

MEANINGS REGARDING THE CONCEPT OF HISTORY IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY ROMANIAN THOUGHT

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to capture the diversity enclosed in the multiple meanings associated with the concept of history in the early twentieth century Romanian thought, the years preceding the consolidation of a common Romanian identity and a common Romanian state. I will emphasize Vasile Goldiș's (one figure of major importance in the process of Romanian unification) contribution to the expression of history as a defining factor in the creation of a nation. First I will discuss the late nineteenth-early twentieth century approaches regarding the concept of history, trying to integrate Vasile Goldiș in this atmosphere and then I will argue for Vasile Goldiș's contribution to the acknowledgement of history as a strong basis for national identity, national unity, and common culture and values.

Key words: history, self-determination, Romanian national identity, Romanian national unity Vasile Goldiș

INTRODUCTION

The sense of history is a problematic concept. It is a matter that exhibits uncertainties, which require an explanation and lets itself to discussions. However, I do think it is an important issue, which constitutes a task for the history of philosophy. The definitions offered by some Romanian historians and philosophers, concerning the historical phenomenon, can be a starting point.

The definition that B. P. Hașdeu offered, in 1860, for a subject that he considered to be the “the confession of past times” (Hașdeu, 1985, 297) and “the most difficult of all sciences”, is but an epistemological translation of his ontological conception of history, massively influenced by Giambattista Vico and evolutionism. “History is the criterion of birth laws, growth, development, weakening, destruction and rebirth of nations in space and time and of the fellowship which all these phases share for a continuous and never-ending progress of humanity” (Vetișanu, 1974, 1052).

As far as the characteristic manner of the Junimist approaches go, it is portrayed by designing history as pedagogy, as a means of guiding the perspective in the present.

With a romantic spirit, on different occasions, A.D. Xenopol defined history as “learning the present times” (1866), “an intellectual guide and a moral comfort for the citizen” (1871) and “learning politics” (1880). In these first attempts of defining it, the emphasis falls on the moral and educational aspect, rather than on the cognitive one. However, the definition that the Bishop Melchisedec offered when revising the Huși Chronicles, stands out as an exception: “the complete and rational understanding of the general phenomena of peoples’ and humanity’s lives”.

G. Panu and Th. Rossetti had in mind the same educational purpose, of a guide in action. The first, reviewing the critical history of the Romanians (1873), which was published by Hașdeu, defined it as “a vast field of a never-ending temptation, where we may obtain sound principles for the remainder of our lives”. The second one proposed the use of the past’s experience in order to distinguish some meanings useful in the present.

However, for I. Slavici, who was even less of a historian than the first two were, history was, aside from being the favorite formative tool, also “an interesting intellectual gymnastics” (Zub, 1976, 216-20).

History, as a wellspring of patriotic and moral examples can be found in the meaning conferred to history by Alex. Papiu Ilarian, one of the leading exponents of the romantic Transylvanian historiography, during the post-revolutionary period. In his historical thesaurus of monuments for Romania (1862), he depicted the nation’s history, from the exigency’s perspective of self-knowledge as “the book of life that, throughout the centuries, enlightened the minds of legislators and politicians, to whose examples the hearts and minds of citizens might soar, to mimic the grandiose deeds of their ancestors, to limit their demise in order to make the most of the present and secure the future” (Teodor, 1990, 198).

What is surprising in all these quotes is precisely history’s comparison with a book of life/a book of learning – a similar metaphorical phrasing to the one suggested by Mihail Kogălniceanu, prior to the forty-eighter revolution. Indeed, in his Speech held at the first national history lecture in the Michaelian Academy (1843), Kogălniceanu thought of history as “the cornerstone book of peoples and of each person, individually” (Kogălniceanu in Teodor, 1970, 134). Once again, circumstances betray the pre-revolutionary, romantic roots of the idea – widely spread in the second half of the 19th century – that defined history in terms of social pedagogy.

