclusion of everything I have previously mentioned. It is an incredibly hard mission. Sometimes we succeed, other times we do not succeed, since obeying rules is always aligned to miming them at least formally. Let me give you an example: let us admit that the mediocre are the ones who do not do research because they are curious or as they cannot let their ideas sleep, but because they are the ones whose purpose is to calculate the numbers of his ISI (Thomson and Reuters) articles, the ones for whom the culture of formal rules covers and hides the absolute vacuum of their own spiritual project. Recently a colleague of mine told me (proving the force of what we call “langue de bois”) that she “had been working on an ISI article”, as if this were a quality of the article, and not a classification of the journal, which is subsequent and independent of the act of creation or the act of research. Moreover, she added that she had been told that it was prudent to quote only authors who signed articles of a similar quality, in order to be quoted in turn. This is unbelievable!

ARLEEN IONESCU: *I also remember the attacks that were launched against you, members of CNCS, in the public meetings you had in 2011 and 2012. The tension in the two meetings in Bucharest I participated in was quite unbearable. Different editors considered that the tradition they had established over the years was sufficient proof of their quality and expected to be ranked higher than anyone else just because they had been at it for umpteen years. Do you think that this anger, when analysed, shows how*

unprepared we are in Romania to respond constructively to criticism in any form? And if so, do you think that this is what often prevents us from making progress in research in the Humanities in our country?

ALEXANDER BAUMGARTEN: Let us jump over the anecdotal. You are right, and the above-mentioned criterion does work: our editorial world will progress only through the help of the ones who are willing to do something gratuitous for the philosophical and literary culture, and not on the basis of the help of the ones who edit only to tick off an item on a list of publications.

ARLEEN IONESCU: *I think, starting in 2011 as well, research projects were blindly assessed mainly by foreign assessors via CNCS. I myself could see the whole process as an insider, since the project I proposed last year was evaluated by three different assessors, and I then had the possibility to respond to their criticism in writing. Taking my responses into account, they reached their conclusions on my proposal and assigned their final scores for each component of the project. I think I learned a lot from these evaluations and I am very grateful to the blind reviewers who pointed out my errors; I think these evaluations are very beneficial to researchers. From the end of 2012, many people started to complain that we do not need foreign assessors to evaluate our work. The famous (post)communist statement, “noi nu ne vindem țara” (we do not sell our country) was brought back to the fore. Our so-called position of superiority (we know best how to conduct research here) will be extremely detrimental to our researchers, as we do need to be in touch with our colleagues abroad and to see what is happening outside our borders. Do you think that such gestures only draw us back towards mediocrity?*

ALEXANDER BAUMGARTEN: These measures seemed revolutionary to everybody, yet they are normal and routine enough. Only the ones who refused to be assessed correctly criticised them. What can be more natural than giving the possibility to some projects to be judged rigorously by people who are really competent in assessing them? After all, it is not necessarily about us, a small group of relatively young people who succeeded in applying these mechanisms in Romania, but about a philosophy of history that pushes us towards them. This is why I am fairly serene, as the European man overcame the ethnocentric hysteria of the last two centuries of modernity and he comes back to what he used to know already in Late Antiquity and what the Middle Ages taught him so many times: that the universal is the place of Truth, where there are neither borders, nor peculiarities.

ARLEEN IONESCU (to Daniel Funeriu and Dragoş Ciuparu): *We all lament situations where mediocrity seems to be indulged and abetted almost as a policy initiative. But would you envisage any situation where mediocrity could actually be a deliberate and ‘positive’ policy objective?*

DANIEL FUNERIU: No, not if one wants positive things to happen to the people that (s)he governs. If one wants to precipitate the self-collapse of a system, yes. In a mind experiment: if the policy of the Allied Forces were to interfere with the Nazis’ human

resources policy so that mediocre people could lead the Nazi army, then they would have been right in promoting mediocrity. But such kinds of scenarios are far-fetched.

