

The Obsession of Romanian Intelligentsia During the Interwar Period: Ethnonational Specificity

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Abstract

Robust debates from the inter-war period confirm that Romanian intellectuals in the 1930s and 1940s were searching for solutions for the construct of the state¹. Their projects were connected to the necessary political and administrative management of the new Romania, within whose structure (along with the lands of the Old Kingdom of Romania) were the regions of Transylvania, Banat, Bukovina and Bessarabia, all of which played host to diverse traditions, linguistic and religious groups. The emergence from war and the creation of the new Romanian state did not imply the automatic resolution of problems that had confronted society since the nineteenth century: poverty, low life expectancy, illiteracy, incipient capitalism, provincialism and high infant mortality; in addition, the multicultural society, represented by three million Hungarian, German, Ukrainian and Serbian native speakers, differed in religious practice from the Christian-Orthodox majority, for example the Mosaic faith. All of these needed re-evaluation of political values and state peculiarities.

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During the 1930s, among numerous approaches regarding the administration of the state, three political views surfaced and were adhered to by most people: Europeanism, traditionalism and the peasants'

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movement. Europeanism was represented by the literary critic Eugen Lovinescu and by economist and sociologist Ștefan Zeletin; traditionalism by the journalist Nichifor Crainic and by philosopher Lucian Blaga; the peasants' movement by the economist Virgil Madgearu². The efforts of the mentioned theorists indicate a concern for finding the most appropriate way to bring the state out of its backwardness. For many Romanian intellectuals it was clear that the contribution of nineteenth-century political thought had been useful to the transformation of state administration and proximity to the standards of occidental states. However, contradictions regarding fundamental issues such as industrialization, the conservation of traditions linked to the rural way of life, modernization through borrowing Western European civilizational values or the confinement in the ethnocratic state, depleted an enormous amount of energy. Europe was visible only to some.

A few economic breakthroughs were important to ensure the consumption needs of population. However, this aspect is not revelatory for a country that needed then, and later, new public and private institutions to capitalize on the chance of joining an international competition. In the absence of long-thought ideologies and a political will for overcoming statism, centralism and ruralism, Romania had difficulties in its substantial change relative to the previous period. The imbalances continued to be visible especially during the Great Depression, but also in the years of prior to the Second World War. The theories according to which the state had to be governed from Bucharest, exclusively on political principles promoted by the Old Kingdom, played a disproportionate role in the new Romanian national state founded in 1918. In spite of this, most inhabitants of Transylvania, Bukovina and Bessarabia had embraced the institutional changes and emerging developments.

The administrative systems of the new Romanian regions had been contrasting, and the construction of the institutional mechanism of the state needed projects and experts. The fact that the technicians from Transylvania's and Banat's industrial enterprises and banks had been replaced by those coming from the capital, Bucharest, had drawn the dislike

² See Keith Hitchins, *Rumania 1866-1947* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994) Chapter 7, The Great Debate, 292-334. For the leading representative of traditionalism, see the paragraphs dedicated to Lucian Blaga, 305-313.

of the groups of local bourgeoisie. Not all Romanians were convinced of the necessity of assuming the Bucharest model. The authoritarian form of leadership and intention of creating a centralist state met with resistance at each regional level, an aspect which people of culture and politicians countered through an assiduous nationalist propaganda. The process of Romanization was joined by fear from the claims of linguistic, cultural and religious minorities. Sometimes managed with ability, at other times with force, the relations with minorities had been part of a medium- and long-term strategy that seemed aimed at either assimilation or emigration. This partially explains the fact that – despite economic crises and ideological conflicts – the Romanian inter-war political parties were united by the idea of joint nationalist policy.

What can be observed from a more attentive analysis of the situation in the 1930-1940s? While the rationalists, modernists, Europeanists and personalities having a critical spirit and a conduct that focused on the principles of individualism lost ground, their adversaries gained by overbidding on ethno-cultural and ethno-national criteria. The involvement of many doctrine-based intellectuals in politics led to the replacement of the leadership style. The instauration of monarchic dictatorship under Carol/Charles II in 1938, followed by that of Marshal Ion Antonescu in 1940, had been not only the result of an international context favourable to the ascension of the far-right, but also the consequence of resuming the romantic nationalist texts and ideologies. Rethinking fundamental concepts regarding identity by rationalist intellectuals was hindered by the magical force of the myths perpetuated by ethno-nationalist cultural environments (Volovici, 1991)³.