After founding the Romanian Academic Society (1867), with the active and substantial support of Transylvania’s people, the crisp, formative-patriotic meaning conferred to history, will find in the academic ambiance a suitable environment for

cultivation and propagation (Teodor, 1990, 195-7). We are witnessing here an increase of its national-patriotic note, derived from the national duties of all the Romanians' supreme cultural forum. Taking on the role of organizing the Romanian historical research throughout the entire area inhabited by Romanians, the historical-archeological department of the Romanian Academic Society attributed to history the task of strengthening the national consciousness. "The study of the country's history and of the nation represents for the Romanian people one of the essential life conditions. If the language of a nation can be considered its soul, well then history is that marvelous means through which its national life manifests itself, it is the degree of legitimacy of a people, in society, and the concert of all the other peoples" (Annals of the Romanian Academic Society, II, p 1-2).

After achieving the national-state unity ideal, because it was no longer a priority from a practical-action point of view, the formative-educational meaning conferred to history faded into obscurity. Its natural fading away does not mean its disappearance from the Romanian historical thought area. It is proven so, among other things, by its reiteration by Iorga: "history is not a subject like physics, chemistry, trigonometry etc.: it is an essential factor in the creation of a peoples' soul [...] a means of power of a people" (Iorga, 1999, 4,7). Positively assessed by C. C. Giurgescu, despite the controversy between the two (Giurgescu, 1937, 60), it synthesized the common belief of the "old" and "new" historiographical schools.

HISTORY. COSMOCENTRIC MEANINGS

A. D. Xenopol and Vasile Pârvan manifested along the lines of conferring a broad, generous meaning, of an organic integration, to the human history into that of the universe.

In an attempt to explain the historical becoming, Xenopol acknowledges the existence of two categories of factors: constant and variable. Those in the first category – the external environment, the national character and intellectual continuity – are at the helm of evolution, influencing it, whilst those pertaining to the second category – historical forces and circumstances – determine it.

Out of the constant factors (Xenopol, 1899, 81-2), the natural and immutable characteristics of peoples' soul, determined by the organic, physiological and psychological complexity of the human individuals – and the external environment – nature and the geographical situation in which peoples are summoned to live in – are "elements that we shall encounter at the basis of the whole history. But these elements do nothing but place beacons for the direction it will follow, mark the height to which it will rise, print the particular color to which it will turn to, but without exerting any modifying action on the facts" (Pop, 1999, 208).

For Xenopol, the historical becoming meant the transformation of the spirit, the last link of a long evolutionary process, previously held in the inorganic,

namely organic matter. Proposing the edge of a universe in a perpetual evolutionary transformation, in which the history of humanity represented nothing more than “a particular case of the becoming existence’s history” (Florea, 1970, 72), the logical relationships between the human history and the natural one were those between a part and the whole (Florea, 1967, 307-8).

Pârvan also proposed a cosmic version, when he saw in the becoming of the human life a spiritual-anthropomorphic expression of the universe’s forces: “In the infinity of the cosmic rhythm variations, the rhythm of the human life is lost as is a note in the symphony of the spheres. It is unique [...] It is the rhythm of the spiritual life [...] The pace of the human life, private in its various spiritual becomings, is the historic pace [...] The evolution of the human spirit is the history of the life’s creative rhythm [...] Thus, life’s cosmic rhythm has in the human life’s rhythm continuous anthropomorphic rebirths: the society, the law, the state, the art, the struggle between individuals, the great variations of the thoughts that stir the crowds – they are all simple human aspects of some of the universe’s external forces [...]” (Pop, 1999, 216).

A cohesive conception on historic factors, defined as “manufacturing agents” of “pressure differences, moral or material” (Pop, 1999, 216), being exercised in the social or individual area, generate new historic becomings, can be encountered at the same Pârvan.

Even if he was not a professional philosopher, Vasile Goldiș has hinted, in his writings, notions regarding the becomings of the human life and the factors that generate it, limiting himself, of course, to the Romanian nation. “The time must come, when all the peoples of this monarchy will have equal rights, in a constitution, which will be based on the principle of national autonomy” (Goldiș, 1911, 2), which continues in the same vein “Fight for creating and understanding the necessity of national autonomy, for it would put an end to the privileges of the Hungarian race and would bring about the happiness and prosperity of the Romanians...” (Goldiș, 1911, 3).

HISTORY. ANTHROPOCENTRIC MEANINGS

In order to better understand the ideas of Vasile Goldiș regarding political history and action in a particular historical moment, the liberties’ categories and the peoples’ rights of deciding their destiny, I welcome the philosopher’s Mircea Florian reference on the concept of history.

