
From *Avant-Guarde* to Rhinoceroses: What Went Wrong with the Interwar Younger Generation?

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Bejan, Cristina, 2019. *Intellectuals and Fascism in Interwar Romania*.
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Intellectuals and Fascism in Interwar Romania. *The Criterion Association* is a significant book that addresses a two-fold audience. First of all, for Romanian studies, this first-rate study of the failure of the pivotal interwar Romanian intellectual circle, the Criterion Association, goes a long way to explaining what happened to Romania's "Generation of '27," which had promised a brighter future yet in the end greatly contributed to their country's turn to authoritarianism and fascism. Secondly, Cristina Bejan's work is of broader importance as an illustrative case study of what went wrong with the interwar European younger generation. It provides, thereby, another optic on how the Era of Tyrannies was able to spread to its evil aegis so rapidly and tragically across the continent despite many well-intentioned young people. The Criterion project, therefore, merits our attention because it appeared at what came to be seen as a turning point in Romanian culture and civilization, indeed, a critical juncture for many if not all European cultures. As the author puts it, the start of the 1930s "was the last moment before everything collapsed" (p. 23).

Criterion's leaders sought through dialogue and analysis to chart a new path and to overcome an already evident polarization creeping across Romania and Europe. They based this hope partly on their mutual sources of inspiration and partly on the friendships they had developed with diverse colleagues and compatriots. Criterion also was important because of the intellectual firepower of its key members, which subsequently manifested itself in a variety of ways.

Originally written as an Oxford D Phil, Bejan's study is the first in English to describe in detail the abortive attempt by the Criterion group to spearhead the post-World War I spiritual regeneration of the greatly-expanded Greater Romania by elevating Romanian culture from chronic inferiority and servitude to European exemplars to universal importance through open dialogue in a public forum. The study does so in nine clearly organized, thoroughly researched chapters based on a growing Romanian and Western literature as well as unpublished materials and archives. Yet it makes for fascinating reading even for those not particularly interested either in Romanian studies or in the how and why Europe was drawn into the totalitarian maelstrom.

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Criterion group leaders were the paladins of the Romanian Generation of '27, which was composed roughly of those born between 1905 and 1911. They were too young to have participated in the Great War and conceptualized themselves as the successors to the Generation of Sacrifice that had brought Romania from a minor Balkan principality to a mid-sized, somewhat liberal, constitutional European state by 1918. Their self-assumed cultural project was outlined in 1927 by Mircea Eliade's detailed "Spiritual Itinerary," published in the rightist newspaper *Cuvântul*. *Cuvântul* was owned by Nae Ionescu, university philosophy professor and the sinister teacher-mentor-confidant of the new generation. Ionescu's charismatic hold over them owed in part to his unique conversational and dynamic Socratic style, which contrasted with the usual stiff, dull, pedantic, rote manner of most Romanian professors, and in part to the undefinable, hypnotic spell his Mephisto-like personality cast over them. Bejan in fact begins her study with a lengthy treatment of "the Master," whose influence was integral to the Criterion project (25-31). As Eugène Ionesco (no relation) acidly remarked in 1945, "If there had not been Nae Ionescu ... we would have had today, a generation of valuable leaders, between 35-40 years old. Because of him, all became fascists. He [Nae] created a stupid, horrendous and reactionary Romania" (253-54).

Eliade's extensive (nearly 100 pages in later book form) manifesto is carefully summarized by Bejan (38 *ff.*). It called for the replacement of "the specialization of science" and dry-as-dust scholarship with a new, authentic, activist Romanian synthesis based on existential "knowledge," organic culture, passionate engagement and religious experience. (Eliade's religious views—which Bejan sees as lacking "any moral standard" (46)—were remarkably similar to what was called in the 1960s by Robert Bellah "Civil Religion," that is, an instrumental view of religion which ignored questions of ethics, historicity and belief as such.) In the end, they predicted that Romanian culture would throw off its inferiority complex and provincialism and assume its rightful place in universal culture.

