

The Old New Soul of the Interwar Romanian Thought

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Abstract: After the minimum criteria for unity - a common language and a unified polity - have been achieved in the aftermath of the Great War, the monopoly over Romanian identity in the interwar period has been strongly contested by several parties. Debating what is the direction that Romanian thought should take in the burgeoning plurality of ideas and concepts that have begun to take root, a few voices have emerged, some with a stronger echo than others. In this regard, Romania's situation is not entirely different from that of Germany or Italy. However, whereas Germany saw its national monument unfolding at the end of the Great War, for Romania it was a matter of fulfilling the aspirations of the new spirit through the now unified Romanian cultural space. Having accomplished its hitherto historical imperative, this new soul underwent a brief identity crisis in order to redefine its ideology, which left enough space for the old spirit to resurface. Amidst this crisis, culture ultimately became a political ideology. And this ideology is the essence of the old new soul of the interwar Romanian thought. In addition to the need to formulate a coherent philosophy of culture, Romanian thinkers also faced the challenge of developing a politics of culture to go along with it.

Keywords: interwar philosophy, Romanian philosophy, culture, mystery, modernism, conservatism

As is the case in psychology, it is easy to distinguish ourselves as individuals when we compare ourselves to other individuals. However, it is extremely difficult to define ourselves effectively by asserting what we are - and in what way we are - in the absence of another to compare ourselves to. Thus, it is harder to determine an *affirmative* identity. The first stage of identity is when it manifests itself in its relation with another. The second stage of identity is when it manifests in its relation to itself. It was straightforward for us to shape our

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identity in an *apophatic*, negative manner, comparing it against the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of our neighbors. But when the focus of this comparison turned inwards, it became apparent that Romanian society was a kaleidoscope of subcultures fighting for domination and the exclusive right to define an all-encompassing Romanian identity.

Constantin Noica ([1978] 1996, 5-6) claims that Romania has a bivalent soul, because it has always been caught in a constant struggle between the Orient and the Occident. In his opinion, this is a cause of joy because the uniqueness of our historical conjuncture offers us the possibility of broadening our cultural horizons more than any other culture belonging exclusively to a single such paradigm. We should not interpret Romanian culture as being situated *between* these two major cultural paradigms, but rather as being in the privileged position of being *within* both paradigms at the same time.

Constantin Rădulescu-Motru (1910, 4) responded to this dilemma by stating that the soul of a nation has a nature of its own. We must not confuse the nature of our culture with the nature of any one of its agents. Our culture resides in each one of us, and simultaneously exists outside of us. We give our culture organic life, and it gives us our historical continuity. Our culture “is the image in which we incarnate ourselves for the eyes of others”. Noica leans more towards *personalism* and the “great man” approach to culture when, like Lucian Blaga and Constantin Rădulescu-Motru, he attributes the complex process of culture to only a few exceptional individuals. Blaga (1937) calls them *creators* of culture. If we follow this line of reasoning, we come to the conclusion that all the great cultures that have appeared throughout history are of a deliberate, artificial and individual construction and ultimately the tyranny of a single personality.

Noica distinguishes between the *historical culture* to which an individual belongs at a given moment in time and space, and an ideal *ur-culture*. This primordial culture, he says, is *eternal*, immutable, unchanging and present in the deep patterns of all cultural expressions that its agents - the aforementioned exceptional creators - exhibit in all their cultural artifacts. Blaga (1935) calls these deep patterns *stylistic matrices*. The novelty of their approach lies in the fact that to the Kantian temporal and spatial a priori they add a stylistic a priori (Noica [1944] 1991, 28).