DRAGOȘ CIUPARU: I have been accused of being arrogant while being in charge of ANCS because we imposed too drastic conditions for project managers when applying for research grants. I strongly believe that mediocrity should not be indulged. I do not see why we should put on the same podium people who are highly competitive internationally and people who cannot even qualify to compete in a local contest. I believe that in such times of crisis, with such reduced budgets for research, we would harm our society if we considered funding the research of the one(s) who cannot bring progress. This is why ANCS and CNCS refused access to funding for “mediocre people” and to “buy” the quietness of everyone. Social equity is not a criterion where funds allocated to scientific research are concerned. We cannot lie to us and to the European Commission and claim that we invest in scientific research, while in fact we think of a misguided principle of equity, in this context, to pay people who cannot perform at the level which is required worldwide in scientific research.

ARLEEN IONESCU (to Daniel Funeriu): *In your opinion and experience, do the mediocre know themselves to be so? If they don't, when is it and when is it not acceptable to puncture their self-image?*

DANIEL FUNERIU: Well, according to ‘my’ definition this is exactly where the point lies. Some do, some don't. The former are more dangerous, because they usually add aggressiveness to their behaviour and actions. Let me give you an example: a poor researcher in chemistry will be a mediocre scientist, but may be a good technical assistant. Mediocrity, as I understand it, is one's behaviour and expectation above one's real capabilities. I wouldn't let a mediocre chemist fiddle around with dangerous chemicals.

ARLEEN IONESCU: *So, in relation to that: has any good ever come out of mediocrity, and must we be brave and ruthless with it? And who would ‘we’ be, these self-appointed non-mediocre people who would militate for ‘standards’, ‘quality’, ‘excellence’, ‘distinction’?*

DANIEL FUNERIU: One can best visualize these issues when one thinks of an orchestra. A mediocre violinist who plays out of tune would spoil the work of the whole ensemble. And it is easy for any audience to pick him out from the others. There are fields in which mediocrity is less evident; in these cases, it is obvious to insiders. To my knowledge, no better social positioning tool than judgment by peers has ever been invented. So, ‘we’ can be either with an ‘enlightened dictator’ or with the judgement of peers, who themselves are stratified. Since the ‘enlightened dictator’ model is out of the question, we remain with ‘judgment by the peers’.

ARLEEN IONESCU (to Dragoș Ciuparu): *Do you go along with the idea that good things could come out of mediocrity?*

DRAGOȘ CIUPARU: I am afraid I can't give a positive answer to your question. Standards must be given by the ones who, first of all, evaluated themselves rigorously

and correctly. If somebody is not prepared to see reality as it really is (repetition intended), including his/ her own image in the mirror, he/she refuses to admit the truth. These people are immediately “engulfed” by mediocrity.

ARLEEN IONESCU (to Petre T. Frangopol): *In your book **Mediocritate și excelență**, Professor Frangopol, you felt it was your moral duty to warn academics and decision makers in general that the education system in Romania is steadily declining towards mediocrity.*

PETRE T. FRANGOPOL: In the fifteenth century, the Dutch humanist Erasmus asserted that “The future of a nation is decided by the way in which it educates its youth”. Twenty-first century Romania, as we perceive it today, was prepared in the second half of the nineteenth century. At that time, Romanian institutions, which had a deeply feudal structure in the past, were modernised rapidly. This development was mainly due to the money obtained from exporting cereals from the aristocratic bourgeoisie’s lands, money that contributed to the development of education, of all types of schools. The effort was immense. In a short interval, between 1859 and 1918 and in spite of social inequalities (people used to live in huts!), differences that put us at the periphery of Europe were blurred. Between the two world wars, Romania had one of the best educational systems in Europe from the point of view of its structure, of its results, and especially, of its efficiency. The founders of education in modern Romania, Spiru Haret and Constantin Angelescu, started from scratch and had no financial support. They did not hesitate to claim that the way school looks like today, so will it be like tomorrow. They did their duty by their country.

Romanian education started going downhill with the Communist reform of 1948, when the main target became forming the new man, Homo Sovieticus, a rate of success of 100%, leading to attenuating elitism by demolishing any form of exigency. In this way, promoting non-values represented the main principle of the Communist doctrine, putting into force the total freedom of the *nomenklatura* action, which unfortunately still operates in 2013 as well according to the principle — “in new times, the same us!”¹¹

After 1990, instead of establishing Romania’s objectives and directions in an international context, of anticipating the tensions it had to face, and last but not least, instead of adapting Romanian Universities to the progress of the sciences, governments, with no exception, had a single interest, that of setting up private universities, the so-called “diploma factories” which increased the number of students from about 100000 to over 800000, with a disastrous decrease in the quality of academics whose performances are very far from the ones of their colleagues abroad or the Romanian academics between the two world wars.

