Intellectuals, School and the birth of the Romanian nation in Transylvania

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Abstract

The national identity of the Romanian people emerged in the last part of 18th century and was shaped in 19th century. Imagining a Romanian nation is the brain child of intellectuals who have defined the national community and built first a cultural identity, then a political identity. After the Habsburg conquest, the Greek-Catholic Church favored the formation of a new generation of intellectuals, who contributed to the formation of a national conscience crossing religious boundaries. Half a century later, the Transylvanian School set the ground for the formation of the Romanian nation. The revolutionary generation of 1848 imagined the nation beyond social and confessional boundaries, mobilizing the peasantry and the townspeople to achieve its national political goals. The national identity of the Romanians of Transylvanian was shaped in a competitive manner, as an answer to the hostile images of foreigners, especially in competition with the Hungarians' national ideology.

Keywords: nation, nationalism, ethnic conflict, culture, intellectuals

Introduction: The Romanians from Transylvania at the beginning of modernity

The formation of the Romanians' national conscience was favored by geopolitical evolutions in Central and Eastern Europe. Transylvania and Banat entered decisively in the West European political context after the Habsburgs conquered them, at the end of the 17th century and the beginning of the 18th century. The imperial reforms accelerated the spread of European ideas, the social and economic transformations that lead to modernity. Notwithstanding, the traditional Romanian community changed slowly. The emancipation of the Romanians, the majority population in Transylvania, and the formation of the intellectual elite capable to articulate the cultural and political program, lasted around a century.

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The Habsburg conquest of Transylvania brought the citizens of a multiethnic region into the European political context. At that time, the Transylvanian society perpetuated anachronistic medieval economic and political models. On the political level, a system of three political Nations was established – the Nobility (largely Hungarian), the Saxon (German) burghers, and the free military Székelys, as well as four established churches – Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist, and Unitarian (Pop, Bolovan, 2013: 87). Even though the political system excluded the peasantry (and in that way the largely Romanian population), some historians emphasize the tolerant features of the Transylvanian society. The four confessions were recognized between 1540 and 1572, but the confessional diversity was the product of a political balance of power, not the result of a humanistic opening to pluralism and diversity. The Romanians remained largely Orthodox, they were excluded from constitutional system and therefore not able to form a strong intellectual elite. The Orthodox priests had limited privileges, they were poor and excluded from political decision making process. The Orthodox Church was unable to build a strong educational system, incapable to create dynamic Orthodox elite. The Romanians' attachment to Orthodoxy, based on conservatism and traditions, was extremely important. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the ethnic-religious conception was transformed into an ethnic-national conception on society (Karnoouh, 2011: 102). Brubaker et al (2010: 29) showed that where religious delimitations and ethnic delimitations coincided, religion contributed to the survival of ethnic communities deprived of political representation. For the Transylvanian philosopher Lucian Blaga, Orthodoxy was a "distinct feature for the Romanians," playing the role of "Romanian law." Starting with the 18th century, Orthodoxy had also a secular meaning, representing the basis for the "kinship conscience" (Blaga, 1966: 90–91).

Dominance by the Nobility led to the complete enslavement of Transylvania's peasantry, a process known as "second serfdom". The historian Toader Nicoară tried to retrace the ideas on life and society of Transylvania's Romanians in the 17th and 18th centuries. The society was dominantly rural (in proportion of 95–98%), and the little towns had rural features, too. The mentality of the 18th century was impregnated by the religious view – the peasants considered themselves firstly Orthodox. An analogical way of thinking prevailed on rational thinking, and the mental universe was dominated by superstitions and prejudices (Nicoară, 1997: 17–31). Toader Nicoară argued that the highly socialized space is essential in rural mentality. The village is central in the peasants' mentality and is understood as a social space. The notion of country ("ţară") is radically different from its present-day meaning –

it designated a county side of 10–20 kilometers around the natal village. Later on, the concept received the political and administrative meaning that we know today. For Transylvania's Romanians at that time, national solidarity was unthinkable. The rural communities focused on the present, having no clear representation of the past and the historic time[1].