The imbalances in the evolution of political thought also were possible because of the poor representation of social-democratic intellectual circles. The left current had been represented in inter-war Romania through an intelligentsia coming from the linguistic and religious minorities. The contribution of the Hungarian-Jewish-German community from Transylvania and Banat was important, but it failed to earn the role it deserved on the scene of political ideological debate, nor from those

³ Leon Volovici, *Nationalist Ideology and Antisemitism: The Case of Romanian Intellectuals in the 1930s* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1991). See also Victor Neumann, *Istoria evreilor din România. Studii documentare și teoretice* [History of the Jews in Romania. Documentary and Theoretical Studies], (Bucharest: Hasefer Publishing House, 2018).

governing. Through many of its most popular intellectuals and politicians, the Romanian centralist state preferred the closed society of ethno-cultural criteria, being little interested by the mentioned contributions of the so-called 'foreign ethnics' (Glass, 1996, p. 25-28)⁴. The Romanian democratic traditions, but also those from its neighbouring countries, were fragile. They had an authoritative leadership, even if the government accepted few pluralist principles, that is, an apparent democracy.

The responsibility of certain intellectuals who were speaking in the name of what they considered 'the people' and the inability of educational institutions to commit to real emancipation of the rural population generated handicaps that were hard to overcome. Comparing the data, we could be tempted to say that in the 1930s and 1940s, the effects of democratic organization and administration remained yet unknown for an important part of the population in the newly founded states of Central and South-East Europe. This aspect had direct consequences in changing the regimes and in the transfer of power from one oligarchy to other.

If that were the case, it is natural to ask ourselves about the theoretical background of the policy at that time. Historians already have drawn attention to the preferred readings of the intelligentsia from the aforementioned regions. There was a real attraction for mystic thinkers, existentialists and authors with an anti-rational conception. The identity crisis visible in late nineteenth-century Viennese culture carried a strong echo within the regions of Central and South-East Europe during these two decades. Is it possible to claim that the directions were wrong? In fact, the people of culture tried to solve their own dilemmas and called upon models of thought they believed could satisfy their new Romantic vision of history. The specificity, either ethno-national or religious, had become once more the obsession that would control most of the intellectual efforts. The unrealistic placement in the field of social sciences had the most dramatic consequences for political life. The ideas largely propagated in the inter-war press of Central and South-East Europe were hardly innocent. The

⁴ Hidrun Glass, *Zerbrochene Nachbarschaft. Das deutsch-jüdische Verhältnis in Rumänien (1918-1938)*, (München: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1996), Chapter 2, 25-58. See also Victor Neumann, 'Peculiarities of the Translation and Adaptation of the Concept of Nation in East-Central Europe: the Hungarian and Romanian Cases in the Nineteenth Century', in *Contribution to the History of Concepts*, 7 (1), 2012, 72-102.

exaggerated impact of speculative texts from the history of political philosophy encouraged metaphysical vision in spite of the empirical one. A lack of lucidity left its mark upon societies within the discussed region (Neumann, 2013)⁵.

Constantin Noica and the being of national community

The French historian and essayist Alexandra Laignel Lavastine (1998)⁶ focused upon the historical obsessions of the inter-war period, inquiring of the evolution of Romanian society and culture of the twentieth century: How can one explain the position of Romanian intellectuality within a timeless horizon? What is the relation between the cultural and the national approach and to what extent does politics subjugate the creative and scientific method? Why did philosophers passionately preserve the culture, proving that it was not the main motivation of their approach, but the being of national community? Why did philosopher Constantin Noica's work⁷ create a more general relation between Romanian culture and the political sphere? What link can be established between the cultural direction of the 1930s and that of the 1980s? And if such a parallel is able to reflect the failure of political thought, respectively, is it impossible to coagulate the literary-philosophical creations around some pragmatic and generous ideas?