ARLEEN IONESCU (to Vladimir Tismăneanu, Dragoș Ciuparu and Daniel Funeriu): *With your permission, let us think of the topic of Mediocrity and the University. In his book **For the University: Democracy and the Future of the Institution**, Thomas Docherty discerns a “steadily generated encouragement of a culture of mistrust”*

¹¹ An old saying reminiscent of the Ceaușist *nomenklatura*, in Romanian: “la vremuri noi, tot noi!” (there is a play on words: *noi* (adjective meaning “new”), and *noi* (first-person plural pronoun “we”), which unfortunately loses its funny allusion when translated into English.

building around universities and their activities that generate scientists who are regarded as “eccentric boffins divorced from reality” or arts people and humanities intellectuals who dangerously plot against ordinary lives.¹² Do you think we can speak about the same anti-intellectual routine setting in against academics in Romania? Is it possible that the anti-intellectualism comes from within?

VLADIMIR TISMĂNEANU: A great American art critic wrote about the revenge of the philistines. Mediocrity is the existential code of the philistines. They close ranks easily and have a remarkable sense for detecting and resenting the nimbus of excellence. Intellectuals are by definition trouble-makers, so there is no surprise that they become the target for populist attacks. I am astonished, however, when I see intellectuals stigmatizing their colleagues only because they cannot attain the same level of recognition. How else can I explain the vicious intensity of the efforts to deny Mircea Cărtărescu’s immense values as a poet and novelist? Or the obsessive quotations, completely disfigured through de-contextualization, from Horia Roman Patapievici’s early political writings? Mediocrity thrives on pamphlets, innuendo, and slander.

DANIEL FUNERIU: In the good Balkan tradition, things are a bit more complicated and refined than in Anglo-Saxon culture. In Romania we highly praise “the academic elite”, the “members of the Romanian Academy” and so on, trying to raise the level of respect and trust in those institutions. At the same time, access to high-level positions of academic life is made according to criteria that are favourable to the mediocrity and unfavourable to the elite. As a result, there is a great danger that for ordinary honest people, mediocrity can be perceived as excellence.

DRAGOȘ CIUPARU: Yes, I do agree that the same intellectual routine is set against academics in Romania; this is a rather mercantile interpretation in which people consider that the goal of research is only economic progress. It is true, and I previously mentioned in my article “Power from the People”, that “the higher education and research system (HE&R) is now, more than ever, the true frontal cortex of any economy, and therefore the only source of sustainable competitiveness in the information age.”¹³ Decision makers do not realize that not only the economic impact of research matters, but also the social one, like for instance relations between people, the way in which different strata of the society interact with one another. Globally, the population is decreasing dramatically—in the foreseeable future we will no longer have so many children in schools as we used to have in the past, and we will need to offer a solution to teachers who will become redundant; one has to be innovative precisely in this area of the social sciences. I think anti-intellectual routines setting in against excellence are rooted in the huge present difference between the various social classes. Intellectuals feel like researching continuously, looking for answers continuously, but in this way they become secluded and others cannot comprehend their message; this is when intellectuals are regarded as a “danger”.

¹² See Thomas Docherty, *For the University. Democracy and the Future of the Institution* (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011), 1.

¹³ Dragoș Ciuparu, “Power from the People,” *Public Service Review: European Union* 23 (2011): 502.

Late

ARLEEN IONESCU (to Petre T. Frangopol): *Is this our present, then, in which we live to facilitate and reward mediocrity? Any thoughts about what our future will look like?*

PETRE T. FRANGOPOL: The Presidential Commission for the analysis and the elaboration of policies in the field of research and education (which I am part of), which elaborated the Report Romania of Education, Romania of Research, emphasized the fact that the current educational system in Romania endangers the competitiveness and prosperity of the country. This system has four major shortcomings: it is inefficient, irrelevant, and inequitable, as well as of poor quality. In my books I amply detailed these aspects. At the time I was writing it, I sincerely hoped that decision makers would take my advice into account. Unfortunately I was wrong. Today, in 2013, we witness a sort of paralysis (the same low budget for education, very low salaries, I underline this, very low salaries for teachers). Innumerable negative examples can be added to my list: the lack of transparency of decisions and the lack of communication that characterized all governments, with no exception.

