

The Self-Image of the Romanians in the Interwar Period*

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Abstract: *The Self-Image of the Romanians in the Interwar Period.* In the interwar period an important number of authors investigated identity in terms of national character and what define us from this point of view. The first author analyzed in this study is Dumitru Drăghicescu, but the national specificity was also a key concept in the work of Mihail Ralea. Another author interesting in elaborating a Romanian ontological model in the interwar years was Mircea Vulcănescu, and the most representative and best-known author of the national ontology, who encapsulated the nation in the so-called *stylistic matrix*, was Lucian Blaga. The reflections on the national specificity are, in this period, focused on *how Romanians are* and *why they are the way they are*. The inventory of traits, the promotion of certain symbols (*mioritic space*), and the allegorical descriptions as parodies of contemporary theories of the national specificity, all these are ways in which the Romanian national character was outlined in the most prolific and productive stage, the interwar years.

Keywords: self-image, interwar period, Romania, national identity, *Völkerpsychologie*

Rezumat: *Imaginea de sine a românilor în perioada interbelică.* În perioada interbelică, un număr important de autori au investigat identitatea în termenii caracterului național și a ceea ce definește din acest punct de vedere. Primul autor analizat este Dumitru Drăghicescu, dar specificul național a fost de asemenea un concept-cheie în opera lui Mihail Ralea. Alt autor din perioada interbelică interesat în elaborarea unui model ontologic românesc a fost Mircea Vulcănescu, iar cel mai reprezentativ și mai bine cunoscut autor al unei ontologii naționale, care definește națiunea în termenii așa-numitei *matrici stilistice*, a fost Lucian Blaga. Reflecțiile cu privire la specificul național au fost orientate, în această perioadă, asupra întrebărilor: *cum sunt românii?* și *de ce sunt ei așa*

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cum sunt? Inventarierea trăsăturilor, promovarea anumitor simboluri (de exemplu *spațiul mioritic*) sau descrierile alegorice și parodiile la adresa teoriilor referitoare la specificul național – toate acestea au fost modalități prin care caracterul național al românilor a fost conturat în anii interbelici, cea mai prolifică perioadă din istoria acestui tip de auto-reflecție identitară.

Cuvinte-cheie: imagine de sine, perioada interbelică, România, identitate națională, *Völkerpsychologie*

The a-historical turn and the definition of national specificity in atemporal terms become evident once with the establishment of the Romanian national unitary state in December 1918. This is the most prolific period, when a number of authors investigated identity in terms of character (how we are) and what define us from this point of view. The main challenge was to create a major culture in a state where the peasantry formed the majority of the population. *Völkerpsychologie*, one of the influential methods of psychology, has been applied in the Romanian area as well. The most sophisticated application of *Völkerpsychologie* method can be found in Dumitru Drăghicescu's work. In the second chapter of his major work, titled *Din psihologia poporului român* [On the Psychology of the Romanian People]¹, the author focuses on the factors that influence the psychology of Romanians, concluding that in this case the primordial factors are the historical-social ones which surpass the physical ones. Relations with neighbours, political institutions, social and economic institutions are much more important than race, climate and geographical configuration. As a result, what is acquired matters more than what is given².

In analysing the first category, Drăghicescu argues that the Romanian soul is the result of a mixture of peoples that have contributed to its delineation in various ways. The Scythians, Gaetes, Dacians, Romans, Greeks, Gauls, Illyrians, Huns, Avars, Slavs, Gepids, Marcomans, Pechenegs, Hungarians, Kumanians, Turks, Tatars, modern Greeks, Russians and French, all left their mark³. Then, by using a deconstructionist approach, Drăghicescu analyses the character traits of the aforementioned peoples in order to establish precisely which of their traits became ingrained into the Romanian soul. Thus, he argues that

¹ D. Drăghicescu, *Din psihologia poporului român* (București: Alcalay, 1907).

² Idem, *Din psihologia poporului român* (București: Albatros, 2003), p. 98.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 111.

while at the time when the Romanian principalities were established and were breaking free from foreign influence the Romanian soul was characterized by a 'strong and unwavering will that was also violent but prudent at the same time' and by 'a simple yet vigorous and systematic intelligence, and a vivid imagination nourished by a very deep religious sentiment'⁴, when the principalities came under Ottoman influence it was altered and its character changed. Drăghicescu further claims that the psychological consequences of this historical event were: 'the loss of positive traits, the destruction of the will and independence of the Romanian people, the sale of Romanian thrones to the highest bidder, and a quick succession of princes'⁵. Finally, he adds that the impact of modern Greeks on Romanians was also negative: 'the country's impoverishment and plunder, the despoliation and confiscation of Romanian fields, the plunge of Romanians into destitution'⁶.

The portrait outlined by Drăghicescu is essentially positive, although the oriental influence of the peoples in this group and of other peoples with whom they came into contact was negative. In analysing the spiritual traits of the Romanian people in the interwar period, Drăghicescu highlights that they were certainly a work in progress. Apart from this feature, he also mentions its 'peaceful wisdom'.

