

# The Typology of the Providential Leader in the Modern Romanian Political Imaginary\*

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**Abstract:** *The Typology of the Providential Leader in the Modern Romanian Political Imaginary.* In this paper, we will attempt to provide an overview of the typology of the providential leader in the Romanian political culture. The providential ruler is a political myth which gives meaning to modern societies, divided along the fault lines of diverging economic interests and ideological beliefs. We propose a classification centred on the symbolic functions exercised by the political figures. The *Saviour*, the *Martyr*, the *Vigilante* and the *Constructor* are the four mythical constellations that can adequately structure the specific roles played by the Romanian providential leaders.

**Keywords:** political imaginary, modern Romania, providential leader, semantic pool, propaganda

**Rezumat:** *Tipologia conducătorilor providențiali în imaginarul politic român modern.* În acest studiu vom încerca să schițăm o imagine de ansamblu asupra tipologiei liderilor salvatori din cadrul culturii politice românești. Conducătorul providențial este un mit politic, care dă sens unor societăți moderne, divizate de-a lungul liniilor de falie ale unor interese economice și credințe politice divergente. Vom propune o clasificare centrată pe funcțiile simbolice exercitate de personajele politice. Salvatorul, Martirul, Justițiarul și Constructorul sunt cele patru constelații mitice care pot să structureze în mod adecvat rolurile specifice jucate de conducătorii providențiali români.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** imaginar politic, România modernă, conducător providențial, bazin semantic, propagandă

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In his seminal study on modern political culture, Raoul Girardet defines four great mythological constellations that structure the political imaginary of modernity: Conspiracy, the Saviour, the Golden Age and Unity.<sup>1</sup> In Romanian historiography, analyses dedicated to these subjects have been produced especially by Lucian Boia,<sup>2</sup> in Bucharest, and Simona Nicoară,<sup>3</sup> in Cluj. In this article, we will focus on one of the four major mythical complexes invoked above, namely the figure of the saviour leader. We will highlight how this myth emerged and developed in the Romanian political imaginary of the nineteenth-twenty-first centuries, in an attempt to define it and to propose an appropriate typology for its investigation.

What is a providential ruler as a figure of the historical imaginary? At first glance, any important leader could aspire to this position. However, the collective imaginary does not warrant that all heads of state or government should occupy such a position. Petru Groza cannot be considered a saviour leader. Neither can Gh. Gheorghiu-Dej, although he does have some of the necessary features. The same could be said about Alexandru Marghiloman, Constantin Argetoianu or even Nicolae Iorga. Consequently, although being a significant political leader with notable achievements is an important prerequisite, it does not suffice; moreover, it is not always a necessary condition. In France, Antoine Pinay (prime minister for a few months, in 1952) was considered a saviour leader in his own time, and was studied as such in specialised works,<sup>4</sup> but today he is only a relatively obscure figure in French public memory. Only time will tell how Emmanuel Macron or Klaus Iohannis will be perceived in a few years.<sup>5</sup>

The first condition for the emergence of such a character, a condition that is more specific than the actual importance of the leader or his actions, is the existence of an appropriate horizon of expectation. A providential ruler is, first and foremost, the expression of tremendous

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<sup>1</sup> Raoul Girardet, *Mituri și mitologii politice* (Iași: Institutul European, 1997), pp. 15–138.

<sup>2</sup> Lucian Boia, *Pentru o istorie a imaginarului* (București: Humanitas, 2000), pp. 189–212; *Istorie și mit în conștiința românească* (București: Humanitas, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Simona Nicoară, *Istorie și imaginar: eseuri de antropologie istorică* (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2000), pp. 167–191; *Mitologiile revoluției pașoptiste românești: istorie și imaginar* (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Girardet, *Mituri și mitologii*, pp. 47–53.

<sup>5</sup> See their works, which serve as genuine autobiographical political manifestos: Emmanuel Macron, *Revoluție* (București: Editura Trei, 2017); Klaus Iohannis, *Pas cu pas* (București: Curtea Veche, 2014).

hope, of a psychological need at the level of the social imaginary, and only secondly is he the product of his own deeds. Bonaparte was expected and, in a way, he was created by a France that was tired of revolution, just like Hitler was created by a Germany that had been humiliated by the war it had lost and that had been brought to its knees by the economic crisis, and Codreanu was birthed by a traditionalist Romanian society that was blighted by a difficult process of modernisation and disappointed by its corrupt leaders. Even though he was an utter disappointment and ultimately proved to be a mediocre and irresolute politician, General Boulanger was also awaited as a messiah in France in 1887, remaining a prototype of the saviour hero, typical of France.<sup>6</sup> Although he failed as an effective leader, at the practical level of history, he remained entrenched in the collective imaginary as a redeemer. It is from this perspective, of the social expectations formulated prior to their emergence, that we must analyse similar Romanian figures, such as General Averescu, King Mihai, Ion Iliescu or even Traian Băsescu.

