

BOOK REVIEW

Lucian Boia: The Romanians and Europe. An astonishing story

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In the historiography of the nations along the Danube, there is a long history of comparing the progression of the certain nations with the Western European “civilisation model”. The states of the *Occidens*, which in many aspects set an example, and had already embarked on the path of transformation into a modern nation-state from not later than the dawn of the early modern era, however, had followed a completely different pattern, with such conditions of which were not given to the nations of the East-Central region of Europe. The lack of basic structures, in act, sheds light on the specific model that characterises the history of the Danube nations and in which the history of the Romanians represents a unique variant.

In his recent work, Lucian Boia has also applied a comparative approach to present the defining moments of the history of the Romanian nation, in which he touches on the controversial issue of the origin of Romanian people, as well as the major stages of the evolvement of Romanian language and the embeddedness of various models adapted throughout their history, and last but not least, the topic of national minorities. Lucian Boia, professor at the Faculty of History of the University of Bucharest, has emphasized since the beginning of his career the need for a paradigm shift in the traditional approach to history applied by Romanian historians. Boia first dealt with the topic of regional relations of the premodern and modern Romanian national movements and the history of modern Romanian politics, but later in his research the examination of the issue of Romanian national consciousness and self-assessment have become increasingly important. In one of his best-known works, *History and Myth in Romanian Public Consciousness (Istorie și mit în conștiința românească)* through a rigorous critical analysis of national myths, he tried to draw public attention to the outdatedness and backwardness of traditional approaches used in Romanian historical research, as well as on the necessary revision of historical works. Prominent representatives of Romanian historiography, of course, received the writing with suspicion and condemned the author for his scientifically unfounded criticisms and anti-nationalist tone. In the recent decades, several volumes and studies have been published by him in Romanian, French, English and Hungarian language. The work presented below is part of a series of his thematic works intended to a wider audience, in which he sought to enrich the interpretation of Romanian history in a European perspective.

The volume contains nine essays, which, despite covering different topics, still fit together coherently. In the first chapter (*Biology or Culture?*) Boia gives a schematic overview of the origins of the Romanian people, presenting the most significant stages of the emergence of the *Daco-Roman continuity theory*, during which the thesis of the ethnic homogeneity and purely Roman origin of the Romanians was gradually replaced by the possibility of mixing with the Dacians. The author also emphasises that although linguistic heritage and genetic origin are essential components of a nation's history, it is necessary to discuss them separately, and they should not be conflated with each other.

In the next chapter (*The Strangeness of the Romanian Language*) the author attempts to reveal the most remarkable moments of the evolvement of the Romanian language, with special emphasis on the neologist movements that unfolded in the last third of the 19th century. Boia does not challenge the essentially Latin origin of the

Romanian language which as such, forms a separate language island in the sea of predominantly Slavic-speaking nations living in the East-Central European region. Nevertheless, he points out that as a result of close linguistic interactions, in addition to the insignificant number of Hungarian, German and Turkish loanwords, a considerable amount of Slavic terms have also been incorporated into Romanian public discourse. However, during the language reform most of the words of Slavic origin were gradually displaced in the common language and were replaced by Latin-based neologisms. Still, the marginalisation of Slavic words does not mean that they are completely vanished from the Romanian vocabulary, in fact, Boia gives many examples of the phenomenon of Slavic expressions, which had been already embedded in spoken language (e.g., *iubire* 'love', *război* 'war', *vreme* 'weather') remained in use.

In the following two essays, the author discusses the different models adapted during the historical development of the Romanian nation. The backbone of the first essay (*The Carousel of Models*) is, in fact, the "civilisation models" that in some way influenced the formation of the Romanian national consciousness. In this respect, the first, and probably the most important element is the Romanian people's adherence to orthodoxy, which at the same time implies that the Romanian nation is essentially the child of the Eastern (Byzantine) cultural sphere, although it has been affected by many Western influences over the centuries. The sketchy reception of the models and the frequent change of direction, mainly in the field of culture, eventually created a mixture in which, although the western features come to the surface, the deeper structures are dominated by the oriental character. In the second essay (*The Art of Blending*), Boia demonstrates the positive and negative effects of the aforementioned blending with many striking examples, highlighting the contrast that still characterises the Romanian cuisine in addition to culture and architecture, and which duality in fact permeates the Romanian society.

