

WEAPONIZING SEXUAL IDENTITIES: HOMOSEXUALITY AS PUBLIC SCANDAL IN INTERWAR ROMANIA

Andrei Dălălaşu*

Abstract: *The present paper intends to provide a preliminary analysis of the social status of the homosexual minority in interwar Romania, applying the theoretical framework of „symbolic violence” defined by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu on the case study represented by the „Credința” press scandal from 1934-1935. The scandal opposed director Sandu Tudor and the editorial staff of „Credința” newspaper on the one hand, and Petru Comarnescu, Al.Chr. Tell, Mircea Vulcănescu and Gabriel Negry (members of the Criterion Association), on the other hand. The novelty of this study consists in integrating the press scandal into the broader scheme of social and economic interactions between different agents from the social field, emphasising their competition for symbolic capital which would legitimise them in defining the nation. The study reached the preliminary conclusions that homosexuality was a cultural identity instrumentalised and then weaponised in order to gain public legitimacy and that attributing sexual meanings to a minority was produced by groups which arrogated themselves the monopoly of moral normativity.*

Keywords: „Credința”, Criterion, homosexuality, minority studies, press scandal, Sandu Tudor

Introduction

In the interwar period, homosexuality, although not legally criminalised until 1936, was considered a social stigma. Homosexuals rarely recognised their sexual orientation in public, considering that the dominant narrative portrayed homosexuality as dangerous to public morality. In this context, the sexual orientation of the homosexual minority could not go beyond the private space, keeping a low profile to remain discrete. The public order, regulated by institutions, the press, the police and other agents, coincided with the moral order that had to be defended to enhance the desired national homogeneity. Homosexuality was treated as a social, legal and political taboo; thus, the police placed gay groups under direct surveillance and acted as a normative institution. The press presented news about exposed homosexuals in order to attract the attention of readers and incite public condemnation, thereby gaining economic capital¹.

* PhD Student, „History, Civilisation, Culture” Doctoral School of Faculty of History and Philosophy of the Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca; e-mail: andrei.dalalau@ubbcluj.ro;  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5741-6432>

¹ Florin Buhuceanu, *Homoistorii: Ieșirea din invizibilitate*, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House, 2022, p. 45-46.

The protagonists of the homophobic defamation were, on one side, Orthodoxist journalist and poet Sandu Tudor (the pseudonym for Alexandru Teodorescu; he later became a monk at Antim Monastery under the name Agaton and after his release from prison in 1955 he stayed at Rarău Monastery under the religious name Hieroschemamonk Daniil) and writer Zaharia Stancu and the essayist and art critic Petru Comarnescu, philosopher Mircea Vulcănescu, Al.Ch. Tell and dancer Gabriel Negry on the other side. The contested cultural field between the two sides was the Criterion Association of Arts, Literature and Philosophy, also known as simply the Criterion Association or the Criterion Group. The Criterion was a cultural group of young intellectuals who held public conferences on different topics from October 13, 1932, to December 11, 1933. Petru Comarnescu was the head coordinator of Criterion, while Sandu Tudor and Zaharia Stancu had themselves been Criterionists and collaborators with key figures of the Young Generation².

The press scandal emerged in late 1934 and continued until June 1935 through slanderous articles published in the „Credința” newspaper, self-described as an „independent newspaper for the political and spiritual fight” [ziar independent de luptă politică și spirituală]. Even if the newspaper falls into the category of scandal publication, it is neither an official newspaper of the Orthodox Church nor a solely religious editorial. It was mainly a news publication with several religious touches on its articles³. In this regard, we argue that „Credința” was a right-wing scandal, Orthodoxist and conservative newspaper altogether due to the Christian topic of the articles, the recurrent Biblical references when addressing public issues and its inherent critical rhetoric towards people with opposing views.

While the central historiographical perspective on the disappearance of the Criterion Association supported the idea of ideological radicalisation, the „Credința” scandal only came to the attention of Romanian researchers as an instability-generating event based on the testimony of religious historian Mircea Eliade extracted from his memoirs⁴. Literary critic Zigu Ornea briefly mentioned this perspective⁵ and it was later developed into a coherent analysis from multiple sources by Cristina A. Bejan⁶. Bejan demonstrated that the Criterion dissolved due to both external and internal factors. Even if the political split of the Criterionists

² Cristina A. Bejan, *Intellectuals and Fascism in Interwar Romania: The Criterion Association*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, p. 180.

³ „Credința” had a section named *The Page of the Right Faith* [Pagina dreptei credințe] where Orthodox theology, religious public intellectuals or church-related problems were published and discussed.