Lucian Blaga compares this eternal culture with childhood. All major cultures have followed a path to reach their maturity and turn themselves from eternal cultures into historical cultures. Both Noica

and Rădulescu-Motru are of the opinion that the sooner a culture leaves behind its immature phase, the better. But Blaga (2011, 332) thinks that these phases are autonomous and there is no causal relation between them. Each of these phases possesses “unique, incomparable structures”. A culture can willingly choose to remain in its eternal phase for extended periods of time, and, indeed, some never leave this phase. Owing to these characteristics, this “childhood” ceases to be merely a provisional phase. Instead, it becomes an “enclosed land, an autarchic duration with its center within itself, enjoying full sovereignty within its borders.” (Ibid, 333) There are no qualitatively superior or inferior cultures. They are only formally distinct cultures; possessing distinct strengths and shortcomings in their chosen expressions.

I disagree with Noica’s ([1944] 1991, 8) assertions that “all conscious culture is personal. ... a form of individualization”, and “while popular creation is anonymous ... It can constitute neither a deliberate, willed culture, but rather a certain creative spontaneity, which is more akin to nature than to culture...”, in the sense that popular creation is anonymous, but that anonymous creator has a distinct identity and is a full-fledged individual who already belongs to an existing culture. No cultural product ever emerges as a spontaneous natural phenomenon; rather it is always a deliberate human artifact. Blaga (2011, 332) almost admits that “it is not man who is the creative subject of culture, but culture with its soul, is the subject for itself”, only to immediately reverse course and finally assert that “in reality culture is not an ‘organism’ nor does it bear a special soul”.

How can we therefore know the nature of our culture if not through its artifacts? And, more importantly, how do we assume a particular culture as our own? Through experience, says Rădulescu-Motru (1910, 5); and Noica agrees. Constantin Noica ([1978] 1996, 6) continues this argument by claiming that “the Germanic soul has a special sense of becoming, the Russian soul a special sense of space, and the American soul a special sense of efficiency”; each having a special and privileged relation with a certain aspect of existence. What, then, is specific to the Romanian soul? According to Noica, it is its sentiment of *being*. And how do we experience this sentiment? The answer is: through language. This argument is based on an earlier work by Mircea Vulcănescu (1943), which described at length the Romanian dimension of existence. The identity which was to be the field of scientific inquiry now had to give way to a “sentiment”, to a subjective

“experience” of belonging. For Rădulescu-Motru, nationality and identity become a question of “spirituality”.

All of them fail to overcome the obsolete Hegelian habit of personification. Not even Rădulescu-Motru manages to decouple culture as a complex historical, psychological and social phenomenon from the influence of its embodied agents. There is no spirit of the world, or spirit of time, or of a place outside of a metaphor. Although Blaga (2011, 333) warns them against “falling ... into the sin of making a current metaphor into a real hypostasis”. He also states that “the man dominated by a magical mentality resorts to metaphors out of self-preservation instinct” in the interest of personal and collective security (Ibid, 352). This behavior perfectly describes Nae Ionescu’s approach to his ideology; in the defense of Orthodox neo-conservatism, metaphor ceases to be a mere metaphor; but in Blaga’s words, it becomes “a defense weapon and a preventive reflex”. But it’s a defense against what? According to Ionescu ([1933] 1993, 23), it is a defense against the “modern, democratic and egalitarian state”. The modern Romanian state ceases to be “the natural ally of the church” because it has ceased to be a Christian state. Formalism overwhelms the religious emotion, and with this spirituality turns into ideology. So, Romantic historical nationalists clashed with a form of Orthodox mystic nationalism.

This brought about the ascribed messianic mission of the postwar new generation. Modeled on the typology and pattern of Charles Maurras’ integral nationalism this new generation began a series of calls for cultural purification and national regeneration (Iordachi 2006). The seeds of this “autochthonous” integralist movement were sown by Alexandru Constantin Cuza. And, not long afterwards they were best described by Nichifor Crainic in his 1938 *Orthodoxy and Ethnocracy*. The term *ethnocracy* here is extremely misleading. Crainic’s new state is extensively an Orthodox corporatist theocracy, and just by conjuncture an ethnic construction; the all, in the attempt to modernizing Orthodoxy and make it relevant again.