Due to the previously mentioned historical causes, in 2013 we can see that mediocrity is promoted in the name of egalitarian democratic principles which are actually prejudicial to our system of education: they can only cause economic and social regress; they will lead to fundamental shortcomings in educating the common citizen, “trained” not to understand basic notions of economic and social progress because of the poverty in which he is consciously forced to live by a mediocre, corrupted political class that condemns Romania to chronic retardation in almost all sectors of social life.

ARLEEN IONESCU (to Dragoş Ciuparu): *What were your own proposals in the Presidential Commission for the analysis and the elaboration of policies in the field of research and education?*

DRAGOŞ CIUPARU: In my view, we have only one solution. We should start from scratch, with trainers who teach at all levels. Our proposal was that we should not allow in the educational system graduates and postgraduates who have scored less than 7.00 (out of 10.00) in their exams, people who do not have pedagogic skills (those must be tested very thoroughly). We cannot allow incompetent teachers into the system. This is where we need to start from: our prerequisite has to be making sure that the average is raised at least to a satisfactory level that can allow the pupil/ student to achieve his potential. Good students ought to be sufficiently prepared to be able to “elude by dexterity” later on. At that juncture, one needs to provide opportunities to the ones who are really good to improve their performance, delegating to them supplementary tasks. In other words, the educational system must be reconsidered radically from the point of view of human resources. Only when human resources are satisfactory, can one propose improvement in curricula or in teaching methods. A very good teaching method is, for instance, to form small groups of pupils/ students according to their affinities and performances; in each discipline, they should be placed within the group they belong to, in such a way that the very good ones are not bored and the average should be able both to approach the subject and improve their performance. There should be a willingness to enhance one’s performance, irrespective of the level the student has when he embarks

on solving a task. Minimum competition is compulsory, both motivationally and psychologically, as it stimulates progress.

ARLEEN IONESCU: *Do you think that the “new” ideology of our century is to reward mediocrity?*

DRAGOȘ CIUPARU: Yes, I would certainly agree with you; yet this ideology cannot be considered a strategy that will bring about progress. It is not a motivating solution. Under such circumstances, why would a good researcher be motivated to obtain even better results if he saw that his project obtained financing as another that brings no results in research? Which can be the driving force that would motivate somebody to be competitive? We need to concentrate our resources on highly competitive people. In this case, the mediocre may realize that only by improving their performance can they aspire to participate in a research project. Rewarding mediocrity can have only a detrimental effect on our society, no matter what kind of result we have in mind: psychological, economic, etc.

ARLEEN IONESCU (to Daniel Funeriu): *In his ‘The Unseen Academy’ (published in **Times Higher Education**, 10 Nov. 2011), Docherty mentions Sir Peter Scott pointing out that at least twenty five universities in the UK claim to be in the ‘top ten of UK universities’. The only conclusion is that they lacked a mathematics or logic department. This can be a kind of desperate move towards a putative excellence that actually serves the mediocre. By following similar self-advertising tracks, through appeals to their own tradition and the rhetoric of mission statements and excellence variously defined, are Romanian universities participating in the move toward excellence or mediocrity?*

DANIEL FUNERIU: Clearly towards mediocrity. In an orchestra, if a violinist plays badly, anyone can spot the culprit. But if they all play well, it is very difficult for the uninitiated to distinguish the best of the violinists. Students usually choose the path against which they need to oppose the least resistance. Therefore, they may tend to go wherever it is easier to get a diploma.

ARLEEN IONESCU (to Daniel Funeriu): *In her humorous account on mediocrity, **You Take the High Road and I’ll Take the Bus. Celebrating Mediocrity in a World that Tries too Hard**, Carrie Cox presents the results of a conclusive study conducted by the international scientific journal **Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin**, according to which “early achievers (those who throw themselves into work from the git-go and achieve relative degrees of success) tend to have shorter life spans than people who earn success simply by hanging around long enough”.¹⁴ At a personal level, are we right or wrong to be driven toward excellence? And is the strength of mediocrity its own persistence and endurance? Is it correct to say that it wears other structures down but not itself, and is there anything to admire there?*

¹⁴ Carrie Cox, *You Take the High Road and I’ll Take the Bus. Celebrating Mediocrity in a World that Tries too Hard* (Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin, 2005), 79.