⁴ Mircea Eliade, *Memorii*, vol. I, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House, 1991.

⁵ Zigu Ornea, *Anii treizeci: Extrema dreaptă românească*, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House, 2015.

⁶ Cristina A. Bejan, *Intellectuals and Fascism in Interwar Romania: The Criterion Association*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

created a hostile atmosphere which made open dialogue impossible, other members had already grown disenchanted with the leading group (such as Sandu Tudor, Petru Manoliu, Eugen Ionesco) and, after the „Credinta” scandal emerged, the association was about to implode⁷.

We aim to enrich the present historiography by analysing the interaction of cultural agents within the „cultural field” in their struggle to gain primacy in defining national specificity, namely „Romanianism”. This symbolic competition included the urge to define both the Romanian nation and its social corpus – where homosexuals did not find their place – and reflected the disposition of the intellectual to situate himself in the social field to conquer the symbolic privilege of defining and attributing the meaning of national specificity⁸. In this regard, the press was the emanation of intellectuals who represented themselves precisely by speaking simultaneously about nation and culture as moralising instances. Ethnocentrism, and its sexual normativity derivate, had activated a function of discrimination between the nation and the „strangers” as a potentially destructive „otherness”. The community defined itself by intensifying the sense of belonging through identity. As a result, to the extent that the national collectivity gained pre-eminence, the „otherness” was lowered below the human limit, as part of an „alien”, „barbaric” and „animal” community which was to be surgically removed from the main body of the nation.

Methodology-wise, the present approach capitalises on Pierre Bourdieu's „symbolic violence” concept regarding both the radicalism promoted by the press in order to gain a form of capital⁹ and the social construction of normative sexuality that defined and thus legitimised the persecution of homosexuality in the broader narrative of the nation-building process. The conceptual premises the argumentation builds upon are the „social construction of sexuality” and the „weaponisation of homosexuality”. Understanding the social *habitus* of the press editors and their target audience provides a comprehensive insight into how minority sexual identities (such as homosexuality and lesbianism) were instrumentalised and later weaponised in the social field of interwar Romania in order to gain political, economic and symbolic capital in the public sphere. The study case regarding the symbolic and cultural competition focuses on the infamous „Credința” press scandal from Bucharest in 1934 and 1935, which divided the cultural elite and deepened the split between the conservative and modernist cultural agents.

The first part of the article deals with the social and cultural augmentation of the interwar conservative archetype towards the imagined „homosexual” as the

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 178.

⁸ Marius Lazăr, *Paradoxuri ale modernizării: elemente pentru o sociologie a elitelor culturale românești*, Cluj-Napoca, Limes Publishing House, 2002, p. 253.

⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, Stanford California, Stanford University Press, 1995.

result of internalised social *habitus* and „naturalised” social constructions using Pierre Bourdieu’s theoretical framework. The second part consists of an in-depth analysis of the „Credința” campaign against the targeted „homosexuals” using the original articles published between late 1934 to mid-1935. The analysis aims to integrate the press scandal into the broader cultural context of interwar Romania, where sexual identities were directly linked with the nation-building process and the symbolic competition of defining „Romanianism” as ethnic and moral exceptionalism.

The issue of „homosexuality” as a public scandal reflects a multi-layered cultural and social understanding of the Romanian interwar period. Firstly, the accusation was inherently derogatory. Its sole purpose was to discredit certain persons based on their sexual orientation despite their noticeable public activity, such as ballet dancing for Negry and conferencing for Comarnescu. In this regard, sexual identity became a „weapon” in the interest of social agents (the „Credința” newspaper and editorial) to gain notoriety and social prestige among a conservative Orthodox audience. Secondly, the scandal was a mediatic confrontation and a political, cultural, economic and symbolic issue where prestige groups, bureaucrats, intellectuals, politicians and journalists intertwined. The personal defamation quickly spiralled out of control and became a public scandal that lasted for six months¹⁰, suggesting that defining an „enemy” based on an illegal sexual identity served the agent’s interest in gaining political and financial advantages on a shared social meaning of the stigma attached. Thirdly, the slanderous attack also reflects the social reality of the interwar press industry. As Bourdieu argues, after the democratisation of the Romanian politics¹¹ and the creation of Greater Romania, the press development was an index of an unprecedented expansion of the market for cultural goods, linked with the inflow of a young middle-class or low-class population from provinces to Bucharest. The newcomers, nourished in humanities, were deprived of the financial means and the social protection indispensable for taking advantage of their degrees¹². Consequently, this social category sought „protection” under the form of a prestigious public person¹³ and an influential institution¹⁴, thus entering an ambiguous process of supporting the ideological constraints of the agents that offered them the remuneration needed for survival¹⁵.