In the 18th century, the imperial official J.J. Ehrler described the region of Banat and its history, including common people and their habits. Ehrler observed the hardworking spirit but, at the same time, the general poverty and backwardness of the Romanians. The priests were "disguised peasants," they could hardly write and read their own language (Ehrler, 2006: 46). The Romanians' habits were exotic and strange for the Austrian official.

After the Habsburg conquest of Transylvania (1684–1699), the privileged groups preserved for the moment their status, recognized by the 1691 Diploma Leopoldinum (Pop, Bolovan, 2013: 126–129). But the long term plan of the Habsburgs was the modernization of society. The Habsburgs imposed the central government and administration and promoted the Roman Catholic Church as a uniting force, weakening at the same time the influence of Protestant nobility. By creating a conflict between Protestants and Catholics, the Habsburgs hoped to weaken the estates. For the Romanians it was important to persuade Orthodox clergymen to join the Uniate (Greek Catholic) Church, which accepted four key points of the Catholic doctrine and acknowledged papal authority, while retaining Orthodox rituals and traditions. Emperor Leopold I decreed the birth of the Romanian Greek-Catholic Church. Some priests, but not all, converted to the new Church. Diploma Leopoldinum (1699 and 1701) were imperial decrees, which established a new status for the Romanians. In exchange for joining the Uniate Church, the decrees offered political and confessional emancipation.

The religious union did not produce the expected results in the years to come, but on the long term it was extremely important. In several decades, some young Transylvanian intellectuals attended higher education in Catholic schools and universities. In that way, a new generation of intellectuals was formed, a generation which, with great respect for authorities and the legal system, but with dedication and hardworking spirit, gathered the ideas that set the foundation of the Romanians' national conscience. That generation, known as The Transylvanian School, was essential for the formation of the Romanians' national identity. In Eastern Europe, the ideas about nation

[1] For the importance of a temporal perception in imagining national communities, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso 2006.

moved from West to East, from local centers to the periphery, from up to down in the social space, from small elites to the people (Brubaker et al, 2010: 31). The role of intellectuals was essential in the process of building a national identity – and the Transylvanian School was essential for the intellectual life of the Romanians.

The Transylvanian School and the idea of emancipation

The historian Keith Hitchins (2013: 47–50) remarked on the role of the Greek-Catholic elite in shaping the Romanian national identity in Transylvania. The Greek-Catholic Church organized an educational system for the Romanians, which molded intellectuals ready to promote the Romanian culture. The young intellectuals became mediators between the West and the Romanian Transylvanians. The first prominent figure was Inochentie Micu (Klein), the head of the Greek-Catholic Church, who articulated a new conception of ethnic nation, based on the Latin origins of Romanians, on the idea that the Romanians were the first inhabitants of Transylvania and formed the majority of the population. An exceptional person, he inaugurated a tradition of claiming confessional and political rights for the Romanians, writing petitions to the Emperor. He asked for the application of the Diploma Leopoldinum, the integration of the Romanians in the constitutional system. Inochentie Micu crossed the strict limits of confessional claims, he acted as representative for all the Romanians from Transylvania (Iorga, 1989: 262). Keith Hitchins (1997: 23) observed the singularity of those ideas at that age. For Lucian Blaga (1966: 96), the way Inochentie Micu fought for all Romanians created a virtual space, at ideological level, for the secularization of the national conscience.

Inochentie Micu's work was carried on by the Transylvanian School. Working hard and writing encyclopedically, Petru Maior, Ioan Budai Deleanu, Gheorghe Şincai and Samuil Micu dedicated their lives to educating people. They fought for the idea that the Transylvanian Romanians were the direct descendants of the Roman colonists brought in Dacia after its conquest. The Transylvanian School searched for historical and philological arguments for their thesis. They worked hard to educate commoners, were dedicated to a career in teaching and contributed to the establishment of an impressive number of Greek-Catholic parochial schools. The members of the Transylvanian School produced encyclopedic works in the fields of history, grammar, literature, religion, as well as translations for educational purposes. The Transylvanian School created the current phonetic system of the Romanian alphabet based on the Latin alphabet.