DANIEL FUNERIU: In my previous answer I said similar things. Yes, persistence and endurance are characteristics of mediocrity. Indeed, this is to be “admired”, but I wish one day one could admire the same in excellence.

ARLEEN IONESCU (to Petre T. Frangopol and Dragoş Ciuparu): *If you allow me to criticize your book, Professor Frangopol, I would express my concern about the fact that somehow the Humanities are constantly omitted or given very little importance in this fight against mediocrity that you somehow launched a few years back. It is true that somehow the European (even most international) scientific committees relegate Humanities to the end, considering them unimportant for the future of our society. Don't you think that such an attitude encourages mediocrity even more? Don't you think that culture is a priority, on the same level as progress in science?*

PETRE T. FRANGOPOL: I would like to underline three shocking true statements on the numerous education reforms started in 1998 that led to the “mediocritisation” of the Romanian school: 1. egalitarian education (which I previously mentioned); 2. the formal university reform (for instance University of Iaşi, the oldest Romanian university, University of Bucharest or University of Cluj-Napoca are put on the same level as a College that was set up in a small town; in this sense there are precise UNESCO regulations concerning the setting up of a university, regulations which were not observed in Romania); and 3. after 1989, humanistic and social sciences were massively introduced. Setting up lots of faculties and sections, both in the state and private sector, with disciplines like sociology, ethnology, psychology, pedagogy or, the so-called political studies, meant postponing the entrance on the labour market of young people qualified in sciences. Education for the industrial and post-industrial society is based on research generated by exact sciences, hence the emphasis on physics, chemistry, mathematics and computer science.

Both arts and sciences are facets of the creative human mind, yet if art is the supreme one, involving not only superior intelligence, but also many years of rigorous education, science can be deciphered only by sustained work and logical thinking.

The education of young people in Western Europe, the United States or Japan is carefully planned and controlled in such a way that they can become specialists in the development of science and technology, because they represent both the present and the future of society. Thus, the vital role of science was recognized and in this way contemporary civilisation was built and prosperity and nation wealth promoted.

Social and human sciences do not directly lead to the progress of economy. Yet we all know that without a complete humanistic education, we cannot train a real engineer or a man of science capable of creating material and spiritual values.

In this sense, in 2011, in Great Britain, The Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC) recommended tightening the relations between arts, sciences, social and human sciences and technology, emphasizing the importance of these relations, and advising the government to work harder to mitigate the archaic division between the arts and the sciences.

In his well-known book *Post-Capitalist Society*, the doyen of American management studies, Peter F. Drucker, asserted that “the basic economy resource [...] is no longer capital, nor natural resources (‘the economist’s “lands”’), “nor labour”. It is

and will be knowledge.”¹⁵ Drucker claimed that “Western foundations” were science, tools and technology, production, economics, money, finance and banking.¹⁶

DRAGOȘ CIUPARU: In my opinion, downplaying the Humanities is a big mistake. People who have a certain level of education need culture. You can see them in bookshops, in theatre halls, at the opera. This is again connected to what I previously said about average attainments in our contemporary society. At the time I was in charge of ANCS, there were no discriminatory policies against the Humanities. There were differences in budgets between projects on science and projects on the Humanities, as more equipment and materials were needed for sciences, but otherwise we did not prioritise a certain field; the rate of success for both projects in science and in Humanities was the same.

ARLEEN IONESCU (to Vladimir Tismăneanu): *Let us consider the specific example of Romanian educational contexts, of mediocrity rewarded. I refer to the practice of plagiarism (a Romanian curse, it could be said, though as we have learnt recently it has blighted German or Hungarian education at the highest levels, even if we should not take refuge in the Italian saying, tutto il mondo è paese, or delude ourselves about the difference between the exception and the institutional). Nobody has ever attempted to write a history of Romanian plagiarism, but we can easily see that the roots of this practice in this country are much deeper than one would think. In communism, to plagiarize was a national sport: on the one hand, people copied the language of party documents (the so-called ‘langue de bois’ in French), on the other hand, political activists, security people, policemen with a degree in law, informers, workers and peasants suddenly converted into ‘intellectuals’ passed their exams by copying in all subjects. Nowadays we teach our students to be honest; yet if we look at the works of some of our former teachers, of some of our colleagues, reputed professors from top Romanian universities, we can see that the practice of copy-paste was a method of research as old as the hills and even worse, we can see that plagiarism is not considered a form of stealing. The plagiarized do not feel like pressing charges against the plagiarist. What do you think can be done about this?*