¹⁰ Cristina A. Bejan, *op.cit.*, p. 181.

¹¹ In Romania, the universal male vote was introduced in 1918 by King Ferdinand 1st after the end of the First World War. The first free elections of Greater Romania were held in November 1919.

¹² Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art ...*, p. 54-55.

¹³ Mentors such as Lucian Blaga, Nae Ionescu, Nichifor Crainic, Eugen Lovinescu, Ion Pillat and others formed intergenerational groups to spread and support their cultural orientation.

¹⁴ A gazette, newspaper, university, research centres, academia or private literary salon.

¹⁵ There were some paradoxical cases when a young aspirant’s identity differed from the political line of the newspaper he was contributing to, forcing him to push an agenda that directly contradicted his status, origins or social values. For an in-depth analysis of the case of Jewish writer

Constructing the homosexual

The „Credința” scandal repeatedly used concepts such as „normality”, „morality”, „natural order” and „common sense” when condemning homosexuality as a „miserable degradation” of public morality. What is „normality”, which contributes to its definition and why agents sought to monopolise its social meaning? Bourdieu argued that what appears, in history, as being eternal and (sexually) natural is merely the product of „labour of eternalisation” performed by interconnected institutions such as the family, the church, the state, the educational system, and also sport and journalism¹⁶. The division between sexes appears to be „in the order of things”, as people sometimes say to refer to what is normal, natural, to the point of being inevitable: it is present both – in the objectified state – in the whole social world, and – in the embodied state – „in the habitus of the agents, functioning as systems of schemes of perception, thought and action”¹⁷. As so, the social construction of the sexual organs symbolically „ratifies certain indisputable natural properties. [...] It thereby helps to transmute the arbitrary of the *social nomos* into a necessity of nature (*phusis*)”¹⁸. This logic of the symbolic consecration of objective processes, in particular, biological ones, which is at work in the whole mythical-ritual system, gives a quasi-objective basis to this system and hence to the belief, also reinforced by its unanimity, of which it is the object¹⁹.

The homophobic rhetoric of the press scandal also reflects a more profound social reality, that of men's inclination to „compartmentalise sexuality”, which is conceived as an aggressive and essentially „physical act of conquest oriented towards penetration and orgasm” due to their socially constructed understanding of intimacy as a form of domination, appropriation and „possession”²⁰. The fundamental principle of division between the active male and the passive female marked the framework of the „Credința” scandal, where sexual relation appeared as a social relation of domination: females are to be dominated; thus, every effeminate man is to be dominated. Comarnescu was satirically portrayed as a sexually passive man, an effeminate and „penetrated” man, whose social status was reduced to his „moral degeneracy”. The image of a passive man was a recurrent archetype in ancient societies, where homosexual possession was conceived as a manifestation of power, an act of domination performed in order to assert superiority by „feminising” the other²¹ and also condemning the victim to dishonour and the loss

Mihail Sebastian and his anti-Semitic mentor Nae Ionescu see Marta Petreu, *Diavolul și ucenicul său: Nae Ionescu – Mihail Sebastian*, 3rd Edition, Iași, Polirom Publishing House, 2016.

¹⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination ...*, Polity Press, 2001, Preface, VIII.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 21.

of status of a complete man. Surrendering to penetration became a symbolic abrogation of power and authority. This dynamic of sexuality and power leads to social humiliation for a man to be turned into a woman, especially by enouncing accusations of homosexuality.

As a result, the particular strength of masculine normativity comes from „legitimising a relationship of domination by embedding it in a biological nature that is a naturalised social construction”. The symbolic construction implies the „performative” operation of „naming”, which orients and structures representations, and the durable transformation of bodies imposing a differentiated definition of „the legitimate uses of the body parts”, particularly sexual ones. The *nomos* which institutes the two classes in objectivity takes on the appearance of a law of nature only at the end of a „somatisation of the social relations of domination”: „It is only after a formidable collective labour of diffuse and continuous socialisation that the distinctive identities instituted by the cultural arbitrary are embodied in *habitus* that are clearly differentiated according to the dominant principle of division and capable of perceiving the world according to this principle”²².

The „Credința” Scandal

The main protagonists of the press scandal were Sandu Tudor and Zaharia Stancu²³ on one hand, and Petru Comarnescu, Al. Christian Tell, Mircea Vulcănescu and Gabriel Negry on the other hand. Initially, Tudor, Comarnescu, Tell, Vulcănescu and Negry were all part of the emerging Criterion Association, where they publicly debated political, cultural, economic and religious ideas. The formers were part of the imperative of „complying” with the conservative orientation of „Credința” and „affirmation” through the symbolic items that were part of the Christian imaginary, which were culturally recognisable in a religious society.