How can one explain the overbidding of problems regarding the existence of the national being-community? The relation of master-servant characterized the mentality of Romanian intelligentsia in both historical periods under discussion. Even if the political context had changed, those who professed and multiplied the mono-cultural forms of thinking seem to be akin. They related to the same ethno-cultural and ethno-national models,

⁵ Victor Neumann, *Essays on Romanian Intellectual History*, Second Edition (Center for Advanced Studies in History Timișoara/ Iași: Institutul European Publishing House, 2013), 41-70; 71-113.

⁶ A.L. Lavastine, *Filozofie și naționalism. Paradoxul Noica* [Philosophy and Nationalism. The Noica Paradox], translation by Emanoil Marcu (Bucharest: Humanitas Publishing House, 1998).

⁷ See *Mathesis sau bucuriile simple* [Mathesis or the Simple Joys], 1934; *De Caelo. Încercare în jurul cunoașterii și individului* [De Caelo. Attempt Around the Knowledge and the Individual], 1937; *Două introduceri și o trecere spre idealism* [Two Introductions and a Passage Towards Idealism], 1943; *Rostirea filosofică românească* [The Romanian Philosophical Voice], 1970; *Eminescu sau gânduri despre omul deplin al culturii românești* [Eminescu or Thoughts upon the Complete Man of Romanian Culture], 1975; *Sentimentul românesc al ființei* [The Romanian Sentiment of Being], 1978; *Povestiri despre om după o carte a lui Hegel* [Stories About Man After a Book by Hegel], 1980; *Cuvânt împreună despre rostirea românească* [Joint Word on the Romanian Expression], 1987.

identifying the rural world as the main landmark of archaism and continuity, and to the right, superiority of the first-come. The identity ideas from schools of the national-communist regime did not differ much from those of the inter-war years, both relying on ruralism as a dominant feature. The result was the ‘folkloric debauchery’ of the Ceaușescu years, effective even today, creating a lack of adaptation of a large segment of the population to the urban spirit and dynamics of social movement.

The resistance of most of Romania’s learned people to the idea of modernization is put into discussion in these historical stages. A reshaping of thought, that is, the formulation of political ideas according to Romania’s aspirations of integration to the civilisation of Occidental Europe, was regarded suspiciously and often rejected with inconsistent reasoning. For example, Noica refused to see the difference between patriarchal society and the modern nation. Drawing a sign of continuity between medieval and modern, between two distinct ways of managing and unfolding cultural, social, administrative and economic life, seems to be one of the major confusions. Noica and his colleagues did not agree to re-evaluate the collective identity of the state inspired by the ethno-linguistics and ethno-culture of the Romantic period⁸. The intellectual discussion regarding the organization of state and nation on the principles of Western European civilisation was tantamount with the fear of national sovereignty. This is why the cultural products of the inter-war years were embraced in the following period by both the few intellectuals who silently contested the communism and those bred at the national-communist schools. The cultural and pedagogical protochronism instated by the Ceaușescu regime in the 1970s and 1980s prevented the literary debate of ideas inherited from the past. Historians and philosophers had been particularly compelled to multiply the ideological concerns of the party-state by forbidding the possibility of uninterested research and knowledge.

Therefore, when we analyse Noica’s identity concepts, we observe that he sees the difference between the two types of society, patriarchal and

⁸ Constantin Noica, *De Caelo. Încercare în jurul cunoașterii și individului* [Attempt Around Knowledge and the Individual], *Vremea* (Bucharest: Humanitas Publishing House, 1993) (first edition published in 1937).

modern, but understands the evolution of nation in the terms accepted by Romantics. One of his interpretative models is the one promoted by Fichte. He seems to believe that the birth of the modern Romanian nation is inextricably related to ethnicity preserved from the distant past; hence, a certain consistency in assuming 'we' instead of 'I' – namely, disregard for training the individual and for the responsibilities that reside therein. The direct and indirect relation to the philosophy of history, as Fichte and Herder understood, is fundamental in Noica's case. The same manner of understanding is found in the engaged intelligentsia of Hungarian, Polish, Czech and Serbian cultures. In fact, the small communities of Central and South-East Europe had not benefitted from a proper framework, from a political and economic cohesion in order to be established as nations. Instead, they were formed and expressed as distinct identities within the Austrian, Ottoman or Tsarist empires.

