Civil Society and National Identity
in Nineteenth-Century Transylvania

Sorin Mitu
Babeş-Bolyai University

Abstract: *Civil Society and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Transylvania*. In this paper, we will attempt to provide an overview of the phenomenon of association in modern Transylvania, to emphasize its origins, and to analyze the functions it fulfilled in relation to the national identity. The association phenomenon is based on communication and the creation of a public space in which individuals share their ideas. The nationalities of Austria-Hungary chose to build their public space separately by creating parallel civil societies that were most often in competition. This tradition is still producing effects in Transylvania.

Keywords: civil society, political and cultural associations, national identity, Transylvania, Modern Epoch

Rezumat: *Societate civilă şi identitate naţională în Transilvania secolului al XIX-lea*. În acest studiu vom încerca să schiţăm o imagine de ansamblu asupra fenomenului asociaţionist din Transilvania modernă, să îi evidenţiem originile şi să analizăm funcţiile pe care le-a îndeplinit, în relaţie cu identitatea naţională. Fenomenul asociaţionist se bazează pe comunicare, pe crearea unui spaţiu public în care indivizii îşi împărtăşesc ideile. Naţionalităţile din Austro-Ungaria au preferat să îşi construiască acest spaţiu public în mod separat, prin crearea unor societăţi civile paralele, de cele mai multe ori aflate în competiţie. Este o tradiţie care mai produce încă efecte în Transilvania.

Cuvinte-cheie: societate civilă, asociaţii politice şi culturale, identitate naţională, Transilvania, epoca modernă

The phenomenon of association was particularly widespread in Transylvania throughout the modern era, and research devoted to it has generated a rich specialty literature.[1] In the following pages, we will attempt to provide an overview of this highly diverse universe, to emphasize its origins, and to analyze the functions it fulfilled in relation

---

[1] For further details on the most important associations in Transylvania, see Ioan-Aurel Pop, Thomas Nägler, Magyari András (eds.), *Istoria Transilvaniei*, vol. III *(De la 1711 până la 1918)*, Cluj-Napoca, Academia Română. Centrul de Studii Transilvane, 2008, pp. 128-129, 165, 174-175, 182-183, 188, 553-559, 573-574, 587, 593-594.

to the most important and unavoidable ideological coordinate of the century: national identity.

If we try to make some order in this "thick jungle," we can stratify it according to several criteria. Firstly, one can speak of societies established within the various ethnic and national communities such as the Saxons, Hungarians, Romanians, Serbs, Swabians, Slovaks, Jews and Armenians. Secondly, they are classified according to the content of their activity, from scientific societies, cultural and religious societies to economic associations and even sports or tourist ones. Thirdly, we distinguish between associations characteristic of certain social groups, that is gender or age groups, such as young students[2], women[3], school teachers and workers. Fourthly, they are different from the perspective of the functions they fulfill and that of their structural typology: from elitist scholarly societies, national cultural organizations, school foundations to support education, and bourgeois meeting places (*casine*) devoted to the socialization of the economic and cultural elite, to professional associations in various fields of activity, trade unions, local mutual aid societies (funeral aid, firefighting, social services), choirs as well as local reading and theater societies.

Although the type of association such as the aforementioned one is essentially a modern phenomenon, its origins can be found in the pre-modern era. If we only refer to the case of Transylvania, we can think of the economic role of gilds or the educational role of religious orders, such as the Jesuits and later the Piarists. At the level of counties, the noble congregations where people socialized, argued, made politics, voted letters of loyalty to the emperor, and mainly vehemently protested against any initiative from above – were bodies that firstly belonged to the civil society rather than the state.[4] There was a steady, almost imperceptible, transition from the Middle Ages to the modern era, namely from these eighteenth-century assemblies of medieval tradition to the mid nineteenth-century meeting places (*casine*) and the late nineteenth-century clubs.

While the forms of these medieval or modern organizations have common characteristics, their content, however, varies radically. The

---

[2] Eugenia Glodariu, *Asociațiile culturale ale tineretului studios român din Monarhia Habsburgică (1860-1918)*, Cluj-Napoca, Muzeul Național de Istorie a Transilvaniei, 1998.

[3] Simona Stiger, *Asociaționism şi emancipare în Transilvania până la Primul Război Mondial*, Arad, Ed. Fundaţiei „Moise Nicoară", 2001.