Such a path to maturity is cyclical. A given geographical area can be the cradle of several historical cultures that succeed each other. Once reaching maturity, historical cultures naturally weaken and die. And in their place new cultures emerge. Some of them inherit the characteristics of their now defunct forerunner culture. But some are so radically different that they do not resemble anything autochthonous.

At times, this circle is interrupted and a decaying, mature culture refuses to give way to a new, younger one to take its place. Instead, a call for regeneration is issued (Griffin 2006, 32). This recourse to the *palingenetic myth* can take many forms and shapes, but in all its occurrences, it presents itself as a viable alternative to mainstream modernism. The old soul is not only conservative but also reactionary; it does not pursue the significant advances that the new soul achieved. Rather, it turns away from them to obsessively reflect upon its own origins. As Mircea Eliade (1963, 30) explains it “[the] return to origins gives the hope of a rebirth”. According to him, those who believe in this myth do not believe that a decayed society, or the world at large, can be mended or repaired. It has to be re-created in its entirety. And consequently the more insightful one is of its origins, the more power it has over this rebirth, and the stronger this new society will be.

But in order to have the possibility to return to a *before*, we need to draw a line and establish a system of temporal references; before ought always to be a before something. For example, for the French, this is a simple question - before means before the French Revolution.

Charles Maurras (1928) describes French history as clearly divided between the *ancient regime* and the rest; with this rest encompassing everything from the Revolution onwards. His thesis is a simple, but effective one. The ultimate goal of a French regeneration was to combat the aesthetic decadence of Romanticism and the social and political damages of the Revolution (Sutton 2002, 1). His Action Française would eventually coalesce into a neoconservative Catholic monarchist movement with a strong counter-revolutionary agenda. Ironically, in 1926 Maurras and his movement were accused by the Vatican of “doctrinal and practical political modernism” (Rao 1983); a Catholic movement headed by an agnostic, in direct political opposition to the Church.

For the Romanians the answer is not a simple one. There is no clear breaking point in Romanian culture that could serve as a catalyst for such major changes as disruptive as the French Revolution. There have been several proposals, including the 1848 Revolution or the 1859 Union of the Principalities. Both moments received a great amount of recognition for having contributed to the modernization of Romanian society. I think that we should not look for a breaking point, but rather for a moment of consolidation in Romanian culture. And there is no greater moment than the end of the Great War. This seems to be the case with Nae Ionescu and Nichifor Crainic, who refer to this event as

the specific breaking point for their *before* moment. In a different way, Lucian Blaga and Constantin Noica refrain from referencing a specific historical period, but a metaphysical *illo tempore*.

It has been argued that Cuza and Crainic's political movement was copying the Italian Fascists. I argue against this association on two very important ideological grounds. The Italian Fascists were neither conservatives nor monarchists; they were social modernists and revolutionary nationalists that favored a "strong man" dictatorship; whereas both Action Français and the Romanian National-Christian Defense League (LANC) were ultraconservative and reactionary movements with a strong monarchist ideology - not a strong monarch, but a strong idea of monarchy as a symbol. One of LANC's first mottos was "Christ, King, Nation", which embodied virtually all of Action Français's ideals. And secondly, the Italian Fascists were not inherently anti-Semitic as up until 1938 Italian Jews could actually join the Italian National Fascist Party; whereas, again, both Action Français and LANC shared a strong anti-Semitic stance in their defining ideology.

Fascism, Hitlerism and Bolshevism and all the other similar contemporary European movements are not in any sense returns to the past. They do, indeed, allude to the past by invoking the past to some extent in their public discourse. But they are far from being what the history of any nation would call a renaissance (Rădulescu-Motru 1934). Fascism wants to reorganize Italy "to conquer the future", not to restore the tradition of the Roman Empire. Germany's leadership invokes many examples from the past, not to return to them again, but as useful analogies and parables for the political propaganda; tradition serves them only as a means. And in the Soviet Union, even these appeals are no longer made, the political leaders building a completely new spiritual order highlighting only those aspects of the past that they agree with their goal (Ibid.). Since they are obviously not proper revivals, in the historical sense, what are then these great revolutionary movements in Italy, Germany and Russia? And what have meant their Romanian counterparts?