The understanding suggested by Noica originates from the organicist or ethnic theory of the nation. He believes – in similar fashion to many of his colleagues – in the role of the historical myth. We are not certain that he does it conscientiously, but clearly he creates a subjective frame by associating the terms of state and nation. Multiplying Hegel's ideas, as well as uncritically retrieving Herder's speculation from *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, the Romanian philosopher confirms his intention to propose a new form of the ethno-national myth. The misleading story of German culture invaded Central and East-European cultures so strongly that even today the freedom to openly discuss the nation theme is hardly understood or practiced. The uncritical takeover of many ideas coming from German culture – Romanians always believed anything coming from Germany is not only valuable, even superior, but also uncontested – often generated confusing ideologies. I believe, however, that the proximity and comparison of concepts area based on knowledge.

During the referenced period, the history of the anti-democratic nationalist discourse left its mark on the culture and political temperament. Compared to others, Noica's leanings regarding the meaning of collective identity represent a philosophical attempt on the issue of ethno-nationalism. Noica is constantly 'tormented' by the national matter. The excesses of his critics upon the instrumental reason are doubled by a more dangerous approach, which always favours the interest of the nation over individual freedoms. The philosopher gives unreasonable importance to national unity,

acknowledgement and becoming in the modern age. The false distinctions between ‘good’ collectivism or nationalism and ‘bad’ collectivism or nationalism highlight the extent to which Noica intended to philosophically clarify an issue that has its parallel in politics. In fact, he discovered the critics of modern rationale through the Legionary Movement. The most telling evidence is a series of political articles he published in the late 1930s, reflecting a preoccupation for joining the Legion’s programme, Fascist political propaganda and theories concerning the retrieval of power. They revealed a belief in the dogma that can be better identified as a political bet than as a philosophical one. There is no compelling reason to question Noica’s ideological sympathies. Later, during the communist-nationalist period, the philosopher demonstrates his disposition for ambiguous games. On one hand, he shows an intellectual refinement in which the interest for the philosophical area is exclusive; on the other, he is concerned for the collective destiny. We can observe here interpretative similarities to those from the inter-war period, when the philosopher had been stricken by the Legionary ideology. Besides, he readily admits this in articles published by *Adsum* and *Buna Vestire* magazines. As for the resistance through culture towards the communist regime, Noica chooses preservation of the national being-community rather than questioning the dictatorship.

The philosopher admits an openness for universality only through the medium of collective order that he places above the natural order and the historical order. “... for [at] present there is one kind of order, which is hard, even impossible, to ignore, the order of the collective...” (Noica, 1994, p. 307-308)⁹. The collective subject in no other than the nation, respectively that of ethnicity, which is a forced domicile for the being. The confusion of terms can contribute not only to the nuanced understanding of the philosopher’s writings, but mainly to the re-evaluation of the basis of which twentieth-century Romanian culture and politics stood. We refer to those landmarks that were not congruent to the socio-political reality, or to the cultural-religious diversity of Romania. Terms such as ‘community’, ‘we’,

⁹ Constantin Noica, “Nu suntem contemporani” (We are not contemporaries), apud *Ideea care ucide. Dimensiunile ideologiei legionare* [The Idea that Kills: The Dimensions of Legionary Ideology], (Bucharest: Noua Alternativă Publishing House, 1994), 307-308.

‘ethnicity’, ‘nation’ are used freely, often with the aim of preserving ethnic nationalism; isolation of the nation-state phenomenon, which gains immunity in the face of modernization; and installation of the cult of collective in spite of individual conscience. A historical analysis based on the concreteness of data and facts reveals that the formation of the Old Kingdom of Romania in the nineteenth century induced important mutations from rural traditions; that is, new state institutions such as parliament, political parties, bank, court of justice, autocephalous church and the royal court bore the hallmarks of European modernization. The agony of rural cultures is not visible everywhere, but is a reality impossible to ignore during the past two centuries.