[4] For details regarding local assemblies in the Szekler seats, see Hermann Gusztáv Mihály, *Secuii. Istorie. Cultură. Identitate*, Miercurea Ciuc, Pro-Print, 2009, pp. 171-203.

core change that the nineteenth-century association phenomenon brings is that the associating subjects were now the modern, free, equal and autonomous individuals whose interaction would give raise to the *public space* that Habermas theorized.[5] These aspects are highlighted in an article from the *Familia* (The Family) magazine which talks about "the significance of our associations," taking Rousseau as a theoretical reference point:

> "The life and development of loners demands the association of the populace in order to promote both. The isolated individual obliterates himself bodily and spiritually, and where a crowd congregates in an undisciplined manner of association, dissolution quickly sets in and loners obliterate themselves. The main factors of a rational association, argues Rousseau in his "Social Contract," are: freedom, equality and the self-awareness of each individual."[6]

Modern association projects emerged in Transylvanian at the end of the eighteenth century in the ambiance of freemasonry and the cosmopolitan universalism of the Enlightenment, the first more important associations being the Masonic lodges. As Catherine Roth writes, Freemasons were more interested in the "fatherland" than in the nations sharing it, given that the structure of the lodges was multi-ethnic and multi-confessional.[7] However, shortly afterwards, the character of association projects will become increasingly "national." Thus, Saxons, Hungarians and Romanians will only create societies divided along ethnic lines.

In Sibiu, in 1790, the members of a lodge which had been dismantled by the authorities initially founded a reading society called *Zwanzig Liebhaber der Literatur* (Twenty Lovers of Literature) which was ethnically diverse. However, later they would later change its name into *Siebenbürgische Sächsische Societät der Wissenschaften* (The Transylvanian Saxon Scientific Society).[8] Meanwhile, the Hungarian writer György Aranka and the Romanian doctor Ioan Molnar Piuariu initiated two other similar projects, obviously having a national character.

---

[5] See Jürgen Habermas, *Sfera publică şi transformarea ei structurală. Studiu asupra unei categorii a societăţii burgheze*, Bucharest, Comunicare.ro, 2005.

[6] Ion Becineaga, *Însemnătatea asociaţiunilor noastre*, in *Familia*, XI, 1875, No. 42, p. 489, col. I.

[7] Catherine Roth, *La Nation entre les lignes. Médias invisibles, discours implicites et invention de tradition chez les Saxons de Transylvanie*, Thèse de doctorat, Paris, Université Panthéon-Assas, 2013, p. 369.

[8] *Ibidem*, pp. 369-370.

As the nineteenth century progressed, each nationality in Transylvania created its own representative cultural association. Thus, Saxons founded the *Verein für Siebenbürgische Landeskunde* (Association for Transylvanian Studies) in 1840, Hungarians the *Erdélyi Múzeum* (Transylvanian Museum Society) in 1859, and Romanians the *Asociațiunea Transilvană pentru Literatura și Cultura Poporului Român* (Transylvanian Association for the Literature and Culture of the Romanian People) in 1861. As the aforementioned article from the *Familia* (The Family) argues:

> "Among us, Romanians, the only permitted cultural association is the national one. This is what all civilized nations that went through these phases of public life tell us and prove to us. Even the famous English economist John Stuart Mill declared this when he took over the office of rector at the University of London; this is what the French Academy of Sciences, whose main purpose was to cleanse the French language of foreign words, tells us; this is also what the Prussians told us earlier with an iron fist and a fire tongue; ultimately, this is the banner under which also Hungarians protect themselves today by following the doctrines of Wesselényi and Széchenyi.[9]"

In the Romanian historiography, Liviu Maior and Ion Bolovan are two authors who used the term "civil society" in relation to the Romanian association phenomenon in Transylvania.[10] Their thesis is that Transylvanian Romanians, given the precariousness of their representation in the political life, used the hundreds of professional and cultural institutions they had created at regional and local levels to strengthen their community life that was under threat during the Dualist regime. From another standpoint, primarily anchored in the processes of economic and social development, Abraham Barna analyzed the "embourgeoisement" process of Romanian society in Transylvania, pointing out the transformations in this sense at all levels, from everyday life and family life to the Church, education and companies of all kinds.[11]

Paradoxically, the first to pay attention to this phenomenon were a few Hungarian writers and ideologists from the beginning of the

---

[9] Ion Becineaga, *op. cit.*, p. 489, col. II.