The second condition for acceding to the position of providential leader is the emergence and development of a *public cult* dedicated to the personality of that leader. A discreet leader who does his job but does not promote his own image and is not praised by others cannot aspire to this quality, regardless of his achievements or even personal charisma. Emil Boc, for example, was a Prime Minister who was forced to manage the effects of the economic crisis that engulfed Romania in 2009. His image as head of government remained, however, negative because he was perceived as an anti-Saviour. Instead of meeting the expectations of the public, who wanted a saviour capable of avoiding pension and salary cuts, Boc did the exact opposite. Similarly, a series of prime ministers from the Conservative Party, the Peasants' Party or other political groups who interrupted – usually in difficult times of political or financial crisis – the long and “glorious” Liberal government of the Romanian Kingdom made a poor impression as heads of government, despite their outstanding personal qualities (P. P. Carp, Gh. Gr. Cantacuzino, Iuliu Maniu and Nicolae Iorga).

As regards its unfolding in time, the cult of a providential leader's personality manifests itself in two ways. On the one hand, it may be ephemeral, fleeting, limited to a particular time, to the governance or, at most, to the life of the character in question, but then comes to a close and ceases to evolve, particularly after the story is over.

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<sup>6</sup> Boia, *Pentru o istorie*, p. 196.

It is the case of General Boulanger, mentioned above, or of General Averescu, in Romania. Although Averescu shone brilliantly for a few years on the political stage (1918-1927) and was adored by peasants and journalists in a way that foreshadowed the Legionnaire movement,<sup>7</sup> and even if his achievements are still mentioned in history books, his figure did not generate a cult that outlasted his time in office or his life.

On the other hand, providential leaders from the second category are interesting because they live several lives, and their cult is propagated and used in several historical contexts, which are sometimes quite different. Ceaușescu, for example, was the idol of a secular religion, created and fuelled by the official Communist propaganda,<sup>8</sup> but a significant cult developed around his figure, especially at the popular level and after his death in 1989. After its anthonymous stage, Antonescu's cult began, in turn, to be reutilised during the years of Ceaușescu's national-communism, and then experienced a second revival, after 1990.<sup>9</sup> The same was true of Carol I, re-mythicised in various ways to this day. As for Cuza, his situation is even more special. Despite his authoritarian tendencies inspired by the Bonapartist model, as well as his remarkable achievements, Cuza was, during his life, a rather common politician, subject to controversy, and – unlike Antonescu, Ceaușescu or Carol I at the Jubilee in 1906 – he was far from being adored. But his cult developed strongly only after the abdication in 1866, especially in posterity, when he truly became a hero of the nation and was perceived as a providential ruler.<sup>10</sup>

What connects the figures mentioned above, defining them as saviour leaders, is the language of the imaginary, a specific rhetoric, the similar symbolic values encapsulated by such characters. Gilbert Durand theorised the concept of *semantic pool*,<sup>11</sup> a term that designates the specific way in which constellations of images and myths characteristic of a certain historical era are configured. The providential leaders of the modern era (i.e. from the end of the eighteenth century to this day) belong to such a common semantic pool which structures the political imaginary of modernity.

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<sup>7</sup> Boia, *Istorie și mit*, pp. 401–403.

<sup>8</sup> Anneli Ute Gabanyi, *Cultul lui Ceaușescu* (Iași: Polirom, 2003); Adam Burakowski, *Dictatura lui Nicolae Ceaușescu. 1965–1989: Geniul Carpaților* (Iași: Polirom, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> Boia, *Istorie și mit*, pp. 438–440.

<sup>10</sup> See Constantin C. Giurescu, *Viața și opera lui Cuza Vodă* (București: Curtea Veche, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> Gilbert Durand, *Introducere în mitologie: mituri și societăți* (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 2004), pp. 66–110.