Noica is not alone in this approach and manner of understanding the national identity. Cultural activism with political accents is evidenced in many generations of Romanian intellectuals. We can find it in the works of Nicolae Iorga, Vasile Conta, A.C. Cuza and Octavian Goga, but also Nae Ionescu, Mircea Eliade, Nichifor Crainic and Mircea Vulcănescu. Having the conviction that they could save the nation through culture and reckoning this as their supreme mission, they purposefully renounced any temptation to exert social pressures by supporting the formation of individual and community, or defending their civil rights. Let us remember that – in spite of the majority’s orientation towards an ethno-national approach of the Romanian political phenomenon – there were several important names from inter-war Romanian culture who understood that a state construct based on different political ideas relative to those of Western culture leaves the door open to ideological slippages and cannot contribute to deeper assumption of modern views. Among them, Mihail Sebastian shines.

One of the reflections of that time indicates a contradiction within the circles of learners, proving the preoccupation for a thorough understanding of cultural ideas and their meaning to the political thought. However, debates based on arguments that resulted from research were seldom part of the local culture. The noisy part of the intelligentsia had been not only more numerous, but also more visible, capable of multiplying the polemic that was not always based on intellectual honesty. An impressive ideological pressure for a unilateral approach of the issue of national identity transpires from most of the articles published in the Romanian inter-war newspapers and magazines. The dissidence towards the majority’s opinion was considered unpatriotic, not solidary to the ‘destiny of the kin’, and

unacceptable because it was inspired from sources foreign from autochthonous traditions. The radical ethno-nationalism was not born only from the concurrence of liberal politicians.

Mircea Eliade vs. Mihail Sebastian

We can consider the observation according to which the Romanian liberal movement orientation displayed a mindset that tempted to close – and not open – the communication bridges towards the modern world. Even today there are many people nostalgic for the liberalism of that time. The example of historian Neagu Djuvara is not singular, but is symptomatic for the conservative meaning of things. On a different note, the problem does not resume with the concurrence of liberal bourgeoisie with the extremist nationalism, as the communist historiography was trying to tell. It did exist in the background, and resulted from the understanding of culture, ethno-national community and statehood political identity. The debate of ideas between Mircea Eliade and Mihail Sebastian is suggestive. It describes the trajectory of political aspirations of the future historian of religion during the years of ascension of Fascist ideology and politics, respectively the isolation of a writer who did not share them. The confrontation of articles written in the 1930s press by Eliade with the content of Sebastian's *Journal* is revealing. Here is one of the most memorable published dialogues:

Last night, Mircea suddenly erupted, in the middle of a fairly quiet conversation about external policy and Titulescu, abruptly raising his voice, that terrible violence he sometimes surprises me with – Titulescu? He should be shot. Placed in front of a firing squad. Riddled with bullets. Hanged from his tongue. – Why, Mircea? I asked him, surprised. – Because he betrayed. High betrayal. He signed a secret treaty with the Russians, stating that in the case of war they should occupy Bukovina and Maramureş. – How do you know? – General Condiescu told me. – And that is enough? Doesn't the source seem too passionate? The information does not seem fantastic? He stared at me with stupor, incapable of understanding that someone can doubt such a <truth>. Afterwards, I heard him whispering to Nina: - I'm sorry that I told him... The whole incident depressed me. Writing it, I observe that I cannot find my annoying tension from last night, the feeling of irredeemable dissension that I have experienced. He is a right wing man, until the last consequence. In Abyssinia, he supported Italy. In Spain, he favours Franco. At home, Codreanu. He makes efforts – how awkward – to

hide it, at least from me. But it happens to get through it, and then shouts, as he did last night. He, Mircea Eliade, who blindly believes what the Universe is telling. His informer is Stelian Popescu - and blindly believes him. The most absurd news, the most trivially biased, finds in him a gullible listener. And he shows a naïve manner of exasperation, of raising the voice, of spreading, without any smile, the mind-boggling things he hears in the city, in the newsroom of *Vremea*, of *Cuvântul*... I would like to exclude from our discussion any political allusion. But is it possible? The street reaches to us, willing or not, and in the most mundane reflection I feel the ever larger crack between us (Sebastian, 1996, p. 85)¹⁰.