[10] Liviu Maior, *Habsburgi și romani. De la loialitatea dinastică la identitate națională*, București, Ed. Enciclopedică, 2006, p. 8; Ioan Bolovan, *Asociația națională arădeană pentru cultura poporului român. 1863-1918. Contribuții monografice*, Cluj-Napoca, Dacia XXI, 2011, pp. 138-147.

[11] Ábrahám Barna, *Az erdélyi románság polgárosodása a 19. század második felében*, Csík-szereda, Pro-Print, 2004.

twentieth century, alarmed by the social and economic upheaval of Transylvanian Romanians considered a danger to the Hungarian state.[12] Over the last few decades, the aforementioned process was historiographically assessed, this time mainly positively, in the works of Romanian historians of the economy, such as Vasile Dobrescu, Michael Drecin, and Lucian Dronca)[13], who noted with satisfaction the progress of Romanians in the financial, banking or cooperative sectors. In connection to this aspect, historians from the communist era, but also the respected Western scholar Keith Hitchins, focused on the milieu of Romanian workers and social democracy in Hungary in the Dualist period.[14]

One can legitimately ask the question whether the social-democratic political movement or the banks with Romanian capital have anything in common with the association phenomenon or with what we now call civil society. According to current definitions – according to which civil society excludes the state, the sphere of politics and the economy (as well as family life) – the answer would be no. However, in the specific case of the Romanian society in Transylvania, these fields of activity, together with the Romanian Churches, religious education, press and national political movement, strongly interfere with what we now call "civil society." Broad sectors of the Romanian society tried to place their national community outside the state through all institutions that could be used for this purpose, which resulted in the formation of a parallel public sphere with a national character – of a "Romanian civil society."[15]

Things were not very different in the case of Saxons either. Catherine Roth is one author who, in her brilliant work on the construction of Saxon identity, impeccably highlights the way the

---

[12] Tokaji László, *Eladó ország. Az erdélyrészi földbirtok-forgalom utóbbi 10 évi adatai*, Kolozsvár, Gombos F. Lyceum-Könyvnyomda, 1913.

[13] Mihai Drecin, *Banca „Albina" din Sibiu. Instituție națională a românilor transilvăneni. 1871-1918*, Cluj-Napoca, Dacia, 1982; Vasile Dobrescu, *Elita românească în lumea satului transilvan. 1867-1918*, Târgu-Mureş, Ed. Universităţii „Petru Maior", 1996; idem, *Sistemul de credit românesc din Transilvania. 1872-1918*, Târgu-Mureş, Ed. Universităţii „Petru Maior", 1999; Lucian Dronca, *Băncile româneşti din Transilvania în perioada dualismului austro-ungar (1867-1918)*, Cluj-Napoca, Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2003.

[14] Ion Cicală, *Mişcarea muncitorească şi socialistă din Transilvania. 1901-1921*, Bucharest, Ed. Politică, 1976; Keith Hitchins, *Conştiinţă naţională şi acţiune politică la românii din Transilvania*, vol. II (1868-1918), Cluj-Napoca, Dacia, 1992, chap. *Socialiştii români şi problema naţională din Ungaria. 1903-1918*.

[15] Ioan Bolovan, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

association phenomenon among Saxons served this goal. She uses the case study of the SKV, a mountain association that would become a major symbol of their communal life.[16]

Unlike Romanians, who began to dream of a community life only in the eighteenth century (when they initially demanded to be accepted as the fourth political nation of Transylvania),[17] Saxons were already such an autonomous, well individualized, body since the Middle Ages and the Reformation, that is the date when they acquired the structure as a distinct social category, framed by its own Church and representing one ethnic community. At the end of the eighteenth century and then again throughout the Dualist period, when their communal autonomy (structured around medieval, obsolete forms, incompatible with the requirements of modern life) was first challenged by Joseph's reforms and then by the *Ausgleich*, Saxons reacted by constructing a modern identity consciousness[18] doubled by a new institutional network meant to replace the old medieval "nation," such as the Saxon University (*Universitas* Saxorum). Similarly as in the case of Romanians, their own Lutheran Church, together with its subordinated education network, were the main pillars of their community life.[19] Closely connected to the aforementioned institutions was a flourishing civil society that structured the "parallel public sphere" of Saxon expression. In addition, it was more developed than the Romanian one and sometimes served as a model for the latter.

In the Saxon case, the medieval origins of their modern association played an important role. Thus, the "Neighborhood" (*Nachbarschaft*) represented an infra-communal solidarity framework found in Saxon towns as well as in villages. This system would also expand among Romanians living on the *Fundus Regius* (Königsboden). The organization of the seat, the guilds and municipal statutes –

---

[16] Catherine Roth, *op. cit.*, pp. 345-579.