The *dramatis personae* of this quest included Mircea Eliade, E.M. Cioran, Eugène Ionesco—all three of whom later became world-renowned intellectuals in the U.S. and France—Mihail Sebastian, Mircea Vulcănescu, Constantin Noica and, the principal hero of the story, Petru Comarnescu. All of them were influenced in one way or another by such trendy figures as Henri Bergson, Paul Valéry, André Gide, Sigmund Freud and Oswald Spengler. Bejan provides excellent and accurate snapshots of the development, ideas and commitment of each of her primary actors. Mention should be made of the fact that Criterion also included a greater than usual participation by women, most importantly the actress Marietta Sadova and the dancer Floria Capsali, who was the Administrator General of Criterion and who,

with her husband, the artist Mac Constantinescu, often hosted informal meetings and social gatherings of the group.

The major leaders of Criterion were educated abroad, from India to Germany and France, and to the U.S. (48 ff.). All of them (ironically, given their commitment to autochthonous and national ideas) were influenced by these international experiences. Following his immersion in eastern culture in India, Eliade saw himself and Romania as a bridge between the East and West. Cioran was later to come back from a Humboldt scholarship in Berlin as an advocate of violent political activism and an admirer of Hitler's "cult of the irrational. The exultation of pure vitality, the virile expression of strength, without any ... restraint or control." Comarnescu, who was primarily responsible for animating Criterion, was newly returned from completing a Ph.D. in philosophy at the University of Southern California and was imbued with an American spirit of optimism—which he contrasted to Romania's habitual pessimism—and professed having felt like a Gulliver in a land of giants.

Comarnescu would be the secretary-general of the group and its *spiritus rector*, and his archives and published journal provide extensive detail on the functioning of the group. Unfortunately, among the leaders, Comarnescu, and perhaps Sebastian, were the only true believers in the efficacy of dialogue, free speech, public decency and democracy. Eventually, the fracture lines became too great to ignore.

The idea of such discussion groups and societies was not new in Romania, ranging from the Junimea group in the 19th century to groups associated with literary reviews (such as G. Ibrăileanu and Constantin Stere's *Viața Românească* and Eugen Lovinescu's *Sburătorul*) (13 ff.). Criterion emerged in 1932 on the heels of the Forum Group, which had held a lecture series in 1932.

Criterion made its public appearance in 1932. Bejan walks us through Criterion's programs, their delivery and the public reaction (Ch. 3, 4, 5). Unfortunately, in a polarized environment such as that of Romania in 1932-1934, attempts at even-handedness were not welcomed. Criterion was accused of being communist, hostile to the contemporary Romanian regime and religion, or of being fascist. Whatever topics were addressed were seen as apologies for such topics. Meetings were often disrupted by student mobs and police-inspired agitators.

Criterion itself, which had begun with such elevated hopes, plans and unity, barely managed to maintain this through the first year. The proximate causes of the disintegration of Criterion were four-fold: burn out/disillusionment, the polarization of Romanian life including among the members of Criterion, the rapid deterioration of Old Europe and the *Credința* scandal. Even after the end of the first cycle, 1932-1933, the novelty of Criterion had worn off with Eliade and Ionesco expressing disenchantment with the project. Eliade wrote in June 1933, "I confess that I am tired

of seeing everybody doing the same thing ... I can't tell you how thirsty I am for something else, something completely different from what we are doing right now" (178). Ionesco was even more brutal. In the fall of 1933, he told an interviewer, "The young generation, precisely like all the young generations that have preceded it, is conceited and narcissistic." Criterion was more or less an "association of jolly good fellows, congenial types, dandies, boozers; they drink beer at the Corso with the air of college students who've run off from school I believe [Criterion] is a society too ambitious for its powers" whose main problem was that it had "no genuine personalities, no individuals of real talent" (178-79).

Secondly, by 1933 the fault lines within Criterion were beginning to appear. Comarnescu was writing in his journal, "Our generation is separating itself into two polar opposite directions and a bitter struggle. I don't want to become politically active, and will remain in my intellectual position, devoting myself to culture. Whether or not I will succeed remains to be seen" (138). Bejan stresses that "the lack of unity within the association became more apparent as political differences and personal life issues ... interfered. By the end of the year Comarnescu lamented, "Of my friends, I no longer see anyone."