Eliade's writings from the 1930s depict a superficial manner of regarding politics. The naivety of his assessments, as defined by Sebastian, trying to excuse his colleague for his uncontrolled outbursts, proves that within the intellectual environments of the inter-war years there was diminished concern for political philosophy, legal science and theory of history; that the intelligentsia was not interested in constructing the modern institutional system, in fact, ignoring or despising the basic principles of its function. What exactly do we conclude when analysing in detail Eliade's political thought? The dissemination of ideas and myths created by intellectuals should lead to great feats. In his view, the political successes are much indebted to myths:

Fascism was indebted to Papini's apology of manhood and Latinity, while the Hitlerism to Nietzsche, Gobineau, Chamberlain and Rosenberg's myth of Aryan barbarian (Eliade, 1990)¹¹.

The fascination to retrieve models and shape the political and social spheres in accordance with his fantasies is visible in the public appearances of the most popular Romanian inter-war writers. In spite of careless lectures in the field of political philosophy – an overlooked fact during an age when the encyclopaedism felt like home in Romania – Eliade dared to issue sentences. The admiration he enjoyed from an elevated public and even from the middle class, owing to his novels, offered larger weight to his spoken or

¹⁰ Mihail Sebastian, *Jurnal 1935-1944* [Journal 1935-1944], Edited by Gabriela Omăt and Leon Volovici (Bucharest: Humanitas Publishing House, 1996).

¹¹ Mircea Eliade, 'Cum încep revoluțiile' [How Revolutions Start], in *Profetism românesc. 2. România în eternitate* [Romanian Prophetism. 2. Romania in Eternity], (Bucharest: Roza Vînturilor Publishing House), 1990, 69-72.

written words. Often – and the future historian of religion was aware of it – the political orientation had been an aspect that particularly interested him, on the background of society's discontents, but also from his own. The radicalism of his discourse from the 1930s reflects the justification of continuity in the ancestral and contemporary world, and his opting for severity, discipline, virtues and revolution¹².

The violence of his language would lead to the conviction of democracy, to the acceptance and promotion of the idea of dictatorship. It is what he wrote himself in the article 'Piloții orbi' [Blind Pilots], or in the interview 'De ce cred în mișcarea legionară' [Why Do I Believe in the Legionary Movement]. A fragment from these texts illustrates how far speculations can go in the absence of rational support, but also the obsessiveness of the ethno-national idea – the racial connotation was obvious – according to which the prohibition of any kind of pluralism, regional, linguistic, religious or political, was appropriate:

My sadness and fright have roots elsewhere. Blind pilots! This more or less Romanian ruling class politicised to the bone, which simply waits for the day to pass, and for the night to start, to hear a new song, to play a new game, to write other letters, to issue other laws... The same thing, over and over, as if we would live in a joint-stock company, as if we would face a century of peace, as if the neighbours were our brothers, and the rest of Europe uncles and godfathers. And if you tell them that you cannot hear no more Romanian on Bucegi; that in Maramureș, Bukovina and Basarabia they are speaking Yiddish; that Romanian villages are perished, that the face of the cities is changing – they say you are in the service of Germans, or ensure you the laws the issued are for protecting national labour... only that, blind as they are, lacking the only instinct that counts today – the state instinct – don't see the Slavic streams draining from village to village, conquering step by step more Romanian land; they don't hear the laments of classes that die, the bourgeoisie and the professions that perish, leaving room to other people; they don't feel that things changed in this country, which somehow does not seem Romanian anymore. Sometimes, when they are happy, they tell themselves no matter the number of Jews, their fortunes stay in the country. If that's the case, I don't see why we couldn't colonize the country with English people, because they work hard and are smart. But a kin ruled by a class which thinks as such and

