

SOME REMARKS REGARDING THE EQUATION “PRODUCTION – DISSEMINATION – RECEPTION” OF HISTORY IN POST-COMMUNIST ROMANIA

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Imprisoned in the cage of a totalitarian ideology, often mystified by the deformities or exaggerations imposed by servitude towards an unjust political regime, the Romanian historical science has been, beyond any doubt, one of the most deeply affected victims of the communist period. The collapse of the dictatorship, in December 1989, marks, thus, a turning point in the evolution of the Romanian historiography, finally freed from the (mis)conceptions and (mis)judgements serving the interests of a ruling minority.

In a legitimate quest for a new identity, as the result of a natural desire to escape the crisis that still affects a traumatised society, the Romanian historiographers have been among the first to recognise the necessity of a sincere, objective evaluation of the past and, equally, of the way in which it was reflected before 1989. Without preaching, a complete rejection or, either, a thorough acceptance of the historical production written after 1947, the appeal to writing a history “without passionate resentments and without ideological routines” and the duty to “rehabilitate a deformed, crippled or forbidden truth”, as Andrei Pippidi put it¹, refer to what seems to be one of the guiding lines in post-communist Romanian historiography – the rush for a *restitution*, understood on two different levels: firstly, a reconstruction of the recent past, a deconstruction of its clichés, a restoration of mystified/mythologised facts, events or characters, a new vision onto moments of our history only analysed from a Marxist-Leninist perspective; secondly, a revealing of ex-taboos of the communist period, an incursion into what earlier constituted forbidden domains, personages or subjects for historical criticism.

In a period of transition, in which the inevitable inertia of numerous authors, still tributary to an already old-fashioned conceptual apparatus, is only overcome by brave vanguards and *en vogue* approaches to the past, Romanian historical writing is in search of a long-desired equilibrium. Faced with new tendencies of integrating and synchronising the historical discourse with the

¹ Andrei Pippidi, *Miturile trecutului – răspântia prezentului*, in “22”, III (1992), no. 8 (109), p. 7.

canons imposed by Western standards, the offer of history products on the Romanian market is diverse, both in form and in content.

Swinging between the scientific and the profane, balancing between a science-oriented discipline and a public-targeted product, the historical discourse seems to have gained an immense popularity in Romania in the past thirteen years. It is not our intention here to make a complex dissection of the causes that brought about this phenomenon in our national historiography, but rather to make some remarks upon the place of the historical science in the Romanian society, starting from the new context in which the equation “*production – dissemination – reception*” of history has received an economically dependent variable.

The first important observation derives from the change in the status of the historical discipline in Romania, after the events of December 1989. Thus, it is a well-known reality that history was a priority of the communist regime, as long as it conferred it a degree of political or ideological legitimacy. We can agree here with the remarks made, in a different context, by the French historian Philippe Ariès, by stating that during the communist regime “the study of the past has lost contact with the public, becoming a technical preparation of some specialists isolated in their discipline”, many authors seeking refuge against the impositions of the political and ideological rulers by hiding behind an “armour of savant criticism, as if it protected them of indiscreet curiosities”².

Ceasing to be an instrument of national militancy, as it was in the epoch when, in the 19th and early 20th century, modern Romania was made, used and abused by the propagandistic servants of the totalitarian regime, the muse Clio has finally gained a long lost independence. In this respect, the return to democracy has signified a complete modification in the functional and axiological foundations of the historical discourse, whose sole justifications have become the scientific and methodological ones. This “liberation” of history, extremely beneficial in terms of the fecundity of its production and the ensuing increase in objectivity, brought with it the economic aspect, as in a consumer society the historical discourse is also intended to be, at least partially, economically viable.

Faced with more and more financial problems, with the difficulties of an economy in a continuous transition, many historiographers “deserted” the purely scientific direction and engaged into the more commercial aspect of dealing with history, that is producing “popular history”. The double finality of this trend seems to be useful to both the specialists and the public, as the newest results in the historical research aim at larger audiences in an accessible, attractive and pleasant form, making the study of the past at least popular, if not a completely profitable financial enterprise.

The fate of the historical publications is extremely illustrative here. In a period in which the Academic scientific revues have totally irregular appearances, due to budgetary shortages of the institutional structures involved

² Philippe Ariès, *Timpul istorie*, București, Meridiane, 1997, p. 233.

with the production of history, the flourishing of magazines dealing with “popular history” is a clear sign of an emergence in the public’s desire to be familiar with scenes from the more or less recent past, but it is, as well, an indicator that historians are keen to make their message reach the public.

This new tendency in Romanian historiography, disputable and objectionable in terms of the evident simplifications and limitations, due to a certain inferior level of scientific and aesthetic expectations, has its positive aspects, considering the larger formative-educational function of the historical discourse. Nevertheless, the opinion, strongly defended by many specialists faithful to the scientific-cognitive finality of the historical message, that the less accessible to the profane the subject or the style are, the more esteemed the author is, is equally disputable and objectionable. Which of the four constituent elements of the historical products identified by the great Romanian scholar Nicolae Iorga (material and criticism, determining the solidity and the truth of a work; and organisation and style, determining its aesthetic appearance) is affected by any of the two above mentioned antithetic directions is a problem too complex to be discussed here.