[17] See David Prodan, *Supplex Libellus Valachorum. Din istoria formării naţiunii române*, Bucureşti, Ed. Enciclopedică, 2013; Keith Hitchins, *Romanian Nation-formation in Transylvania: the Stages, Seventeenth Century to 1914*, in Sorin Mitu (ed.), *Re-Searching the Nation: The Romanian File. Studies and Selected Bibliography on Romanian Nationalism*, Cluj-Napoca, International Book Access, 2008, pp. 57-80.

[18] Sorin Mitu, Anca Gogâltan, *Transylvanian Saxons' Identity and the Idea of German Affiliation (18th–19th Century)*, in Sorin Mitu (ed.), *Building Identities in Transylvania. A Comparative Approach*, Cluj–Gatineau, Argonaut & Symphologic Publishing, 2014, pp. 55-70.

[19] See Mircea-Gheorghe Abrudan, *Ortodoxie şi Luteranism în Transilvania între Revoluţia paşoptistă şi Marea Unire. Evoluţie istorică şi relaţii confesionale*, Sibiu–Cluj-Napoca, Ed. Andreiana & Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2015.

superimposed by the Universitas Saxorum[20] and further coagulated by the Lutheran Church – complete the picture of well-rounded communal structures that served as forerunners to the nineteenth-century professional, economic or educational associations.

Swabians, even though they formed well-organized communities (especially rural ones), were lacking the historical roots capable of shaping a national civil society, so their situation was quite different from that of the Saxons. In their case, we encounter primal association forms that resulted from certain local "grassroots" initiatives, which highlights ordinary people's remarkable ability to mobilize and organize themselves in order to achieve common goals. So were citizens' groups created to prevent and fight fires[21] or local choirs spread in all market towns and villages in the Banat.[22] Local Serbs and Romanians followed the Swabian model and set up their own music clubs, choirs or marching bands.

From a national perspective, however, as Rudolf Graf pointed out, most Swabian scientific, professional or even religious music associations performed their activities in Hungarian,[23] which highlights, in both senses, not only their wish to integrate within the existing social and political framework, but also the pressures exerted by the Hungarian state.

In reality, in the case of Hungarians and Szeklers (although – if you regard the situation in a formal way – they started from the positions of a social status similar to that of the Saxons, each representing only one part of a plural and segmented historical Transylvania), things were different and evolved in different ways. Until 1918, in general, Hungarians were the politically and socially dominant element in Transylvania. As a result, throughout most of this period, they were not forced to take refuge in a parallel communal and autonomous life within which to save their threatened identity as was the case of Romanians and Saxons.

---

[20] Ioan-Aurel Pop, Thomas Nägler, Magyari András, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 181; Vintilă Mihăilescu, "Vecinătatea şi fraternitatea economică", www.icca.ro/pdf/Vintila_Mihailescu.pdf, (last accessed: 28.02.2013).

[21] See the statues of St. Florian, patron saint of firefighters, constructed by Swabians in Aradul Nou and Jimbolia (Horia Truţă, Dan Demşea, *Monumente de for public, însemne memoriale, construcţii decorative şi parcuri din judeţul Arad. Catalog selectiv*, Arad, Nigredo, 2008, p. 7).

[22] Ioan-Aurel Pop, Thomas Nägler, Magyari András, *op. cit.*, vol. III, p. 593.

[23] *Ibidem*, pp. 593-595.

To a lesser extent, however, a similar phenomenon occurred also among Transylvanian Hungarians especially during the Viennese Court's centralizing drives, although the province always preserved its autonomous structure (from 1691 until 1867) and the Hungarian elite its leading position. Whenever Hungarians were advocating for the assertion of their nationality in Transylvania – for example linguistically, against the supremacy of Latin or German in public life –, they would set up associations for the preservation of their language ("threatened" or thus far insufficiently "cultivated"), such as the *Erdélyi Magyar Nyelvmivelő Társaság* (Society for the Cultivation of Hungarian in Transylvania), founded in Târgu Mureş in 1793.[24] It was the time when Romanians were also pondering their own *Philosophical Society* (Societate Filosofească) and began to write the first grammars and lexicons.[25]