¹² Idem, 'Piloții orbi' [Blind Pilots], *Vremea*, year X, issue 505, 19 September 1937.

speaks of the features of foreign Romanians – has not more left to live. It could transform in a well-managed federation. It, as kin, however, has no more the right to measure with history'¹³. (Eliade, 1937)

The first to observe Eliade's state of mind is Mihail Sebastian. He is also the one who – in spite of the dialogue with many exponents of Fascist ideologies – has a different perspective upon the Romanian politics from 1935 to 1944. What exactly gives reliability to the evidence included in Sebastian's *Journal*? Had Nae Ionescu (PhD at Bucharest University), Sebastian's real mentor, or one of other intellectuals, prompted his reflection upon politics? Why does Sebastian have an ambiguous status within the Romanian and Jewish communities? Unlike Eliade, was Sebastian a less popular author? Can his opinion regarding the identity of the Romanian state be accused? He is apprentice to nobody, even less to a radical intellectual the likes of Nae Ionescu. Quite interesting is Sebastian's position in relation to the Romanian intelligentsia, of which he was part. At their greatest, Sebastian's texts demonstrate clear responsibility for the written word.

Through his friends and companions, he understands the world around him, describes it dispassionately, sieving his doubts through intellectual debates. The reflection upon politics shows a knowledge of modern history, but also a solid grasp of concepts: thus, the posthumous credibility of his *Journal*. Sebastian's coolness had disturbed a world passing through a controversial process of modernization. Today – following the publishing of his *Journal*, a reliable testimony of the time – he draws sympathy and contributes to the inclusion and understanding of a subject that has not been sufficiently discussed. It is possible, at least in the case of this writer, that unacceptance of the polarization of cultural and political thought on community-ethnic criteria could have generated a different perspective. In any case, the absence of biases makes possible Sebastian's openness towards a conceptual plurality, a kind of relativism, permanently justified through a continuous effort of distancing from illusions. I mention him here, in parallel to one of his friends and colleagues, precisely to show that the critical spirit had not been irredeemably diluted, and that it was possible,

¹³ Idem, 'De ce cred în biruința mișcării legionare' [Why Do I Believe in the Prevalence of the Legionary Movement], *Buna Vestire* magazine, year I, issue 244, 17 December 1937.

among the Romanian intelligentsia, that an excessive sentimental orientation was adopted in part by the most notorious influencers.

Between a philosophy of being and a philosophy of nation

The cultural and political itinerary of modern and contemporary Romania has been disputed by a philosophy of science and a philosophy of nation, the dispute entailing a profound disruption. The intellectual biography of the inter-war generation sums up, in great measure ‘the vicissitudes of a critical process towards modernity’, a process tackled in the articles and books of literates, journalists, historians and philosophers. Not only Noica and Eliade’s writings conferred an understanding of identity and, implicitly, of political culture. The example offered by Lucian Blaga on the theme of ethnic-nation is similar; the Transylvanian philosopher included in the debate the relation between ethnic and art work, the association of people with nation and of collective with ethnicity. He had invented a ‘stylistic mould of the popular culture’. Similar to his colleagues’ way of thinking, the politics of the nation had to be an accomplishment of the ethnic being, who assumed the refusal of any form of pluralism, including the interpretative one (Trencsény, 2013)¹⁴. It is no accident that the most visible Romanian intellectuals of the inter-war period – Mihail Manoilescu, Nae Ionescu, Ernest Bernea, Traian Herseni, Nichifor Crainic, Dan Botta, Octav Onicescu and P.P. Panaitescu – accepted or pleaded for the idea of an organic, and not associative, nation.