Their ethnic approach to the definition of the nation relied on the theory of Latinity and continuity of the Romanians in Transylvania, and they passionately fought for those ideas. They recognized the poverty and the social and cultural backwardness of the Romanians, contrasting it with the great past of the Roman Empire. The Transylvanian School condemned the oppression of the Romanians, the main cause for their precarious status. Influenced by the Enlightenment and by Romanticism, which overlapped in East and Central Europe[2], they assumed the task of improving the general level of education, by promoting school and literacy. They were interested in general life conditions of the peasantry, but they condemned the villages' shortcomings – superstitions, drunkenness, laziness, illiteracy.

The Transylvanian School considered history and the Romanian language to be the distinctive features of the nation. The idea of nation was no longer limited to confession and faith, but as Keith Hitchins (2013: 263) wrote, it was not modern yet. They felt pity for the peasants, but they could not imagine peasantry as a part of the political nation. That is why they criticized the peasants' upheavals.

Claude Karnoouh (2011: 95) observed a double role of intellectuals in the formation a national conscience: a restitution of the past and a popularization of the past by educational actions. For all that, the members of the Transylvanian School were less interested in "the people's spirit" as in the archaic essence of the folk. Karnoouh (2011: 105–106) wrote that at the beginning of the 19th century, the intellectual elite of the United Church, who came from rather modest families, presented the features of an intermediary class – between the imperial power or the nobility power and the peasantry. They were the authentic germs of the ethnic-national middle class in countries with weak, foreign or absent bourgeoisie. This intellectual class earned its living from public offices – a reality which required political recognition. The growing numbers of the Romanian intellectuals from Transylvania who graduated from schools and universities in Budapest, Vienna, Berlin or Rome, supplied the absence of a true middle class capable of designing the national project. They combined the Enlightenment with a religious ethnicity and legitimated themselves as representatives of the peasants.

[2] For the general intellectual atmosphere, marked by Enlightenment and Romanticism, see Victor Neumann, *Tentaţia lui Homo europeus. Geneza ideilor moderne în Europa Centrală şi de Sud-Est*, Editura Polirom, Iaşi, 2006; Victor Neumann, Armin Heinen edited by, *Istoria României prin concepte. Perspective alternative asupra limbajelor social-politice*, Editura Polirom, Iaşi, 2010.

The critics of the Transylvanian School

The role of the Religious Unity and the foundation of the Greek-Catholic Church in the process of building a nation is far from being unanimously recognized. For Lucian Blaga (1966: 30), for instance, the Religious Union was realized by "seduction and promises", but remained "holy goals" never achieved. He concludes that it was a mere deception of the Romanians. But the intellectuals of the Transylvanian School were appreciated. Their "errors" were excusable because, at that time, they had "a whole world of spirituality to build" and they had to retrieve "the lost history" (Blaga, 1966: 129).

Writing from an assumed nationalist point of view, the historian Nicolae Iorga underlined the merits, but also the limits, of the intellectuals promoted by the United Church. He accused the superficiality of the Religious Union, considering it a mere compromise. By keeping the Orthodox rituals, the new Church was not important for the large population. Nicolae Iorga recognized the importance of the tremendous work of the Transylvanian School, despite "colossal history errors". Iorga (1989: 355) wrote that by "fantasy constructions" or "unrefined errors", intended or unintended, by rude exaggerations, those intellectuals have managed to build a nation. But Iorga forcefully reproached the Transylvanian School their foreign style and education, as well as the cold and academic distance that separated them from the Romanians. In his speech on the nationalist doctrine held in 1922 (Dan 1998), Iorga referred to the Transylvanian School as "the poor who died among the strangers." He criticized them for the weak connections with the peasantry – even if they were born in peasants families. In their books, argued the nationalist historian, they didn't use as starting point the popular tradition, but instead they went back to ancient Rome. Iorga thinks that they should have studied the folklore, local archeology and history. Nicolae Iorga's views changed somewhat after the Great Union of 1918 and before the First World War: in the book dedicated to the Romanians of Transylvania (1989, first published 1914), Iorga's attitude towards the Transylvanian intellectuals is critical. Iorga considered them fearful and willing to negotiate with the imperial authorities, ready to believe in the Emperor's promises, unwilling to really represent the peasants. For Iorga, the School of Blaj (the centre of the Transylvanian School and of the Greek-Catholic educational system) is an imposing construction, the best school available for the Romanians. He appreciates the people's work and their organizational system, but not the spirit of that school, considered simply foreign. The School of Blaj was for Iorga separated from "the life of the people", the teachers were considered "uprooted" from their families and from the people. In