In the premodern epochs, political leaders were vested with two essential and closely interrelated symbolic functions: mediating exchanges between gods and mortals and redeeming the people they ruled. The first character in history was a saving hero, Gilgamesh. The Sumerian *énsi* or the Chinese emperors were considered representatives of the gods on earth, while the Egyptian pharaohs or the Roman emperors were deified. The sovereign was the elect one, the one called to save all his people through his redeeming activity, which is why the rulers of the Jews and Arabs, from Moses to Jesus or Muhammad, were considered or called both kings and prophets. For the same reasons, in barbaric Europe we encounter the practice of the king's ritual suicide, in case of defeat on the battlefield, with the role of atoning thus the misfortune that befell his people. The death of Decebalus or the Queen of Britons, Boudicca, can also be interpreted in this way. The murder of Jugurtha or Vercingetorix, in captivity, by the Romans was also a ritual act, signifying the political annihilation of the peoples with whom these leaders identified and who, as a result, could no longer be saved.

The sacralisation of rulers was a customary phenomenon in the imaginary of traditional societies. However, in the modern era, when society began to be secularised and the City of God became the city of men,<sup>12</sup> the saving heroes and thaumaturgic kings of yore<sup>13</sup> turned into the providential leaders of modern political regimes. These leaders' new kind of messianism is closely related to the idea of democracy and the sovereignty of the people. Whether we speak about the representative of a free and potentially democratic society (Washington), a totalising nation made up of equal citizens (Robespierre), the formula of democratic Caesarism (Napoleon), the Nazi ideology condensed in the slogan "ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer" (Hitler) or the versed leaders of the working class (Lenin, Stalin, or Mao), we can notice that the modern providential leaders tend to identify fully with the people they lead. The leaders of traditional societies identified themselves primarily with divinity and, as such, they guided the people. Modern leaders replaced God with the people themselves, who simultaneously became the object of their saving action and the source of power and ultimate ground for legitimising the deeds of any ruler. The people and the nation are the new gods of the modern imaginary.

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<sup>12</sup> Simona Nicoară, *O istorie a secularizării: de la Cetatea lui Dumnezeu la cetatea oamenilor (sec. XIV-XVIII)* (Cluj-Napoca: Accent, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> See Marc Bloch, *Regii taumaturgi: studiu despre caracterul supranatural atribuit puterii regale, în special în Franța și în Anglia* (Iași: Polirom, 1997).

Still, what remains of the archetypal structures that govern the collective imaginary is the *aspiration towards Unity*, the figure of One. The leader has always been and remains a singular transfiguration of all. The authentic saviour, the true one, can only be one, the Chosen one, like Jesus or Neo (anagram of "The One"), the hero of *The Matrix*. Modernity has failed to dislodge the archetype of the unique saving hero from the collective imaginary, and this constant psychological dimension has overlapped the propagandistic need for a discursive legitimisation of power, a need felt by (almost) any leader, except perhaps by those with genuine democratic reflexes.

In modern practice, democracy and the limited number or duration of mandates undermine, to some extent, the position of providential leaders, especially in symbolic terms, because it suggests that everyone can occupy those roles through elections and by rotation. A consequence of this mechanism is the overflowing proliferation of more or less providential contemporary leaders.<sup>14</sup> Such a leader is no longer the unique One, but can be anyone.

However, the logic of the imaginary has always successfully struggled to overcome this handicap of the modern providential ruler. Washington, who retired to Mount Vernon after two terms only because he wanted to, remained immersed thus in a traditional logic of power (like Cincinnatus, who also retired on his own turf, but had to be recalled precisely because he was unique, irreplaceable). The other American presidents whom history remembers as providential leaders, despite their having completed their constitutional mandates on time (or even earlier), such as, for instance, Lincoln, F. D. Roosevelt or Kennedy, were also seen as unique, irreplaceable leaders, saviours of the nation in times of need. In the American imaginary, however democratic the society that gave birth to them may have been, they played, like Hitler or Napoleon, roles that could only belong to them and nobody else.

The providential ruler is a *political myth* which gives meaning to modern societies, divided along the fault lines of diverging economic interests and ideological beliefs.<sup>15</sup> As a result, such a myth unites society and gives it meaning only through its general mechanisms, and not through its particular embodiments. In other words, no particular providential ruler is accepted by everyone, but only by a part of the social body, even if the whole society yearns for a saviour. Some

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<sup>14</sup> Boia, *Pentru o istorie*, p. 193.