This was the beginning of what Benda termed "the Treason of the Intellectuals," which decimated the ranks of scholars committed to objectivity, truth and integrity. In the Romanian case, this was hastened by a culture of intellectual corruption and power seeking. This was definitely a direct result of the Generation of '27's predisposition to action over thought, to *elan vital* and to experience over science, and to emotional passion over rational inquiry. Ionesco gloomily wrote in 1945: "The 'Criterion' Generation ... [has now] disintegrated, perished. Not one of us is yet forty years old—and we are finished the whole 'Criterion' generation is destroyed The only one who remains is Petru Comarnescu, but he was only the impresario, the organizer of 'Criterion,' 'the animator'; he no longer has anyone to animate or organize" (253-54). Later, in his famous play *The Rhinoceros* (1959), Ionesco was to describe this as the process of what he called "rhinocerization" (*cf.* pp. 211 *ff.*)

Thirdly, internal development was going downhill in Romania. Early in the year, the railroad strikes paralyzed industrial life and led to a state of emergency, proclamation of martial law and censorship. Criterion's sessions at the Royal Foundation were suspended. These were moved to another venue, but any impartial public discussions were seen as pro-communist and anti-governmental. Later in 1933, the prime minister was assassinated by members of the extreme rightist Legionary movement, adding a fascist threat on the right to go with the communist threat on the left. Among those arrested following the assassination were Nae Ionescu and Criterionists Mihail Polihroniade and Alexandru Christian Tell. The *Balkanistica* 35 (2022)

outcome of 1933 was rapid polarization, a dramatically shrinking political middle and escalating authoritarianism on the part of the King. None of this boded well for the Criterion project.

Nevertheless, Criterion continued until 1935, with symposia, musical programming and, possibly most importantly of all, publishing an eponymous journal, *Criterion*. Comarnescu had been appointed director of conferences at the Royal Foundations, which was a significant boost to Criterion's programming and exposure. The symposia topics, again succinctly summarized by Bejan, reflected the growing sense that the world was in growing crisis and that war was imminent. The musical sessions were wildly popular, possibly because they were generally apolitical.

The journal, *Criterion*, that appeared in seven issues between October 1934 and February 1935, was a final attempt to preserve the group's visibility. Though the review explicitly claimed that it was not connected with the Criterion Association, this conceit was probably largely for legal purposes. The editors were all Criterionists, including Comarnescu, Eliade, Vulcănescu, Noica (all of whom appeared on the cover), Tell, H.H. Stahl and Ion Cantacuzino; as were all of the writers and contributors, and the journal and the Association shared the same values. It was clear that the public presence of the Association was at an end and that the journal was more or less its successor. Bejan thoroughly reviews the contents, which cover a wide variety of fascinating questions (a *précis* of the *problématique* of contemporary Romania and the world), but the journal was doomed to be short-lived. In his journal, Comarnescu described January 1935 shortly before it ceased publication, as one of the worst months of his life (149-76).

The fourth and pivotal event in the fall of Criterion was the *Credința* scandal of 1934-1935. According to Bejan, this scandal has been largely ignored in the literature and by its nature makes it difficult to sort out the wheat from the chaff. It involved Zaharia Stancu, a Criterionist communist, a sometime Criterionist Sandu Tudor and the scandal-mongering leftish Orthodox newspaper *Credința*, directed by Tudor and edited by Stancu. The *causus belli*? Charges by Stancu that Comarnescu was a homosexual, followed by Tudor charging in *Credința* that Criterion advocated homosexuality and other “invert” sexual behaviour.