conclusion, this school is relatively useless (Iorga, 1989: 305–306). Finally, he blamed the Transylvanian intellectuals for their failure to become the real leaders of the nationalist movements.

The 1848 revolutionaries and the formation of the Romanians national conscience

The Transylvanian School prepared the cultural atmosphere for the 1848 generation. One century after Inochentie Micu, and half a century after the birth Transylvanian School, society was deeply changed. The Romanian schools produced intellectual elites capable of political representation and eager to undertake it. The cultural synthesis included the Enlightenment, Romanticism, Liberalism and Classicism (Pop, Bolovan, 2013: 77). The national identity of the Romanians of Transylvania was formed in 1848, when the intellectuals appealed to the peasantry and included it in the political nation. The claims of the revolutionaries were simultaneously national, political, social and confessional. As Brubaker et all (2010: 40) argued, the poly-ethnic empires became multinational empires. A convergence of political territory and national culture – the main request of nationalist ideologies – was impossible in Central and Eastern Europe. In this context, the social conflicts were reinterpreted as national conflicts.

The 1848 revolution in Transylvania was influenced and conditioned by the Hungarian revolution. At the beginning, their revolutionary ideas were appreciated by the Romanians (Pop, Bolovan, 2013: 180–186). National differences may have been overshadowed by the idealism of the European revolutionary liberalism. But for the Hungarians, just as for the Romanians, the liberalism was subsumed to the nationalist ideology. The Hungarians' conception about a nation included a "nationalizing state". Rogers Brubaker (2010: 47–49) points out that the state is viewed as the property of a single nation. Therefore, the majority nation saw its "right" usurped by minorities.

The Romanian national movement proved vigorous in its promotion of national and social demands. The young Romanian revolutionaries refused to consider themselves as part of politically unified Hungarian national entity. They declared that they would accept the reunification of Transylvania with Hungary only if Hungary recognizes the Romanians as a national group with a right to use their mother tongue in the local government. Avram Iancu, the military leader of the Romanians, was straightforward: "Free redemption or death!" Their main social claim was the abolition of serfdom, a claim that was designed to mobilize the masses. The Romanians asked for a form of constitutional state that could guarantee equal status for all nationalities in the State. George

Bariţ, for example, argued for a model of multinational coexistence of Transylvania's Hungarians, Romanians and Saxons.

It was crucial that the peasantry should begin to appreciate the revolutionary ideas of intellectuals and townsfolk. The county assemblies asked for the abolition of serfdom, and deepened the peasants' mistrust in the nobility. They believed in the Emperor's good will but considered that the nobles were opposed to imperial reforms, including the abolition of serfdom. The local social protests of the peasantry became strongly linked to the emerging Romanian national movement. The Romanian intellectuals became confident and even heroic – Avram Iancu was referred to as a Prince! The alliance of intellectuals and peasantry and the common political program were essential for the formation of a national identity. In Transylvania, social conflicts began to aggravate the emerging confrontation among national movements and lead to a civil war.