<sup>15</sup> See André Reszler, *Mythes politiques modernes* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1981).

discovered this leader in Codreanu, others in Carol II, yet others in Antonescu. Myths are opposed by counter-myths. Leaders have saviour potential for some, but are catastrophic for others. Even Carol I, who at one point enjoyed a quasi-unanimous appreciation, faced severe criticism from the republican, anti-dynastic socialists. Sometimes pairs of competing figures come to the fore, depending on the polarisation of the political spectrum. Carol II is opposed to Codreanu, Horia Sima to Antonescu, Antonescu to King Mihai.

At this point one can observe very well the constructed nature of these political myths, the close connection between a timeless myth and the *propaganda* that answers the ephemeral needs of the moment. Aided by the propaganda associated with them, leaders consciously shape their own representation, using the ingredients and recipes available in the storeroom of the collective imaginary. Napoleon was the first charismatic ruler to forge his own legend, starting with the bulletins of the Great Army and ending with the memoirs from Saint Helena.<sup>16</sup> In the same spirit, Carol I's memoirs, the Captain's "circulars" or Ceaușescu's speeches deliberately propagated an image capable of influencing and manipulating society in order to conquer, preserve and legitimise power. In the first instance, providential rulers are born from the dreams, fears and hopes of the many. At least in equal measure, they also generate themselves, capitalising on the need to believe of a society that seeks, on earth, the meanings once offered by a transcendent authority.

In the plane of historical reality, Romanian providential leaders of the modern era had only a weak and questionable genealogy behind them. The Phanariotes, with whom the local *ancien régime* came to an end, bequeathed to the Romanian society a detestable image of the ruling authority.<sup>17</sup> The local rulers who succeeded them could have represented a saving solution, but their political scope was too small, and the authoritarian conservatism of rulers like Mihail Sturdza or Gh. Bibescu did little to improve the figure of the ideal prince. Moreover, as regards the voivodes of the Middle Ages, the truth is that they left no consistent trace at all in Romanian political practice, and their glorious image was invented and completely rewritten by historians, poets, playwrights, painters and sculptors of the nineteenth century. A historical fiction, and not an actual political tradition, founded the symbolic genealogy of the Romanian rulers of the modern era.

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<sup>16</sup> Pieter Geyl, *Napoleon pro și contra* (București: Editura Științifică, 1968).

<sup>17</sup> See Daniel Barbu, *Bizanț contra Bizanț: explorări în cultura politică românească* (București: Nemira, 2001), pp. 47–88.

From the gallery of leading characters prevailing at the beginnings of modernity, the collective imaginary has selected mainly the figures of some *plebeian leaders*, in keeping with the democratic mentality of the new modern era.<sup>18</sup> For romantic populism, of Herderian extraction, the ideal ruler of the Romanians had to be a peasant, not a boyar or a king. Horea, Tudor Vladimirescu and Avram Iancu perfectly played this role of leaders who totally identified themselves with the lower classes, and their tragic destinies were typical for the condition of redeeming heroes. Decebalus marks the ancestral beginnings of this series: he is represented as a kind of peasant-king (like Dromichaetes or Mircea the Elder from Eminescu's *Third Letter*), bearded and with wavy hair, a leader detached from the ranks of the many, whose vocation is to sacrifice himself for his people.

As a result, when Cuza and then Prince Carol wanted to promote their image as modern sovereigns and statesmen, different from their predecessors with fur caps and sheepskin coats, they took over everything they could both from the voivodal attire reconstructed by Romanian historians and from the external stylistics of a nineteenth-century constitutional prince. Like Emperor Mutsuhito of Japan, Cuza also adopted the appearance of Napoleon III, wearing a uniform and a beard.

In Transylvania under Austrian rule, a province that was more advanced also as regards political symbolism, there were some premodern antecedents of the myth of the providential ruler, namely Habsburg dynasticism and the *myth of the "good emperor"*.<sup>19</sup> Transylvanian Romanians cultivated a rather significant dynastic loyalty towards Maria Theresa and Joseph II to Franz Joseph and Franz Ferdinand (the pro-Romanian archduke in whom the Transylvanian people put great hope, shattered, however, in the summer of 1914 in Sarajevo).<sup>20</sup> After 1918, they simply changed the effigy of the sovereign, and lithographs with the image of Emperor Franz Joseph, which had been exhibited in the houses of the wealthier peasants, were replaced by those representing King Ferdinand of Romania. The speed with which

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<sup>18</sup> Sorin Mitu, „Domni, preoți, dar mai ales țărani: reprezentări ale statutului social la românii ardeleni, la începutul epocii moderne”, *Revista de Istorie Socială*, 7-9 (2003-2004): 174-204.