The motivations of the *Credința* crowd need not detain us here, but suffice it to say that the success of Criterion quite clearly had provoked envy and jealousy from those who were or felt excluded from the inner circle. According to Bejan, “In this social network, envy of the intellect was linked to friendship envy” (204). The scandal became nastier and nastier for nearly a year with the result that Comarnescu was publicly disgraced, even though he won a libel suit against *Credința* and even though homosexuality was not even illegal in Romania until 1936. Comarnescu

subsequently refused any further public appearances, his public potential, Eliade wrote, being “from that time onward neutralized,” *Criterion's* public lecture and discussion series came to an end ... and *Credința's* circulation increased 1,000%.

It might be said that the fondness many *Criterionists* had for the homoerotic fantasies of André Gide, their interest in matters sexual in general, Mircea Eliade's voluminous near-pornographic fiction, and the efforts of *Criterion* to push the envelope in matters of public morality generally had come back to bite them. In the event, the scandal “was the final nail in the coffin of the legendary association” (179).

The book concludes with two fascinating chapters on what happened to her protagonists after 1935 and after 1945. It was not a pretty picture (211-71). Many of them became rhinoceroses between 1935 and 1941. Some were killed in 1939 by the government's blood purges of Legionaries in retaliation for the Guardist assassination of the Prime Minister (Mihail Polihroniade, Alexandru Christian Tell). Others were killed during the suppression of the 1941 Legionary revolt (Haig Acterian was arrested and sent to the Eastern Front, where he died). After 1945, some went into exile and gained international fame (Eliade, Ionesco, Cioran; Eliade and Cioran's fascism came to be widely known following the end of Communism in Romania, while Ionesco's “extreme individuality” appeared to make him immune to totalitarianism). Some went into the Romanian GULag from which some did not emerge (Vulcănescu, Noica, Marietta Sadova, Arșavir Acterian). Some became intellectual stalwarts of the Romania Peoples' Republic of Romania (Zaharia Stancu, Sadova) and some died in tragic accidents (Sebastian, Al. Vianu). After house arrest and later incarceration in the GULag, Noica eventually founded a kind of “dissidence through culture” school at Păltiniș that some consider a successor to *Criterion*, several of whom became notables in post-1989 Romania such as Gabriel Liiceanu, Andrei Pleșu, Mihai Șora and Andrei Cornea.

Comarnescu's fate was possibly among the most poignant: after the war he became a collaborator with the communist regime and a secret police informer. It is possible that the Securitate dangled homosexual exposure over his head, which is what Boia thinks and Bejan doubts. After 1945, Comarnescu was the translator (a frequent refuge of silenced intellectuals under the communists) of Eugene O'Neill and Bernard Shaw, and author of numerous highly-respected monographs on Romanian art (such as the Voroneți Monastery) and artists (including Grigorescu, Luchian, Pallady, Țuculescu and Brâncuși). At the same time, he was of immense academic assistance to young American scholars who came to Romania in the 1960s, even though he was of course obliged to inform on them. Boia published these files in 2014. However, one of the Americans concerned (who has read them) told me that Comarnescu's reports do not appear to have welshed on his American contacts.

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The final chapter discusses the legacy of Criterion. In Romania, it became a leading myth of Romania's lost golden age of democracy. This was an exaggeration, but certainly was "something special" for the Criterionists themselves. Eliade felt strongly that if the Criterionists had not written mostly in Romanian instead of a major cultural language, they would be seen as "the most important predecessor to French Existentialism" (271). The "romanticized memory" that Criterion has in Romanian consciousness today was another sign of their success in Bejan's estimation (272-73).

Bejan credits Criterion with raising numerous controversial or pressing subjects that many or most of the elite preferred to brush under the carpet. The reaction of the regime to them was, she feels, a measure of their effectiveness, but I think the regime was heavily given to overestimating and exaggerating the threats posed to them (for example, their heavy-handed dealings with Evangelical Christians, who comprised a minuscule fraction of a percent of the population and were mainly a force for improving morality among the lower classes). In the end, she points out that the "annihilation" of Criterion "also demonstrated the limits of free speech during this time" and the degree to which Romanian society was prepared to allow non-conformist views to be propagated or even discussed (273).