VLADIMIR TISMĂNEANU: First and foremost, the public conversation about authentic versus spurious values needs to continue, regardless of political meteorology. Second, we need to take these issues seriously. Students should become aware that fraud never pays off in the long run. Third, plagiarists, impostors, intellectual charlatans should be invariably shamed. An ironic situation combines these days the anti-intellectual prejudices with the aspiration of being recognized as a bona fide member of the intellectual community. After all, why did Victor Ponta need a PhD degree? Precisely because he wants to convince others, but also himself, that he is worth something in the field of human knowledge. It is a matter of self-esteem, and this explains why he so stubbornly refused to admit his fraud.

ARLEEN IONESCU (to Daniel Funeriu): *In the same context, I would address the same question to you, yet in more practical terms: should those things be said, and how are they to be said?*

¹⁵ Peter F. Drucker, *Post-Capitalist Society* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 7.

¹⁶ See Drucker, *Post-Capitalist Society*, 194.

DANIEL FUNERIU: A teacher, a university, a school all interfere with the value system of a nation. Therefore, the responsibility of a teacher is far beyond the responsibility of an accountant. All possible measures, no matter how strong and radical, must be taken against such behaviour.

ARLEEN IONESCU (to Dragoş Ciuparu): *Do you think that Romanian academics are ready to change things in order to give excellence a chance?*

DRAGOŞ CIUPARU: I am not too sure about that. I need to add that at this moment in Romanian universities we expect from our students a level at least commensurate with the one high-school graduates used to have in the 90s. Meanwhile the level of our students has fallen dramatically. We continue to assume that the training of students who are admitted to the first year of university is the same as fifteen years ago. In this way we end up building without having any foundations: we teach our students without taking into account their vacuum of skills, of knowledge, etc. There is no mechanism to relate high school and university. In this way students learn things by heart and they accuse their new teachers of elitism.

ARLEEN IONESCU (to Dragoş Ciuparu): *Whose fault is it?*

DRAGOŞ CIUPARU: It is everybody's. Academics do not understand that they should start building after checking that their students are capable of absorbing knowledge and acquiring skills. High-school teachers do not realize that their pupils need to have general competences which reflect the European baccalaureate framework, and pupils (students) do not realize that they need to learn in order to stand a chance in today's world. Nothing can be done unless each of these parties is willing to change something.

Before It Is Too Late

In 2013, our educational system is still invaded by ghostly returns of mediocrity of all sorts. Mediocrity is perpetually resistant, irrespective of the reforms that were made in the last years in Romanian education. As one of our contributors has stated in this issue, in recent years confusion and poor direction has plagued both leftist and rightist doctrines, which has not helped standards. Different political alliances (otherwise theoretically incompatible) were forged with one unabashed purpose: power, without thinking of the consequences on fields which normally should not be so vulnerable to political change. The easiest preys in such political games proved to be education, research and health. Sound decision-making by perceptive and competent people was rejected on the grounds of their real or assumed political affiliations, without regard to their relative qualities, qualifications or professional integrity. Yet in 2013, we might say that it is time to call the bluff of those who are not adept. My view is that we can promote and preserve excellence only by putting a stop to the countenancing of the petty politicising of education and by encouraging autonomous and critical thought — in spite of how risky and quixotic that effort might appear.

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Apologia de mediocritate

Prezentul studiu de caz, care, în mod convențional, depășește granițele unui articol academic, a fost construit într-o formă, amintind de *Dialogurile* lui Platon. Diverși profesori universitari sau persoane care au avut rol decizional în ceea ce privește învățământul superior exprimă atât opinii personale, cât și opinii profesionale despre starea mediocrității în secolul XXI, axându-se în ultima parte pe situația particulară a sistemului educațional românesc.