In his fundamental work – *Recessiveness as a world structure* – Mircea Florian demonstrated that anthropocentrism is a recessive structure in relation to the cosmocentric vision, meaning that we can only explain the world in relation to the man. Therefore, according to our philosopher, the man is not a “byproduct of the world”, on the contrary, he “is the supreme principle of existence, he is the purpose of the world, the crowning of <<creation>>” (Florian, 1987, 299), which

implies that man is the agent of history, that he offers a meaning to life, on the large scale of history and on the small scale of a human individual and his generation. Vasile Goldiș shared the same idea as Mircea Florian, that the first and most important characteristic of history is the fact that it is a result of human action, of his intelligence and his will. Therefore, even though there is a certain continuity between nature and culture, between nature's history and humanity's history, it is necessary to encompass history to the scale of human life. "Man is a historical object through his very action – claimed Mircea Florian – through will and intelligence, being the only creature that has a will and that works knowingly" (Florian, w.y., 9). Hence the conception according to which the historical event is two-way human, man being both the support, as well as its artisan, through his intelligence and will.

Through his writings, Vasile Goldiș gets closer to this conception of Mircea Florian, even though it is not very clear and concise in the case of the first. In the article titled "Through ourselves", published in "The Tribune" in 1910, the great patriot said: "There are a great deal of things that human diligence can do, but there are considerations regarding individual prosperity and earthly happiness, that many can provide together. The more enlightened a people is on its life conditions, the more it is willing to sacrifice a part of its labor in order to ensure the indispensable conditions of public happiness" (Goldiș, 1910, 3).

Mircea Florian also disagrees with the idea of progress, the notion of evolution and that of revolution, stating that "... evolution is not the same thing with progress, it is the expression of historical progress in general" (Florian, w.y., 21). As far as the concept of revolution goes, the Romanian philosopher considers that "... the dominant key of it is novelty, creation" (Florian, w.y., 22). Whilst the novelty of evolution is quantitative, expressing a growth, as the thinker notes, the revolution is qualitative. Evolution encompasses revolution: it prepares and perfects it. The revolution is a construct, it combines necessity with personal initiative.

The notion of revolution as defined by Mircea Florian can also be found in Vasile Goldiș, perhaps written more poetically: "Recognizing and ensuring the national spirit of the Romanian People and guaranteeing his recognition and validation by politically validating our country, in relation to its numerical, economic and cultural significance, as a constituent element of the Hungarian state – here's the dogma that we worship" (Goldiș, 1911, 3). Hence the conception of Vasile Goldiș regarding the "revolution" that the Romanian people needed, namely the necessity of a new, vibrant program that recognizes the Romanian nation as an independent nation in Transylvania.

Cătălin Zamfir has a different opinion in comparison to that which associates the idea of progress with evolution. He claims that "the ideas of evolution and progress are logically linked by the idea of the meaning of history. The sense of

history refers to the logic specific to the temporal dynamics of human society. Each moment in time represents a stage of a more prolonged process and makes sense in relation to it” (Zamfir, 1981, 118).

What is, however, the sense of history in Mircea Florian’s conception? Before answering this question, the philosopher offers us two uses of this term: “meaning implies wholeness and a purpose, and they can be merged” (Zamfir, 1981, 190). Therefore, meaning requires a whole or a total, but this totality may consist of parts that acquire meaning if they’re fully articulated.

Getting to this point, Mircea Florian tries to present the concept of unity used in its historical explanation which “... is often expressed in typical terms or typologies, for realities such as state, people, production, culture”. Regarding typification as a means of conceptualizing in history, there is a general accord that its function is explanatory, but not regarding historical laws. In his opinion, “an explanation as complex as possible cannot dispense itself of historical legality, because it does not rule out other categories such as: finality, typology, value” (Zamfir, 1981, 17).

Analyzing all these aspects of the historical phenomena, Mircea Florian states that “the sense of history is the historical process itself, because all the human ideals are developed and realized within history, because the dream itself of being anchored in the ultra historic absolute occurs only in certain historical circumstances” (Zamfir, 1981, 194). This conclusion of Florian lines up with his general humanist philosophy, always emphasizing the human initiative and effort in the relentless pursuit of the historical process.