Bejan writes that "Criterion was also a failure in that rather than create a 'more integrated humanity' it only widened the gap between this elite intellectual circle and the greater Romanian public." In search of an explanation for all this, she asks "Why did some intellectuals succumb to fascism while others resisted?" Among other factors, "anti-liberalism, anti-Semitism, and anti-communism" are suggested. Ionesco's "rhinocerization" was another, that is, the Bendaesque "promise of power that [causes] people to give up their individuality and join the herd of rhinoceroses." Referencing the post-World War I world, Ionesco asserted that "there has never been such a will to power than in our era" (274).

In addition to this "'why,' Ionesco also provided a potential 'how,'" according to Bejan. In his play *Rhinoceros*, Ionesco "emphasizes the role of rationalization." We all are quite ready to rationalize our behavior or mis-behavior, writes Ionesco. "In fact, rhinoceroses have deliberately distorted, deliberately diverted the meaning of words ... which they have corrupted for propaganda purposes." In the final analysis, Bejan believes that a "totalitarian mindset" leads to "intellectual arrogance," which leads to rationalization and distortion of the past and present (274-75). This is what Thomas Sowell has called the arrogance of intellectuals in his *The Vision of the Anointed: Self-Congratulation as a Basis for Social Policy* (1996). Bejan's citation of one of the most cogent analysts of this era, Marta Petreu, is *apropos* here: "the fact that they were all sincere and well-meaning with good intentions paved the way to the Holocaust and the Gulag—and that is all" (275). It

was their “boundless confidence in their intellect, good intentions, pride, and self-delusion” that eventually brought the Criterionists down (276). Sincerity, in the end, is a completely inadequate basis for a moral code.

In the final analysis, the author argues successfully that “a number of factors led to the dissolution of Criterion” but the “fundamental one was the solidification of extremist political ideological stances ...” (4), whether populist, fascist or communist. Her refusal to demonize her cast of characters or to anachronistically polemicize with them nearly a century after the fact is commendable, though of course, they often convict themselves with their own words. And in our current cancel-culture, surely there is place for such objective analysis.

In general, this study elicits few criticisms. There is some degree of repetition between chapters, but that is perhaps unavoidable. The author is both critical and appreciative of the work of other scholars, naming names instead of leaving this to guess work by the reader (*cf.* 5 *ff.*). She is fair to her protagonists and her summaries of their ideas, and contributions are useful and straightforward. She rightfully credits Criterion for its “ambitious program” and “the courage that it took to pursue such a cultural project,” during what she calls “a unique moment in Romania's tumultuous interwar period” (23, 4). She is also upfront about the causes and circumstances that resulted in Criterion's “quite unanticipated premature rupture, disgrace and failure” (24).

One could quibble about the birth dates for the Criterion generation, which the author gives as 1905-1916. Realistically, this appears to have been selected to include Jeni Aterian, who is the only one born after 1911. She would have been barely sixteen when Criterion officially began and nineteen when Criterion dissolved. I disagree with her assessment that Criterion was a “roaring success,” especially if we are talking about mass appeal (24). The Romanian elite of the day, after all, was tiny, and cultural journalism reached a very small market segment indeed. That does not, obviously, undermine its significance.

It is to be hoped that this outstanding book will reach a large audience, given that its relevance goes far beyond Romanian studies into the study of what actually happened culturally and politically in Europe as the World Crisis—not just economically but politically, socially, morally, philosophically and spiritually—struck home. *Intellectuals and Fascism in Interwar Romania. The Criterion Association* provides a sombre case study of the whys and hows of the collapse of Old European culture and the ideological transformation and decline of both the coming generation of intellectuals and of public discourse. Lastly, Criterion was significant because of the apparent paradoxical nature of the fact that its initial but short-lived idealism and search for a way out of the conundrums posed by the World Crisis of 1929-1939 eventually resulted in an era of tyrannies, World War II, the *Balkanistica* 35 (2022)

Holocaust and the 1945-1991 era of the Cold War. Many of us wish fervently for “never again” about much of the 1930s and 1940s. Studies such as this might help.