In reality, the conflict we are dealing with is not between an old soul and a new soul, but rather between a new soul and an even newer soul, because there is no tradition of radical Orthodoxy to which this apparent re-emergence of old soul to be tied. So, Nae Ionescu, Nichifor Crainic, Constantin Noica and even Lucian Blaga are placing not in a classic neoconservative position, but actually in a radical revolutionary

one. Constantin Rădulescu-Motru himself is not impartial in this struggle. As a center-left agrarian with Romantic sensibilities, he tried to place this identity within the peasant class, which was representing the quantitative majority of Romania's population. However, he was not part of this social class, belonging to the privileged class of the intellectual elites. As such, his views of how an ideal Romanian identity was to be constituted did not in fact reflect the socio-cultural and political realities of interwar Romanian society. He is closer to the Western European *ethos* than the traditional Romanian one. What is unique to his own version of "centrist" nationalism, the *Romanianism*, was a civic nationalism completely lacking in any kind of racism or xenophobia.

Against Nae Ionescu's assertion, I argue that never the modern Romanian state has been a Christian state. From the start, it was a product of revolutionary ideals that have origins in the Western European romantic nationalism and the French Revolution. As Rădulescu-Motru ([1937] 1999, 26) puts it, "an absolute identity of soul structure can never exist between all the individuals of a nation". Yet I believe that initially, this identity did not even exist in a majority of its individuals. Eric Hobsbawm (1992, 56-60), arguing from a linguistic point of view, asserts that the French state preceded the formation of the French people by standardizing a "national language" through which it disseminated sanctioned cultural values from the top down. In the same spirit, I believe that the Romanian state made the Romanian nation through a mechanism of dissemination.

In archaic times, this mechanism of dissemination was the church. However, this church was not meant to, and indeed it did not, spread any ideals relating to a Romanian nationhood. The institution functioned alongside historical geopolitics. For example till the late 18th century, the language of church service in the Romanian Principalities was the Old Church Slavonic. Coresi (a Romanian printer of the 16th century in Wallachia) had to flee to Braşov (in Transylvania) where he could edit printed books in the Romanian language. His work was of great importance for the development and unification of the Romanian language. A common language, put into print, acquires an immutability that makes it seem more permanent and therefore more "eternal" than it really was (Hobsbawm 1992, 61).

An important modern mechanism of dissemination for the Romanian state took the form of public education that was under siege in its upper echelons (Rădulescu-Motru 1943). The main accusation

was that Romanians only had teachers of foreign philosophy and not authentic philosophers. Therefore, this main mechanism of disseminating identity was rather dominated by the power of foreign influences and, as such, there was a threat to artificially replace the Romanian cultural identity. According to Constantin Noica ([1944] 1991, 99), the old Romanian soul “does not, in its natural course, possess the vocation of philosophy ..., and only the theological” can give it this direction.

Rădulescu-Motru (1904, 5) himself has described this phenomenon as a social disease that has an evolution identical to that of an organic disease. It goes through a period of infiltration, in which the social body displays the early symptoms of infection; it follows a period of culmination, in which it dominates the social body; and it ends by a period of decline, in which the now immunized social body eliminates it. He was referring to the events of the 19th century, placing the final healing phase during the interwar period. He was optimistic in entrusting the younger generation with the mission to speed up the recovery of Romanian society; but he omitted an aspect: some organisms do not recover from such a disease, and they only serve to hasten its demise.