On November 23, 1934, dancer Gabriel Negry and his assembly (Mimi Tutunaru-Chirculescu, Silvia Enescu, Alexandrine von Silbernagel and V. Cornea) performed at the National Opera House in Bucharest. Negry was part of the Criterion Association due to his close friendship with Petru Comarnescu. Under the strong effect of the recital, Comarnescu noted: „The movements were like those of a bird and many people cried”. In fact, Comarnescu was publicly endorsing ballerina Floria Capsali and dancer Gabriel Negry based on their artistic talent and

²² *Ibidem*, p. 23.

²³ Sandu Tudor's career path followed a religious trajectory, suggesting that he shared the worldview of interwar Christian nationalism. Zaharia Stancu, on the other hand, transitioned from the conservative standpoint of „gândirism” to militant socialism and then communism. His implication in the „Credința” scandal has had economic and symbolic motivations.

contribution to the emergence of Criterion²⁴: „Floria Capsali and Gabriel Negry are European-level dancers. [...] At Floria the emphasis is on the aesthetically objectified expression, while at Gabriel Negry on an inner sensitivity, which seeks expressive escapes”²⁵. However, ballet dancer Floria Capsali became jealous of Gabriel Negry’s success and suggested to a group of reporters that his interpretation reflected homosexuality and pederasty²⁶. After two weeks, „Credința”’s director Sandu Tudor and editor Zaharia Stancu accused Criterionists Gabriel Negry, Petru Comarnescu and Alexandru Christian Tell of homosexuality. Bejan argues that the cause of the scandal was Petru Comarnescu’s marriage with the daughter of politician Ion Manulescu-Strunga, a high-profile aristocrat from the National Liberal Party [liberals]. Zaharia Stancu had carried on a press campaign against Manulescu-Strunga, and Petru Comarnescu had mocked him for doing so. The conflict ignited when Stancu accused Comarnescu of being a homosexual in „Națiunea Română” newspaper and reached paroxysm when Stancu challenged Comarnescu to a duel in June 1934, while the latter refused²⁷.

The first article of the dispute was written by two „Credința” contributors, Victor Medrea and Nicolae Roșu, to their editor Zaharia Stancu on December 15, 1934, entitled „In a Question of Honour” [Într-o chestie de onoare]. „Honour” is a particular form of the game acquired through prolonged submission to the regularities and rules of the economy of symbolic goods. It is the principle of the system of reproduction strategies through which men, the holders of the monopoly of the instruments of production and reproduction of symbolic capital, aim to secure the expansion of this capital – fertility strategies, matrimonial strategies, educational strategies, economic strategies, inheritance strategies, all oriented towards the transmission of the inherited powers and privileges²⁸. The journalists accused Comarnescu and Tell of violating the duel’s „code of honour” when challenging Zaharia Stancu at the Corso café, which was full of customers at that moment, and not privately.

The „homosexual” stigma became recurrent when „Credința” cited Stancu’s provocation of June 17, 1934, from the „Național” newspaper entitled *For Mr. Petru Comarnescu*, where the editor made several insinuations regarding his sexual orientation, including the accusation of „respecting the Turkish habit of Radu the Handsome”²⁹ [homosexuality] and reaching „a good material status by sideways”

²⁴ The Criterion Association idea came to fruition after informal gatherings and discussions held at Floria Capsali’s residence.

²⁵ Lucian Cursaru, *Paravan cu iriși*, Bucharest, Edit. Muzicală, 1984, p. 64.

²⁶ Zigu Ornea, *op.cit.*, p. 127.

²⁷ Mihai Chiper, *Pe câmpul de onoare: o istorie a duelului la români*, Bucharest, Edit. Humanitas, 2016, p. 277-278.

²⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination ...*, p. 48.

²⁹ Radu III of Wallachia, also known as Radu the Handsome, was the brother of Vlad III [Vlad the Impaler] and prince of the principality of Wallachia during the second half of the 15th century.

[a reference to the dorsal part of the body]. The sexual orientation was directly linked with climbing the social ladder; thus, Stancu further provoked Comarnescu to „appear, as a man, face to face, not from behind as you are accustomed, and to sue us”³⁰. On December 15, 1934, philosopher Mircea Vulcănescu, enraged by his public defamation, went to the „Credința” office to fight Zaharia Stancu. Stancu was missing, but Vulcănescu requested to meet director Sandu Tudor and a fight ensued³¹. After this moment, „Credința” staff went on a full-scale public attack on Criterionists. It started using injurious and derogatory insults when referred to them, such as „inverts”, a synonym to „homosexual”. The article *A Coward: Mircea Vulcănescu* pointed out that „the homosexual chubby man, eater of cakes and slaps” was evicted from the „Credința” office by the police after attempting to attack Sandu Tudor „from behind”³².