Hereinafter, in three brief essays, we get a schematic overview of the past and present of the national minorities and the attitude of the state power and the majority society towards them. In the first essay (*Minorities*), analysing the data of the 1930 census, the author points out that while the proportion of the Romanians in the *Regat* exceeded 90%, other regions were more characterised by ethnic diversity. He also points to the phenomenon that although the Romanian population formed an absolute majority in Transylvania as well, the Hungarian and Saxon ethnic groups were the dominant ones in the cities. In other regions, such as Bukovina and Bessarabia, in addition to the Romanian population, there was a significant number of Ukrainian and Jewish minorities, the latter mainly in the vicinity of urban settlements. Subsequently, in a short essay (*Are We Good or Bad?*), Boia examines the issue of tolerance, looking for the answer concerning the extent to which the Romanian people met the criteria for acceptance when living with different ethnicities. In his view, Romanian society is characterised by a duality in this respect as well: while it represents unconditional acceptance and openness towards "Western elements", it is extremely hostile to the ethnic groups that have lived with it for centuries. He cites as an example the intolerance towards Jewish communities in Romania at the beginning of the last century and the growing prevalence of antisemitism in Romanian society, emphasising his conviction that the Romanian nation is very susceptible to extremities. Eventually, in the third essay (*Again on Minorities*), by presenting the current and recent status of the Hungarian and Saxon ethnic groups and paralleling the current Romanian nationality policy with the national strategic objectives of other European Union countries, the author gives the reader a comprehensive picture of the affairs between the Romanian state and national minorities, emphasising throughout his conviction that various

ethnic groups, especially minorities with a distinct cultural identity and ethnic self-awareness, which are also usually geographically separated, are indeed an important part of Romanian history.

In the two final essays of the volume, the author examines the question of the possibility of federalisation (*Should we federalise?*) and the dilemmas of the current Romanian political system (*The Dragnea Experiment*). Greater Romania, made up of provinces with strong regional traditions, still struggles with the autonomy aspirations of the minorities who are trying to preserve their language and cultural heritage, primarily with the aspirations for autonomy of the Hungarian speaking ethnic group living in a well-defined area. Yet, the slightest realisation of the aforementioned aspirations to autonomy means betrayal in the eyes of the Romanian people thinking in national unity and threatens the disintegration of the Romanian nation-state. Thus, given the "historical sensitivity" of the majority society on this issue, the Romanian political elite set the dogma of a unified nation-state against the federalist state structure, envisaging, if necessary, the forcible assimilation of national minorities. Nevertheless, efforts to bridge the widening gaps in the cultural sphere have been pushed out of the political discourse in parallel with the emphasis on national ideology, although, according to the 1930 census, there have been marked disproportions in the regional distribution of literacy. Concerning the relationship between society and politics, Boia argues that the anomalies in the modern Romanian political history originate primarily from the shallow adoption of Western patterns, which even if integrated into the Romanian society, the circumvention or violation of the imposed basic rules has now become common practice. Hence it is not surprising that the society is gradually moving away from politics and that the people are fundamentally distrustful of politicians, many of whom also held office in the communist system but may remain in leading positions to this day without calling them to account (*Illustration*).

In conclusion, we can say that despite the fact that the work primarily conveys educational content, it also exhausts the criteria of a scientific study in its complexity and approach. The scope and the volume of the essays also promise a schematic overview of the issues discussed, however, the numerous references and the coherent, consistent presentation of the thoughts suggest the author's proficiency in the examined issues and also his unquestionable expertise. The marked critical tone, the frequent, almost sarcastic invectives that characterise many of Boia's works, in many cases try to draw the reader's attention to current problems, phenomena pervading Romanian public thinking, such that without breaking the dynamics of the text, in fact, on the contrary, they tend to shade the overall picture. The essays included in the volume, even because of their genre specifics, contain few references, and the author applies them only when publishing data or a literal quote. On the other hand, on some of the less elaborate questions, Boia repeatedly refers to his own works, which helps the readers who intend to immerse themselves in a particular issue to get further information. Considering all aspects, the volume provides an extremely exciting outline of the most controversial issues in Romanian history, using an approach very different from the traditional Romanian historical methodology, as he is not afraid to reject conventions and strictly favours scientific facts over subjective elements. It is an instructive work that despite being meant for a wider readership, will hopefully resonate in both Romanian and international academic life.

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