Lucian Blaga ([1943] 1983) found the main problem of the scientific spirit in education’s organization in that it ignores the man’s need for mystery. The scientific spirit is alienated from the Romanian soul, because instead of drawing support from the beliefs of the Romanian people, it relies on a European tradition of Descartes, Kant, Hegel, and other such foreigners. We belong first and foremost to a European culture and only after that to a Romanian culture. It seems to be natural that Romanians share aspects of culture with the Europeans at large (Rădulescu-Motru 1943): “in all its fields, the European culture calls for collaboration between people and not for the singularization of each people within its own ethnic group”. Originality results from the differentiation that the struggle gives, in the form of a competition between people, and not from singularization to which only nations incapable of progress are condemned. Against Blaga’s claims, Constantin Rădulescu-Motru asserted that myth is nothing more than an object of study for philosophy. Mythology appears in culture under two hypostases. Firstly, in primitive cultures it appears as a *taboo*, something forbidden to be known; and secondly, it appears in modern scientific cultures as *the yet unknown* (Ibid.) The scientific philosopher not only neglects the taboo, but also fiercely

fights against it. For the scientific philosopher there is no hindrance before reason. There are difficulties in the advance of reason, but not conscious hindrances. Everything that comes into the field of human consciousness, either through the channel of the senses or through the intuition of intelligence, must be verified in the light of reason. And it has to be verified by everyone, constituting the very sovereignty of human reason. The progress of culture has always consisted in the extension of the right of scrutiny of reason into the field covered by the taboo mystery.

If tradition comes in conflict with experience, it is not experience that removes tradition, but the latter removes the evidence of experience. And relinquishing this right in the face of taboo means the triumph of the primitive man that now pretends to be modern. The abandonment of this right is demanded only by the taboo, and not by the unknowable, which, on the contrary, needs the extension of the right of scrutiny. As concerns the second mystery, it is not a prohibition to knowledge, but rather an overcoming of the barriers that stand in front of this higher knowledge. If that is the case, then the scientific philosophy studies the mystery extensively (Ibid.). In this matter, the advice of Rădulescu-Motru is “to understand the spirit of the times we live in” and not to fight against it. His description of the new soul rejects superstitions in favor of reason and scientific rigor. It embraces individuality, and especially individual exceptionalism, in the detriment of amorphous collectivity. In philosophy it is rather analytical than contemplative. Regarding religion it is strongly secularist, and economically, it is a reflection of the industrial revolution and technological progress.

Constantin Rădulescu-Motru (1910, 3) rejects the old soul as a mosaic, a patchwork lacking a conscious unity or consensus. From such a soul, culture emerges only as a conjunctural and sporadic phenomenon. This “gregarious soul” is not opposed to imitation. On the contrary, it mandates uniformity and strongly discourages individuality and dissent. The individual living within such a soul lacks true personhood; and harmony in this type of society is mechanically acquired and biologically motivated. The “gregarious soul stopped the differentiation of personalities and also of cultures”; but at the same time it “preserved the entirety of the Romanian nation and of the weak culture as much as it was” (Ibid, 17; 20). An old soul, embodied in the Romanian Orthodox Church, has undoubtedly served an important role in resisting hostile foreign elements; but the same conservative nature

is accused of “shameful backwardness”, culture being slowly propagated, amid the intimate background of religion.

According to Rădulescu-Motru (1904, 29), culture “exists in so far as it is *actual* in the human soul”. A culture exists only within its temporal boundaries. Attempting to revive a defunct culture into actuality does not bring back it, but a culture in line with its new historical circumstances and with only a formal, superficial resemblance to the defunct one. This culture does not exist as a self-contained substance that can be separated from its manifestations, but it exists only in these manifestations. A culture does not exist unless it is actual in the soul of the members of a specific society: “The true being of the soul consists in nothing else but in the life of the soul itself” (Ibid, 31).

Culture is passed on from generation to generation as an heirloom. It is preserved through traditions, writing and cultural artifacts. Without the individual to inherit it, culture would lose its meaning. However, at the same time, this inherited treasure would be dead and ineffective if it was not alive in each present generation compelled to new creations. It may lie dormant in the works of past generations, but it becomes true culture only when it is *alive* within the current generation.

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