On December 16, 1934, director Sandu Tudor addressed the issue of the „Criterion Generation”, which Comarnescu, Tell, Vulcanescu and Negry were part of³³. Tudor operated with the concept of „generation”, which included several dozens of Bucharest intellectuals in their early 30s, but then attributes moral judgements on a generalising pattern concluding that these men are „without paternity and masculinity”. He carried on by accusing the Romanian young elite of inversion, moral depravity, and rottenness, calling them „rags”, „wrecks”, sexually obsessed and masturbates [masturbați], decreeing: „Your Criterion put on a pedestal a dancing homosexual”³⁴. Victor Medrea continued Tudor’s attack in *The Offensive of the Inverts*, using vicious invectives towards the alleged homosexuality of the accused:

It took a person with a genius on his feet and sex behind his back to move his buttocks invitingly on an official stage for the mafia of those with foul-smelling physiological predilections to coalesce in defence of a monopolised dorsal asset.³⁵

According to Greek chronicler Laonic Chalcocondil, Radu was the lover of Sultan Mehmed II. He allegedly converted to Islam. The homosexuality of Radu the Handsome, and, by extension, of Petru Comarnescu, was regarded as a „Turkish habit” by the conservative press, suggesting that the „sexual deviation” was inherent to Islam as a cultural image of „otherness”. During the pre-war and interwar periods, these sexual „deviations” were considered a foreign distortion of traditional Christian morality when the state conducted a nation-building process promoting autochthonous values. Later, „Credința” staff deepened their explanation, arguing that homosexuality was utterly absent from Romanian history as it was a perverted practice brought to Christian countries by the Ottoman janissaries (*Este românul homosexual?*, „Credința”, January 10, 1935, p. 1.)

³⁰ Victor Medrea and Nicolae Roșu, *Într-o chestie de onoare*, „Credința”, December 15, 1934, p. 4.

³¹ Cristina A. Bejan, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

³² *Un laș: Mircea Vulcănescu*, „Credința”, December 16, 1934, p. 8.

³³ The Criterion Generation was an institutionalised form of the so-called „Young Generation”, or Generation '27, representing a group of young students and public intellectuals from Bucharest.

³⁴ Sandu Tudor, *Generația Criterion*, „Credința”, December 16, 1934, p. 3. The quote was a direct reference to ballet dancer Gabriel Negry.

³⁵ Victor Medrea, *Ofensiva invertiților*, „Credința”, December 16, 1934, p. 3.

The Criterionists were described as „knights of the sacred heat”, Comarnescu was „American by profession and paederast by vocation”, and Christian Tell was a „bastard”. Zaharia Stancu would write an article entitled *Honour between Buttocks*³⁶ [Onoarea dintre fese] where he referred to Comarnescu as a supporter of internationalism and cosmopolitanism, linking his sexual „inversion” to a political allegiance towards democracy, liberalism and Americanism, which threatened Romanian spirituality. The interference between sexuality, political support and spirituality was a constant in Tudor’s and Stancu’s expositions. On January 9, 1935, Tudor began his article *On sodomy* by quoting a verse from the Bible where homosexuals were punished for their sins³⁷ in order to legitimise his slanderous campaign on a moral basis. He then proceeded to include the sexual „deviations” in a broader social and political crisis, where:

Man has become centripetal, round, breaks free from „natural ties”, depersonalises, and wallows in a deviation that takes him away from „the normal” to sink into the disease of all inverts. An inner disharmony takes place in man, and tumultuous chaos is created. The „boundaries” between the sexes become uncertain. The factors determining man for woman, and woman for man, are neutralised. The man „effeminates”, and the woman „masculinises”. Everything ends up needing to be clarified and mixed up. In such a time when the inverted type dominates society, „relativism” rules, and tolerance is the day’s virtue.³⁸

The generalisation of the „inverts that manage to dominate society” was a social exaggeration that allowed him to urge the sense of moral catastrophe that would eventually come to fruition if no action against homosexuals was taken. Tudor proposed the alternative of curbing man’s aggressive and anarchic sexual instincts and restraining them based on Christian morality and national state laws. He then dismissed Charles Darwin and Sigmund Freud’s ideas that „show us how much man is related to the beast and how much darkness of instinct lies inside him”³⁹ and proposes „a genuine spirituality” whose aim is to fight against „the inner beast”, which was to be the personification of desire and lust.