The same conception about progress in the historical process can also be found in the writings of Goldiș, permeated however by the fervor characteristic to a person participant at that very progress: “The Romanian nation from Transylvania and Hungary, bound for centuries, both bodily and spiritually, by the ruling class of the Hungarian people, liberated now by a brilliant rise to arms, who have fought for the rights of the human civilization against the barbaric principle of national and class oppression, against the oppressors’ government, has declared its will of becoming a free and independent state, in order to limitlessly put to good use its forces in the service of culture and human freedom” (Goldiș, 1943, 41).

HISTORY. METAPHYSICAL MEANINGS

Blaga’s philosophy of history depicts a metaphysical sense conferred to the reality-history, completely solidary with the entire philosophical conception of its author. For Lucian Blaga “historicity is a dimension of the Luciferian human” – “that human who begins to live in the horizon of mystery and revelation” (Blaga, 1977, 216). In the perspective of revelation, man is “equipped with unique spiritual gifts” – “stylistic categories”. If for the human being they are “a structural, positive means of revelation”, for the supreme metaphysical entity that is the great

Anonym, they are “limitative and phrenic” categories of the access to the absolute. “Because man cannot create in a revelatory sense, only within the limits and constraint of a stylistic field, his products (man’s products) acquire through their very spiritual conditions a historic character”. Having been birthed in prehistory, historicity “has an ending only with the human being in general”, in this sense being “permanent” (Blaga, 1977, 217). In relation to these metaphysical explanations, human history seemed to Blaga “as a result of two components which, in the universal existence, act somewhat in opposite directions [...] as a compromise between man’s secret aspiration to replace the Great Anonym and between the defensive measures taken by the Great Anonym in order to save the existential centralism” (Blaga, 1977, 244).

B. P. Haşdeu also brings into discussion the role of providence in human life and history, but he claims that “neither divine action, nor nature’s action can cancel the free will of man” (Haşdeu, 1984, 279). From this point of view, Haşdeu’s conception seems to be representative in the Romanian landscape for an entire trend of thought, in the late nineteenth century. And, naturally, here we can exemplify through the writings of Goldiș who mentioned in the article “To the Romanians from Arad County” from the periodical *The Romanian*, that “The great battle, the one against the law’s weapons, will start soon and in its midst the plains and mountains and valleys will echo across the Romanian lands ... We want justice and we are determined to obtain it, even if it means giving up our lives” (Goldiș, 1913, 1).

The attributed metaphysical and transcendental meaning is also encountered in Pârvan. From a broad, inquisitive perspective, Pârvan viewed in history, above all other things, “a creative attitude, of spiritual construction and capitalization” (Pârvan, 1920, 67). History – Pârvan stated – can only be comprehended by itself, like other metaphysical and transcendental attitudes, such as art, religion or philosophy. “Just as art, religion or philosophy, history can only be explained by itself. In the same way you cannot understand art through philosophy or through religion, because it is a spiritually independent and organically-specific entity, so can you not understand history neither through art or what the contemporaries call “science”, and still less through philosophy. History is, like religion, art and philosophy, an attitude connected to the world and life. This attitude of humanity, no matter how primitive self-conscious is just as old as the very first glimmer of anthropomorphic duality thought: man and the world” (Blaga, 1977, 47).

It seems that Pârvan influenced his contemporary, Vasile Goldiș, regarding his conception about man and the world, who in 1913 published in *The Romanian* the article “The Oppression of a People”, presenting the Romanian people’s ideals, on the one hand of the plain Romanian individual and on the other hand, of “the other people” that opposed the ideals of the Romanians. “We have awaited election day like it was resurrection day, but we could not celebrate it because we were

hindered by the gendarme's bayonets. They wouldn't let us go out and locked us up like wild beasts. At dawn, the gendarmes awoke many of our brethren and escorted them to the communal house, bound by their hands, where they forced them to vote ...” (Goldiș, 1913, 2).

CONCLUSIONS. IS HISTORY ART OR SCIENCE?