Other characteristics of Romanians that derive from contact with otherness and are relevant to the overall portrait are: repulsion towards the foreigner (well-known and explained again through historical factors) that can sometimes reach pathological levels, and, conversely, sociability in relation to their compatriots, argued from a historical perspective through the vicissitudes that they underwent together and that were decisive for the unity of all Romanians. The negative traits of Romanians, evident at first glance, are supplemented and essentialised in the expression: 'Western race with Eastern customs'. An overall appraisal of Drăghicescu's work reveals his intention to connect the Romanians' character flaws with their historical traumas. Character, from this perspective, is a historical product: events condition *the psyche*, and history creates social traits⁷.

In outlining the social psychology of the Romanians, Constantin Rădulescu-Motru, another important author of the interwar years,

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 206.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 218.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 256.

⁷ Balázs Trencsényi, *The Politics of „National Character”: A study in interwar East European thought* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 31.

argues that their traits are conditioned by three main factors: the biological and hereditary background, geographical factors, and institutional character acquired throughout history⁸. In the author's view, the traits of Romanians which 'are evident at first glance' are individualism and lack of perseverance in finishing what they started. Individualism is translated by the solitary character of Romanians who dislike company. Further, Rădulescu-Motru explains that Romanian individualism is only potentially positive in comparison with Western individualism that implies economic initiative as well as political and social independence which firmly place it in the category of positive features.

Lack of education is responsible for the moderation of the traits, for their imperfection and weakness, while indolence is considered the source of many ills of the Romanian nation. Rădulescu-Motru lists the major defects of the Romanians who are undisciplined and sloppy, and have a habit of working 'now and then', with many rest periods, but he evens the balance by listing a number of qualities such as tolerance, hospitality, love of justice, and religiousness⁹. Most of the Romanians' defects are linked to their actions, while most of their qualities, such as love of justice and freedom as well as religiousness, are linked to their character.

Finally, Rădulescu-Motru demonstrates a great deal of lucidity when he argues that in the interwar years, despite the favourable geographical and political circumstances, Romanians were going through a crisis, which constituted, in fact, another mitigating circumstance.

In the interwar years, national specificity was also a key concept in the work of Mihail Ralea. In his book *Fenomenul românesc* [The Romanian Phenomenon], published in 1927, he emphasizes its non-unitary character in the Romanian-inhabited areas due to the different influences: Moldavian Romanians are influenced by Russians and Turks, while Transylvanian Romanians are influenced by Hungarians¹⁰. He further argues that differences in national specificity can also be detected depending on the landforms they inhabited and on the living environment (urban or rural context). According to Ralea, adaptability is the main attribute of Romanians, essential for survival in difficult historical conditions. He identifies radical scepticism (as inferiority complex), megalomania (as superiority complex expressed through nationalistic and

⁸ Constantin Rădulescu-Motru, *Psihologia poporului român* (București: Paideia, 1998), p. 11.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 16.

¹⁰ Vezi ediția Constantin Schifirneț, Mihai Ralea, *Fenomenul românesc* (București: Albatros, 1997).

cultural demagogy), lower creative imagination (as surface), clear and common-sense intelligence that excludes naivety. Ralea believes that a change in cultural practices would ultimately improve the Romanian soul, and concludes by advocating for critical thought and empathy¹¹. Finally, in his point of view, the nation is conceptualized as a product of modernity, thus being an invention of the French Revolution.

Another author interesting in elaborating a Romanian ontological model in the interwar years is Mircea Vulcănescu (1904-1952) who investigated the Romanian national specificity in two books: *Omul românesc* [The Romanian Man] (1937) and *Dimensiunea românească a existenței* [The Romanian Dimension of Existence] (1943). Vulcănescu theorizes identity mainly in metaphysical terms. To characterize the Romanians, he identifies certain temptations that can be activated at different times in history. Temptations can be defined as challenges, temptations to exist in a certain way¹². As a fundamental temptation, Vulcănescu identifies opposition, that is the Romanians' ability to stand against almost anything. However, he argues that denial does not refer to existence but to the essence (a mode of existence). He further claims that among Romanians the potential (depth profile) and actuality (surface profile) are perceived as being unitary. What has not yet become actual, according to Vulcănescu, is not lost but remains to be activated as a potentiality at the right moments. From here, Vulcănescu identifies a number of other attributes: there is no non-being (as being and potentiality are not clearly separated), no absolute impossibility, no alternative, no imperative and no irreversibility, life is taken lightly (the mixture of actual and potential defines life) and there is no fear of death (there is no non-being in the Romanians' conception)¹³. In appraising Vulcănescu's work, we can identify at least two defining features: his a-historical understanding of the nation and his profound Romanianism.

The four authors presented above employ classic approaches to the psychology of the Romanian people, such as *Völkerpsychologie*, for instance. Nonetheless, they present a number of limitations, including the *post-factum* justification of stereotypes and cliches, a lack of methodological rigour, and the excessive use of the inductive method. In spite of these

¹¹ Daniel David, *Psihologia poporului român. Profilul psihologic al românilor într-o monografie cognitiv-experimentală* (Iași: Polirom, 2015), p. 40-41.