Symbolic violence

The press scandal spiralled into a more aggressive and defamatory campaign. The first-page article from January 9, 1935, was entitled *The Traffic of Male Meat from the Bucharest Elite*, which was an ongoing series. It presented Petru

³⁶ Zaharia Stancu, *Onoarea dintre fese*, „Credința”, December 16, 1934, p. 4.

³⁷ The passage quoted from the Bible was Romans 1:26-27: „For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature. And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompense of their error which was meet” [*The Bible*, King James Version].

³⁸ Sandu Tudor, *Despre sodomie I. Preludiu*, „Credința”, January 9, 1935, p. 3.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

Comarnescu under the diminutive „Hommo Curlandus”⁴⁰ [a sarcastic referral to his book *Hommo Americanus*] and Gabriel Negry as „Fesalina” [a female diminutive invented from *fes* = buttock], accompanied by their effeminate caricatures and photos. Bejan argued that Curlanda was a reference to The Teutonic Knights of Courland, „Credința” attributing the etiquette „Knights of Curlanda” [Cavalerii de Curlanda] to the Criterion Generation as a whole⁴¹. Homosexuality was described as „the vice of the lazy and unbalanced” [viciul leneșilor și dezaxaților], a danger for the „public life”, a „defilement of blood and life” and a „consciousness slime”. Comarnescu became the target of incentives after suing the „Credința” staff: „[Comarnescu] is fearful, cowardly, feminine, his figure developed feminine characteristics; his back is growing because of the yeast that every lover pours [onto him] even though it doesn't leaven - although it seems to us that Comarnescu is six months pregnant”⁴². Moreover, as it was not enough, Comarnescu was also publicly threatened: „The destroyers of healthy morals will be put to the wall of public opprobrium. The world will be able to see them, «spit on them» and shout: HOMOSEXUALS! And there will be no more sin”⁴³.

The caricatures impose a visual representation of the prejudices that surrounded homosexuals. The body has its „front, the site of sexual difference”, and its „back”, sexually undifferentiated and potentially female, in other words, passive, submissive, as is recalled, in gesture and words, by insults denouncing homosexuality. It has public parts – face, forehead, eyes, and mouth which illustrate social identity and its hidden parts or shameful private parts, which honour requires a man to conceal. It is also through the mediation of the sexual division of the legitimate uses of the body: the public, active uses of the upper, male part of the body – facing up, confronting, looking at another man in the face, in the eyes, speaking publicly – are the preserve of men⁴⁴. On the one hand, the caricatures aim to dispossess Comarnescu of the public and active uses of the male upper body – to hold back, to face, to duel – that were considered the monopoly of „real” man. On the other hand, Comarnescu was described with „dominated” feminine features– he walks leaning forward, with his eyes on the ground, and hides; his features are inaccurate, erased, and lacking decisive and cutting assertion. If the posture of a man was socially naturalised as an „upright posture, a sign of rectitude, the feminine submissiveness seems to find a natural translation in bending, stooping, lowering oneself, submitting – curved and supple postures and the associated docility being seen as appropriate to women”⁴⁵.

⁴⁰ „Curlandus” comes from the Romanian pejorative slang „cur” [= ass, buttock].

⁴¹ Cristina A. Bejan, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

⁴² *Traficul de carne bărbătească. Azi începe procesul cavalerilor de Curlanda*, „Credința”, January 10, 1935, p. 1. The rhetoric question „Did Petru get to stick his body snail to Gabriel Negry's rear pads ?” was phrased as a subtitle in the article.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 1.

⁴⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination ...*, p. 17.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 27.

One of the most pressing demands of „Credința” was the criminalisation of homosexuality in the Criminal Code. In *About Sodomy II*, Sandu Tudor complained about „the lack of freedom of speech” when addressing sodomy and about the privileged status of homosexuality in Romanian society due to the authorities’ tolerance towards this sexual practice. In the meantime, homosexuals allegedly „wreak havoc”, spread clandestinely and form „gay nests” that will eventually take over when someone tries to oppose them. As so, Tudor built a social conspiracy to urge the government to enact a law criminalising homosexual activity. In their efforts to criminalise „sexual inversion”, the „Credința” staff ideologically defined a „crime” and then proceeded to demonstrate that Criterion was indeed guilty of crimes against the society based on their moral relativism⁴⁶. They defined crime as „every act that results in the termination (elimination, negation) of the human in any form”, homosexuality being qualified as a crime because it was (1) against nature; (2) against society⁴⁷. Moreover, homosexuality has been portrayed as a tool against the „truth” and „nature”, being „disgusting”, „immoral” and „miserable”⁴⁸.