When asked “Is history an art or not”, most of the notable thinkers in the field of theory of history, in the late nineteenth century, with the exception of Croce, responded negatively. Initially, this had been Nicolae Iorga's response as well. In the opening lecture of the history course at the University, the referral to the Roman poet Lucian, who would have desired that the historian be a “pedestrian poet”, was made with the intent of clearly delimitating it from this conception. Moreover, Iorga together with A. D. Xenopol will stand against Pompiliu Eliade who, in *Causeries litteraires*, described history as an art” (Iorga, 1903, 13).

Raymond Aron may seem to consider the same, but at a closer analysis of his conception regarding human evolution, he states that “the total history would be a history of the people, in the multitude of their activities and universes, from their way of dressing and exchanging, up to their style of praying” (Aron, 1997, 179). But when you state that the history pertains to the people and consists of their activities, you cannot deny the collocation art history because, most of the times, the writings of the historians are “infected” by the subjectivity and the trademark of the author that, most of the times, can have an artistic twist to it. It's sufficed to remember in this case the heroic and patriotic poems which portray real facts from a nation's history.

“Endlessly creating – Aron continues – spiritual or social works, it is without purpose, without a deadline, any age exists only for itself, irreducible and solitary, because everyone assigns himself a different purpose and because no profound community unites these dispersed humanities” (Aron, 1997, 185).

In 1919, in the synthesis he dedicated to the philosophy of contemporary history, I. Ghibănescu acknowledged the similarities between history and art, but he seemed particularly keen on emphasizing their differences, namely “the way in which they reproduce data and material by using fantasy”: the poetic one embodying imaginary deeds, whilst the historical one depicting real ones. His conclusion was, quoting Georg Simmel, that the historian's artistic nature must be viewed only as a necessity of cultivating sympathy for the subject who undergoes the historical investigation (Ghibănescu, 1919, 84-5).

The requirement will also be formulated by Iorga, in another context. The shift in his views regarding history as a poetic art had not been operated however from a comprehensive angle, but rather from the historical writing itself, for whose harmonious “architecture” and “humanity”, Iorga always militated.

The impact of Croce's works (of 1883 and especially those between 1912 and 1913) will have affected the Romanian historical thinking as well, including Iorga, as long as, during the interwar period, his point of view is much more nuanced. The statement according to which "by writing history I dared to remember that, through the presentation that is added to the information and the critic, history is a literary genre" (Iorga, 1999, 186) is eloquent in this respect. Also the note made with another occasion: "In my humble opinion, history, that is, to be clearer: common sense and logic, and the rest – pure poetry! And here is why: no age writes itself down in the documents so that its followers may discover it" (Iorga, 1999, 113).

Between the two conceptions of history, one as a poetic art and the other as human conception, Iorga saw and organic and indissoluble connection, since he insisted on stating: "but we should not only cover it with literature like today's furniture that furnishes an ordinary wooden thing with mahogany – but must be literature within. In a word: the subject should be depicted as being truly human" (Iorga, 1999, 187). The value he put on history being depicted in a literary style determined him to conclude his last pages of universal history by exclaiming: "I would have liked for me to have more poetic talent, to be closer to the truth" (Iorga, 1968, 13).

We can occasionally encounter the sense of history-poetry in Pârvan as well: "a human soul creating history has visions of epic spiritual proportions, like the great visions of the artist" (Pârvan, 1920, 54).

The unsystematic and scattered references, of the two great historians, to history as a poetic art, allow them to be perceived especially from a metaphorical and essayistic point of view. Even if they do not have the meaning and philosophical foundation conferred by Benedetto Croce when he said that history is art (Collingwood, 1992, 192), they remain no less significant for the Romanian historical thought efforts to liberate itself from the shortcomings of positivism.

When talking about the historian Vasile Goldiș the sense of history-art cannot be questioned. His political writings, either the ones fighting for justice or the ones expressing gratitude for the Romanian national rights fighters are imbued with artistic sense, patriotism and the warmth specific to arts, not sciences. "After centuries of serfdom, oppression and humiliation the Romanian people have come, at last, to freely hold their fate and future in their own hands" (Goldiș, 1918, 1), continuing in the same article by saying that "The odious oligarchy which has held the power in this country for centuries, in the midst of the war, when hundreds of thousands of Romanians, all that our forsaken nation had best to offer, were fighting and shedding blood for the petty purpose of the class owners, strangled not only our schools, but also this advertising tool of our party's national committee" (Goldiș, 1918, 1).

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