<sup>19</sup> Doru Radosav, *Arătarea Împăratului: intrările imperiale în Transilvania și Banat (sec. XVIII-XIX): discurs și reprezentare* (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană - Dacia, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> Liviu Maior, *Habsburgi și români: de la loialitatea dinastică la identitate națională* (București: Editura Enciclopedică, 2006).



this process of dynastic translation occurred showed once again that, especially in a modern society, the Saviour figure can take on any shape. What is often more important is the belief of the masses in the mechanism of salvation, and not who actually embodies it: the Habsburgs, the Hohenzollerns, the Legionnaires, the Communists...

An approximate list of candidates for the condition of providential leaders of the Romanians (champions of the modern political imaginary, different from the voivodal heroes of the Middle Ages), has been compiled and analysed by Lucian Boia and his collaborators.<sup>21</sup> It includes, first of all, the representatives of the dynastic myth, Carol I, King Ferdinand and Queen Marie, Carol II and Mihai, preceded by Cuza; they are joined by the additional "dynasty" of the Brătianus, Ion and Ionel Brătianu; the crownless saviours of the interwar period are Averescu, Codreanu and Antonescu; and in the communist period, of course, Gheorghiu-Dej and Ceaușescu. Nothing prevents us, however, from adding to this redeeming platoon all four post-December presidents, each of whom is more or less strongly associated with the theme of "National Salvation." In addition, these heads of state, government or "movement" may be joined by several charismatic political leaders or activists, such as Horia Sima, Iuliu Maniu, Corneliu Coposu and Doina Cornea. Clearly, there is an inflation of saviour leaders, which is, as we have already seen, a feature of the contemporary political imaginary. However, considering that all of Romania's heads of state from 1866 onwards appear on this list, what the Romanians appear to believe is that the main task of every leader is not so much to manage the current state of affairs, but to save the nation!

Hoping to put a little order in this somewhat too numerous group and to see exactly who can be considered a providential leader and why, we can resort to a typological classification of the above-mentioned figures. Despite its evanescent character, the imaginary still has its categories. Gilbert Durand, for instance, built up an extremely complex taxonomy, in *The Anthropological Structures of the Imaginary*, where the sceptre, the sword, the ascent, the arrow, and the head are the symbols associated with the "Uranian sovereignty", while the regenerating moon-related cyclicities of the "agrarian drama" are related to the figure of the saviour hero.<sup>22</sup> Raoul Girardet, who is more focused

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<sup>21</sup> Boia, *Istorie și mit*, pp. 358–457; Lucian Boia, ed., *Mituri istorice românești* (București: Editura Universității, 1995); *Miturile comunismului românesc* (București: Nemira, 1998).

<sup>22</sup> Gilbert Durand, *Structurile antropologice ale imaginarului: introducere în arhetipologia generală* (București: Univers Enciclopedic, 2000), pp. 125–144, 283–308.

on historical factuality, postulates the existence of four archetypes of the contemporary political Saviour: Cincinnatus, the grave and wise hero, called upon to save the city in his old age; Alexander, the young and brilliant conqueror, a symbol of adventure and immediate action; Solon, the legislator, the founder of the new order of regulatory enactments; Moses, the prophet, the seer, inspired by God, who leads his people onto the path of the future.<sup>23</sup>

Girardet's typology seems to me, however, too general and too culturally informed to be applicable to the Romanian leaders of the nineteenth-twenty-first centuries, so I will propose a simpler classification, able to cover satisfactorily the gallery of local political characters. It is a classification centred on the symbolic functions exercised by these political figures, and not on their archetypal features. The *Saviour*, the *Martyr*, the *Vigilante* and the *Constructor* are the four mythical constellations that can adequately structure the specific roles played by the Romanian providential leaders. The *Founder* could occupy the fifth position, but this archetype is found almost equally in most existing cases; as a result, from a methodological viewpoint, it is not capable of highlighting specific features. By definition, almost all providential leaders have the vocation of being founders, whether they be constructors, like Carol I and Carol II or Ceaușescu, or Legionnaire martyrs, who aimed to build, through sacrifice, a Romania as holy as the sacred sun in the sky, or saviours like General Antonescu, who envisaged themselves as the founders of a new order and reorganisers of the national state. The roles of saviour, martyr, vigilante and constructor also combine or overlap in different dosages in the symbolic configuration of different personalities, but nevertheless usually give a dominant note to each particular profile.

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<sup>23</sup> Girardet, *Mituri și mitologii*, pp. 55–61.