The targeted Criterionists were usually referred to as „a gang of inverters”⁴⁹, „the discoverers of rear America”⁵⁰, „cocoons”, „mongrels”, „strangers”, „parasites”⁵¹, „the homosexuals of the Bucharest elites”, „the mafia of the homosexuals”, „trashers” and „Gypsies” [țigani]. Claiming to represent the young generation, Criterionists were accused of masking „rotteness” behind their cultural engagement and were subsequently reduced to trivial categories such as „a bundle of ready-made boys”, „bandits”, „gentlemen with bad habits”⁵² or even „a gay surname”⁵³. In this regard, they were accused for „assassinating the public morality”.

Another issue raised by the „Credința” scandal was the economic capital of the „inverters”. Some articles claimed that Petru Comarnescu, Mircea Vulcănescu and Alexandru Christian Tell should not be paid with public money due to their sexual orientation: „It is surprising that in this country where young intellectuals are unemployed, many positions were found in the public institutions for the

⁴⁶ Cristina A. Bejan, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

⁴⁷ X.Y.Z., *Mafia Homosexualilor: Arhim Șeriban; Petru Comarnescu, Alexandru Christian Tell și Mircea Vulcănescu*, „Credința”, January 26, 1935, p. 5.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁹ *Cine apără claca homosexualilor?*, „Credința”, January 11, 1935, p. 8.

⁵⁰ X.Y.Z., *Decameronul Arhimandritului Scriban*, „Credința”, January 17, 1935. This is an example of the „territorialisation” of homosexuality as a supposed pejorative modernist and democratic worldview imported from the West, which was considered decadent and contrary to the Romanian national spirituality.

⁵¹ Sandu Tudor, *Stema unui curlandist*, „Credința”, January 19, 1935, p. 3.

⁵² Al. Predescu, *Reprezentanți de generație?*, „Credința”, January 30, 1935, p. 7.

⁵³ *Locotenentul invizibil sau Alexandru Christian Popescu zis Al.Chr. Tell*, „Credința”, March 6, 1935, p. 5.

capital's elite inverts"⁵⁴. At that time, Comarnescu was the general inspector of theatres and inspector at the Romanian Cultural Foundation, Mircea Vulcănescu was working at the Ministry of Finance while teaching at the University of Bucharest as assistant of the sociologist Dimitrie Gusti, and Al.Ch. Tell was a lawyer at the National Bank of Romania. The „Credința” staff asked the ministry to conduct a „moral investigation” regarding the three inverts to „disinfect the atmosphere of vice that grips public life”. The economic capital of the rising Criterionists, and the accusation of homosexuality, which was considered a crime, determined „Credința” to write a plea to the general director of theatres and operas, Ion Marin Sadoveanu⁵⁵, to dismiss Comarnescu from his position. The „argument” for his demise was constructed from a personal and sexual point of view. They argued that no one could seriously take „this round and fleshy brave imbecile's intellectual activity into consideration, and holding different professional positions in the government became a question of national honour”⁵⁶.

Nation-building and homosexuality

The „Credința” scandal was a direct manifestation of the nation-state-building process on full display during the interwar period. Social, political and cultural agents were competing to impose their definition on the nation and the state to gain access to its prestige. As both a scandal and Orthodoxist press diffuser, the „Credința” newspaper defined „Romanianism” as a mixture of Orthodox Christian spirituality, collectivism and masculine virtuosity in direct opposition to any form of physical or moral „depravity”. Claiming that each citizen's life is organically integrated into the national community, the border between the „intimate life” and „public life” thins to the point where the state, as an expression of the national consensus, is called upon to regulate each individual's private life: „social life demands to be organised according to the same laws of integrity, justice, love for your neighbour that also orders the intimate moral life of our personality”⁵⁷. In other words, Sandu Tudor argues that an immoral person in private life cannot be moral in public life.

Another appropriation between the nation and the slanderous attack was Petru Comarnescu's name, which stood for a Romanianized version of Komarnitzky. „Credința” team referred to Comarnescu as Komarnitzky after an anonymous reader claimed he found the „real” Moldavian ancestry of Comarnescu.

⁵⁴ *Cavalerii de Curlanda, Cavaleri grași ai slăbănogului buget*, „Credința”, January 20, 1935, p. 8.

⁵⁵ Ion Marin Sadoveanu was a writer, playwright and general director of theatres and operas in Romania from 1933.

⁵⁶ *În atenția d-lui ministru al Artelor și a d-lui Ion Marin Sadoveanu*, „Credința”, January 29, 1935, p. 7.