The origin of the Romanian – Hungarian nationalistic adversity

Melinda Mitu and Sorin Mitu (2014: 22–39) considered the 1848 Revolution as the starting point for major interethnic conflicts in Transylvania: the first bloody episode of what they called a "weird war" that has lasted for 200 years. They considered that the Romanian – Hungarian adversity has two components: the actual interactions and the mental representations of the actual interactions. The real facts, they thought, cannot be easily distinguished from the mental representation of those facts (Mitu, Mitu, 2014: 13–14). Beginning with the 1848 Revolution, the Romanian – Hungarian adversity has been deeply rooted in the Romanian culture. The Hungarians were imagined as old and natural enemies. The past social relations (noble = Hungarian; peasant = Romanian) were interpreted in ethnic and national terms. A part of the Romanian historiography argued that 40,000 Romanians were murdered by Hungarians in the 1848 Revolution. Ioan Aurel Pop and Ioan Bolovan (2013: 193) have demonstrated the falsity of those facts: demographists have estimated an overall population reduction of all nations in the whole region due to deaths, migration, etc. But there is a reality in that ethnic relations were seriously affected, for the elites as well as for the common people. The Romanian revolutionist Alexandru Papiu-Ilarian wrote that the history of the Romanians in Transylvania is one of ceaseless oppression by the Hungarians (Mitu, 2006: 238).

For Melinda and Sorin Mitu (2014: 26), the mechanism of adversity is not typical for the Romanians and the Hungarians. It is essential to understand the way old and new images of the past were reinterpreted in the field of modern political imaginary and received new meanings,

relevant only for the people living in the last two centuries. The intellectuals' writings on national identity and the Romanian spirituality were no mere theoretical speculations, but rather, they were used as real weapons and instruments in national political projects. They demonstrated that, for the Hungarian culture of the 19th century, the image of the Romanians was marginal and less important than the perception of the Hungarians in the Romanian culture. The perception of the Romanians in the Hungarian culture was inspired by the Western perception of East European peoples. The Hungarian intellectuals were interested in civilizing the Romanians, by democratic reforms or assimilation, by including them in the Hungarian political nation. The Hungarian intellectuals were convinced, in the 19th century that, if the Romanians are emancipated, they will be willing to accept the benefits of their civilization. The violence of 1848 Revolutions shattered those ideas and influenced, from the Hungarian perspective, the inter-ethnic relations.

The 1848 Revolutions carried out the process of national construction in ethnic terms. The historian Victor Neumann observed that, in Central and Eastern Europe, the ideas of nation and people were prior to the formation of the state. Language is equivalent with the nation and the state (Neumann, 2005: 123–125). He criticized the way terms like "neam" (kin), "etnie" (ethnos) and "popor" (people) are used in the Romanian culture, preference being given to symbolic representation, rather than to the rational and legal organization of the society (civic nation, constitutional law). Such preferences led to restrictive definitions of the national community, which later triggered the issue of minorities. This manner of understanding identity, Neumann believes (2005: 132), is typical for societies where national conscience was formed quite late and in the absence of a national state. In those societies, the notion of "people" is reduced to the dominant ethnic group. The preference for the concept of "neam" (kin) points to a bias towards the exclusivist definition of the Nation: the Nation is Romanian and Orthodox (Neumann, 2005: 139).

Conclusions

The national identity of the Romanians of Transylvania was shaped and consolidated during the 18th and 19th centuries, within a multicultural space. The effort of some scholars, like the ones who formed the Transylvanian School, was decisive to creating strong and militant elites, to shaping a national culture and a political program. They perceived their present time as bleak, the Romanians being deprived of political rights, socially marginalized, culturally limited and

poor. Therefore, the foundation for the national construction was the past, which was idealized as glorious. They emphasized the Romanians' continuity in Transylvania and considered history and the great number of the Romanians living in the space to be decisive arguments for their national claims. The revolutionary generation of 1848 accomplished the essential alliance between intellectuals and peasantry, and they also elaborated a political program that crossed social and confessional borders to unite the nation. Since 1848, the Romanian – Hungarian adversity has become basic for inter-ethnic relations and has remained an unsolved issue in Transylvania.

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