A similarly "competitive" association initiative was the *Transylvanian Museum Society* (Erdélyi Múzeum-Egyesület) whose beginnings can be traced back to early nineteenth century when a magazine with the same name was published (1814-1818).[26] The project finally materialized in 1859, still in an era of Hapsburg "absolutism" by the creation of a cultural and scientific society with this name. This society urged Hungarians to defend and to cultivate their own "muses" in Transylvania, not necessarily in competition with the Saxons or Romanians, but especially in relation to the centralizing Viennese policy which separated Transylvania from the motherland, namely Hungary. Austrian authorities showed naiveté when they approved the establishment of the society, arguing that it was apolitical, had scientific goals, and was founded by aristocrats with moderate views, among them several prominent Romanian and Saxons scholars.[27] In fact, as Catherine Roth writes by following in the footsteps of Pierre Bourdieu, "culture is always political."[28] As a result, neither the undeclared objectives in the statutes of this Hungarian society could ignore the national finality of such an endeavor.

But when the "union" was finally achieved and Transylvania was administratively incorporated into Hungary in 1867, the objectives

---

[24] See Jancsó Elemér, *Az Erdélyi Magyar Nyelvmivelő Társaság íratai*, Bucureşti, Akadémiai Könyvkiadó, 1955.

[25] Ioan-Aurel Pop, Thomas Nägler, Magyari András, *op. cit.*, vol. III, pp. 128-129.

[26] *Ibidem*, pp. 165-166.

[27] Anna Mária Ardos, Maria Mirel, *Considerații privind înființarea societăților culturale transilvănene Astra şi Asociația Muzeului Ardelean*, in „Acta Musei Napocensis", XVIII, 1981, pp. 531-536.

[28] Catherine Roth, *op. cit.*, p. 440.

of Hungarian societies would also change. No matter whether they were local initiatives started from below (for mutual aid, for professional categories, meeting places or theater societies), or organizations with a wider scope, they now had by their side a state that was no longer perceived as hostile. On the contrary, the Hungarian state was now a partner – a very strong one – called to protect national culture and interests. For such reasons, the Hungarian society *Erdélyi Közművelődési Egyesület* (EMKE) (Hungarian Cultural Society of Transylvania), created in 1885 with the stated aim of counteracting the activity of the Romanian ASTRA society, was seen more as an instrument of the state and its Magyarization policy than as an initiative of the civil society.[29]

It is true that a number of Transylvanian associations have tried to cultivate a certain regional and trans-ethnic specificity. For example, among the founders of the Transylvanian Museum Society, who supported its establishment through donations, were Andrei Şaguna, Alexandru Sterca Şuluţiu and Timotei Cipariu. Similarly, two years later the Hungarian Count Mikó Imre, who acted as president of the society, financially contributed to the establishment of the ASTRA society.[30]

However, such gestures were rather verbal. For instance, the statutes of *The Saxon Mountain Society* (Siebenbürgischer Karpatenverein, SKV) stipulated that anyone could join its ranks, regardless of nationality, but at the same time ruled that is was a "German association."[31] In any case, among its members no more than 3% were Romanians and Hungarians![32] Therefore, one can note that in nineteenth-century Transylvania people preferred to congregate along ethnic lines even when they were organizing a trip. Hungarians had their own mountain association, the *Erdélyi Kárpát-Egyesület* (EKE), founded in 1891[33], while Romanians, in the absence of something more consistent, took pride in Badea Cârţan! Even social democracy in Hungary was organized along national lines. For example, in 1905, a distinct Romanian section of the Hungarian Social Democratic Party was set up,[34] which says everything about the relationship between the association phenomenon and national affiliation in Transylvania throughout the Dualist period.

---

[29] See Aradi Viktor, „*Emke*" şi „*Astra*", in „Transilvania", LIII, 1922, No. 4, pp. 275-282.

[30] Anna Mária Ardos, Maria Mirel, *op. cit.*, pp. 531-536.

[31] Catherine Roth, *op. cit.*, p. 439.

[32] *Ibidem*, p. 442.

[33] Ioan-Aurel Pop, Thomas Nägler, Magyari András, *op. cit.*, vol. III, p. 574.

[34] *Ibidem*, p. 443.

The association phenomenon is based on communication and the creation of a public space in which individuals share their ideas. The nationalities of Austria-Hungary chose to build their public space separately by creating parallel civil societies that were most often in competition. This tradition is still producing effects in Transylvania. The ASTRA and the Transylvanian Museum Society were reestablished after 1990, and the Saxons perpetuated the tradition of their scholarly societies within the framework of the *Arbeitskreis für siebenbürgische Landeskunde e. V. Heidelberg.*