⁵⁷ Sandu Tudor, *Viața publică și viața intimă*, „Credința”, January 22, 1935, p. 3.

Ethnic origins were directly linked with his alleged foreign ancestry, thus attributing moral „depravity” to his ambiguous national legacy alien to the Romanian spirituality. Comarescu was described as „of Polish descent, of back nationality [de naționalitate spătar] and homosexual citizenship”⁵⁸.

Conclusion

On February 23, 1935, „Credința”'s director Sandu Tudor and two other editors were arrested after Tell, Comarnescu, and Vulcănescu sued the newspaper for defamation⁵⁹. The newspaper's staff viciously attacked the „homosexual mafia” for the „dirty staging”⁶⁰. Tudor was released the next day, but the „Credința” trial lasted for a couple of months, only to officially end in June 1935: the Criterionists won the case, and Sandu Tudor (and „Credința”) were found guilty in the slander suit. The public scandal's most prominent consequence was the immediate termination of Criterion's public activity, but it also implied changes from a personal perspective. Bejan demonstrates that the scandal had multiple effects on an interpersonal level: former Criterionist Petru Manoliu sided with the newspaper; Al.Chr. Tell was asked to leave the law association of which he was part; Gabriel Negry travelled to Western Europe in 1936-1937 and then returned to Bucharest, Petru Comarnescu eventually lost his marriage, and the scandal's legacy tarred his reputation for the rest of his life⁶¹. During the communist period, Comarnescu became an active collaborator of the Securitate [Romanian Secret Police] and focused on writing monographs as an art critic⁶².

The attacks of „Credința” were manifestations of „symbolic violence”. Although the common understanding of „symbolic” may imply an opposition to „real violence”, symbolic violence produces real societal effects. Any form of violence establishes a principle of symbolic domination – in this case, a dominant narrative of sexuality endorsed by the majority of Orthodox Christian believers from interwar Romania – which transforms itself into the norm. Therefore, a socially constructed norm, when reproduced from one generation to another, undergoes a process of habitual „naturalisation” and eventually becomes „self-evident a historical normality”. As Pierre Bourdieu argued, these apparent a historical domination structures are the product of „an incessant and therefore

⁵⁸ X.Y.Z., *Viața romanțată a spătarului Petru Komarnițki*, „Credința”, January 22, 1935, p. 5.

⁵⁹ *Odioasa înscenare împotriva Credinței*, „Credința”, February 23, 1935, p. 1.

⁶⁰ *Cum e privită de presă odioasa înscenare împotriva noastră*, „Credința”, February 23, 1935, p. 8.

⁶¹ Cristina A. Bejan, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

⁶² For an exposition of the intricate informative activity of Petru Comarnescu during the communist regime, see Lucian Boia, *Dosarele secrete ale agentului Anton: Petru Comarnescu în arhivele Securității*, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House, 2014.

historical labour of reproduction”, to which singular agents and institutions (families, the church, the educational system, the state) contribute”⁶³.

The actual effect of the symbolic domination (whether ethnic, gender, cultural or linguistic) is exerted not in the pure logic of knowing consciousnesses but through the schemes of perception, appreciation and action constituting *habitus*. This dominance sets up a cognitive relationship that is profoundly „obscure to itself”, below the level of the decisions of consciousness and the controls of the will⁶⁴. In other words, a social or sexual minority – homosexuals – unconsciously perceived themselves as *alters* within the category of the dominant heterosexual morality by embodying the already naturalised and normative classification of the majority. As a direct consequence, the image of the homosexual from the interwar period was not produced by himself but by normative actors who defined „normality” – the press, the doctors, the police, the church, the public intellectuals, the politicians etc. – and then monopolised the meaning and definition of the national community.

The contagion and moral decadence of which they are accused aroused reactions of rejection from society and led to the adoption of measures to redefine criminal policies. The homosexual was reduced to a non-reproductive sexual behaviour⁶⁵ that took him outside of „normality” and placed him very low in the hierarchy of a nation: he was identified as non-Christian, representative of moral evil, and lacking access to forgiveness or salvation. Since 1936, homosexuality was criminalised through the new Penal Code, which legally aimed to arrest gay people if they caused a „public scandal”. In conclusion, the majority successfully defined manliness (*virilitatea*) as an instinct, but the concept was a relational notion, constructed in front of and for other men and against femininity in a kind of fear of the female – or any form of emasculation such as homosexuality – and, firstly, of oneself⁶⁶.

⁶³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Dominance ...*, p. 34.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 37.

⁶⁵ Florin Buhuceanu, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

⁶⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Dominance ...*, p. 53.