¹² Roberto Merlo, „«Ispita» lui Mircea Vulcănescu sau căutarea de sine între identitate și alteritate”, in Viorel Cernica (ed.), *Studii de istorie a filosofiei românești. VIII: Mircea Vulcănescu* (București: Editura Academiei, 2012), p. 37.

¹³ Daniel David, *op. cit.*, p. 41-42.

limitations, their works remain among the most relevant approaches of this kind, written in the interwar years.

The most representative and best-known author of the national ontology, who encapsulated the nation in the so-called *stylistic matrix*, is Lucian Blaga. He became a symbol of defining Romanian identity after coining the expression '*mioritic space*'. Undoubtedly, the main purpose of his work was to create of a 'major culture' whose foundation is the existence of the village¹⁴. The Romanian cultural space is, in Blaga's view, a 'topos' defined as a '*mioritic space*': 'Let us call this matrix-space, tall and indefinitely undulated and endowed with the specific accents of a certain feeling of destiny: mioritic space'¹⁵. Blaga's *topos* includes the '*plai*' that stands for nothing more than the alternation between mountains and hills covered in orchards, and appears especially in the folk ballad *Miorița*. However, the '*plai*' has other stylistic connotations as well. It is a spatial horizon specific to the Romanian culture, an 'infinite indefinite horizon' of valleys and hills that form the spiritual substratum of the anonymous creation of the Romanian folk culture¹⁶. The '*mioritic space*' is, therefore, the quintessential space of the nation's being, and folklore, on the other hand, is the highest expression of our ethnic substratum. A thorough analysis of Blaga's work from the perspective of national specificity reveals certain paradoxical features: while, at a superficial level, Blaga opposed the normative image that dominated the delimitation of national specificity until his time, at a deeper level he praised national features as cultural roots¹⁷.

A special approach in the shape of a parable / allegory, with notes of self-irony and sarcasm, belongs to Stefan Zeletin. His book *Din Țara Măgarilor. Însemnări*. [From the Land of Donkeys. Notes.] is a critical radiography of the Romanian society at the beginning of the 20th century. The narrative of the allegory suggests that the 'land of donkeys' is no other than the land of Romanians, a distorted country described in detail by a 'narrator' imagined as a missionary sent by the gods to write a report.

The 'Land of Donkeys' is a land of contrasts, of superficial existence with no depth: village donkeys are different from city donkeys, the major difference between them being that city donkeys display their donkeyness ostentatiously, while village donkeys display it in its brute

¹⁴ Balázs Trencsényi, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

¹⁵ Lucian Blaga, *Spațiul mioritic* (București: Humanitas, 1994), p. 17.

¹⁶ Keith Hitchins, *The identity of Romania* (Bucharest: The Encyclopaedic Publishing House, 2009), p. 212.

¹⁷ Balázs Trencsényi, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

form¹⁸. Two other antagonistic categories are the *străinofili* (foreigner-worshipping humanists that borrow from the West all the shiny forms without the substance) and the *măgarofili* (the pro-donkey hostile to any change and favourable to the preservation of traditions). The 'Land of the Donkeys' is the land of chaos: the village is the space of suffocating inner and outer misery, of undisguised and grossly-displayed misery, while in the city everything is but a facade, inner misery being defining. The houses of village donkeys remind of stables, or worse¹⁹, village donkeys being 'hairy, shaggy, fluffy like any behemoth' and feeding on onions and garlic as well as *polenta* (one can note how the image of degraded beings that live in an amorphous space is outlined, which is, however, the image of authentic donkeys that do not attempt to hide their donkeyness in a hypocritical manner). Conversely, the houses of city donkeys are livelier and brighter, and light dominates the life of the city adorned with many entertainment facilities and especially street cars and officers (however, this space is inhabited by donkeys shiny on the outside but rotten on the inside; it is a space of forms without substance, of inauthenticity). Practically, another world where you are hit by *dolce far niente*, where no one knows exactly how the donkeys earn their own livelihood.

In the 'Land of Donkeys', culture is merely a 'superficial gloss that conceals the inner donkeyness'²⁰, character is essentialized in the expression *tip for pleasure*, and justice and morals are almost non-existent. A world turned upside-down, where the fundamental principle of existence is the precipice between facts and words. Donkey patriotism has one value, that of counterfeiting, and is meant to provide a superficial gloss to the nation. The text is one of the most insightful reflections on the Romanian national specificity where not metaphysics is central, but everyday reality in its pure misery.

It is clear that the reflections on the national specificity are, in this period, focused on *how Romanians are* and *why they are the way they are*. The inventory of traits, the promotion of certain symbols ('*mioritic space*'), and the allegorical descriptions as parodies of contemporary theories of the national specificity, all these are ways in which the Romanian national character was outlined in the most prolific and productive stage – the interwar years – that remained a true point of reference from this perspective.

¹⁸ Ștefan Zeletin, *Din țara măgarilor* (București: Nemira, 2006), p. 42.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 34.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 52.