Sociologist Traian Herseni offers one example from many, lecturing the Romanian inter-war press. In the sense given by this publicist, ethno-nation and race go hand in hand. According to the sociologist, the racial selection implies ‘the removal of harmful features’, parting from all that is ‘foreign’, ethnic purification based on spiritual and material differences. The speculation went as far as to endorse the idea that encouraging the Romanian racial element was the only manner in which elites should do politics. The desire to regain the purest spirituality in the archaic rural world had become

¹⁴ Balázs Trencsény, *The Conceptualization of the National Character in the Romanian Intellectual Tradition*. In Victor Neumann, Armin Heinen (Eds.), *Key Concepts of Romanian History. Alternative Approaches to Socio-Political Languages* (Budapest-New York: CEU Press, 2013), 333-377; 352. See also Keith Hitchins, *Op. cit.*, 305-313.

a way of thinking and propagating the ideology that was going to govern Romanian political life around and during the Second World War.

The meaning of the phrase ‘history of Romanians’ was understood by the intelligentsia as the history of the majority, not the history of the Romanian nation and state built on administrative and legal backgrounds. Thus, the creation of stereotypes in Romanian culture was possible, stereotypes that hindered or simply banned the critical-rational analysis of the past. The non-acceptance of a different language, respectively of the alternative views regarding the national theme generated exclusions towards other cultural-linguistic and religious communities. The procedure is found in Romanian historiography, but also in those of smaller nations of Central and South-Eastern Europe. The ethno-cultural and religious dissociations of Iorga, Noica, Eliade and others still are encountered today.

The disclosure of the identity issue, propagated through historical, literary and philosophical writings, aimed not only the ‘legitimacy of forgetting the difference’ among old society and the modern national version, but also proved the *Volk*’s uniqueness and antique culture at the base of the contemporary state and nation. There is a mythology here, possibly not always programmatic, but included in the Neo-Romantic theory of national becoming. In the case of Romania’s elite, the ostentatious display of belonging to a privileged social stratum and the rejection of individual chance of equal affirmation illustrate a manner of understanding inspired from medieval communities. The attachment to power made impossible the formation of contesting groups or organised opposition towards the abuses of the authoritarian or totalitarian state. The inexistence of civic culture, but also the precarious material means of most intellectuals, have led to this attitude.

Instead of conclusions

Romanian books, press and schools have not granted sufficient attention to the formation and cultivation of the middle class, the coagulation of community spirit around the set of values fundamental for democracy. The intellectuals often focused on aesthetics, and not on the social meaning of the cultural life. The ideas of the French Revolution received by the Romantic writers could not materialize, not in 1840, or during the following century. We can find the explanation as soon as we discover that a large

segment of the population was illiterate; as soon as we admit that the modern age accentuated the social discrepancies and the nation-state did not take these realities into account. Lastly, the administrative-political institutions had been inspired, for a long time, from the Osman-Oriental traditions instead of Western European values. The *Völkische Kultur* ideology influenced by the German Romantic literature was preferred, occupying vast spaces of the public discourse – both cultural and political – while the issues regarding the development of the specialized structures of the state (thought-out since the eighteenth century by Montesquieu as fundamental for development) were granted only minor concern. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Forty-Eighter generation had grown suspicious of programs it initially promoted. A culture of intolerance towards diversity had spread, for example, the total unjustified delay of the Jewish emancipation. The history of Romanian political thought between 1866 and 1947 revealed a Romantic understanding of the nation, language, homeland and state. Hence, the accent upon dichotomies, but also the neglect towards the individuality, obstructing the formation of personal conscience, the only one capable of solving the goals of the European revolutionary programs of 1848.

In the inter-war period, the destiny of Romanian society and culture was separated by a large group of writers and scientists. The awkwardness derives from the reductionist perspective that gained ground at the expense of the supple vision, from the refusal of the critic-rational culture to the rejection of primary themes of the state as an institution for all citizens. There were exceptions, too: Gusti's school, the literary, musical, and artistic circles of the important cities in Banat and Bukovina (Timișoara and Cernăuți, respectively), a part of local elites focused upon regionalization and inclined to discover and cultivate the aspects of regional identity, as was the case of inter-war Transylvania. All these display the existence of ideas alternative to centralism and ethno-nationalism, but being spread so scarcely, they were not able to transform the vocabulary and direction of Romanian socio-political thought, a fact that was exploited by the authoritative and totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century.

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