So, besides the well-established “Magazin istoric” (“Historical Magazine”), whose continuous publication for over 35 years and whose extremely diverse materials (in terms of the subjects and periods of time covered) assured it, along the years, a constant and rather heterogeneous public, new titles have come to cover an ever increasing demand for history: “Dosarele istoriei” (“The History Files”), “Historia” and “Dosarele Historia” (“Historia Files”). Tackling almost exclusively delicate or controversial issues of late modern and contemporary history, using a simple, unsophisticated language, supporting the texts with many iconographical documents, with scientific references kept to a minimum (if not completely absent), with a journalistic page layout, the historical magazines target the numerous non-specialists fond of the enigmas of the past.

Establishing a fruitful collaboration with newly founded institutional structures dedicated to the study of recent history (i.e. “The Institute for the Study of Recent History”, “The National Council for the Study of the ex-Securitate Archives” etc.), having the support of reputed Romanian historians, the range of topics analysed in these magazines appears to be both interesting, attractive, and credible. Thus, in terms of the recourse to authorities in the domain, the following examples are more than relevant: the scientific council of “The Historical Magazine” includes Members of the Romanian Academy (Dan Berindei, Virgil Căndea, and Dinu C. Giurescu), whereas “The History Files” has among its councillors reputed specialists in the history of the last century (such as the Romanians Florin Constantiniu and Ioan Scurtu, or the foreign historians Dennis Deletant and Robert Levy).

An enumeration of some subjects from the March issues is also useful here, as it covers the main themes related to the *restoration* and *completion* of the national and world history trends mentioned earlier. *A Genghis Khan of the XXth Century* (Stalin) and *Iron Guard Plotters and Soviet Agents against General*

Avramescu are the most interesting titles from *The History Files*. *The Historical Magazine* proposes to the readers topics such as *Dictators of Romania* or *1969. China as Subject of Romanian – American Confidential Talks*, whereas *Historia* focuses upon themes like *A movie-like love-story: Queen Mary – Barbu Știrbey*, *The Tango, a Sad Thought which Can Be Danced*, *The Last Victim of King Charles the IInd: Nae Ionescu* or *Refined Mistresses who Made the History of France*.

The titles also offer a clear image of many new directions of analyses in the Romanian historiography, both prolific and popular. The monarchy has been the subject of great historical dispute, the private life of the royal family, the personalities and actions of the kings and queens of Romania being thoroughly dissected (although no remarkable monographs have been produced yet). The role of the free-masonry in the past two centuries of Romanian history, completely absent or *factotum*, real or imagined national or universal conspiracies, spying agencies and missions of secret services, confidential arrangements that affected the course of history etc. are other profitable and subjects of study. Equally popular in the last decade are the topics related to the private life domain: romanced biographies, secret adventures of famous people, personal tragedies or just the flavour from the saloons of past epochs. Magic, occultism, the supernatural, myths or mentalities are also among the most attractive and successful themes.

Far from being an isolated phenomenon, these new tendencies in the Romanian historical writing (in the national historiographies from all ex-communist societies, in fact) represent a stage in the process of synchronisation to Western canons, another form of mass-culture manifestation. It responds to the expectance-horizons of a certain public, being a completely sociologically and economically explainable reality.

Another interesting and relevant example for the popularity of the historical discourse is the commercial success of many publishing houses dealing with editing history books. Translations from prestigious foreign authors writing about the modern and contemporary periods, new editions of the most remarkable Romanian historians' works, as well as the latest results of today historiographers' research, form already consecrated collections of books. A simple mention of the multiple editions printed by the most important Romanian publishing houses (Albatros, All, Corint, Humanitas, Institutul European, Polirom, Editura Științifică etc.), despite the high costs of the volumes (according to Romanian standards), is yet another clear sign of the fact that history sells.

We have induced so far the idea that dealing with history is a profitable business in Romania. The truth should rather be that dealing with publishing, with popularising history, is more profitable than embarking upon producing history. The success of the historical discourse in countries heading towards a capitalist society seems to be more the result of the excellent management of media corporations, aware of the expectations of a large prospective public and

ready to nourish them. The case of Romania, where “popular history” has been strongly promoted by a successful journalist, Ion Cristoiu (founder of many profitable newspapers and magazines, including those dedicated exclusively to history), is illustrative here for the importance of the new commercial strategies in popularising a certain segment of the historical discourse.

This increased interest in the past, mentioned above in terms of the variety of topics approached, is also easily visible when assessing the quantitative production of history in Romania in the last years. The data from the *Romanian Historical Bibliography*, also they do not offer anything more than a general estimation upon the growth of the historical or history-related production are quite illustrative. Thus, volume IV, comprising the historical production for the period 1969-1974, contains 9,920 entries (books, articles, studies, historical essays, collections of documents etc.), published in 181 revues, whereas the titles included in volume VII (1984-1989) amount to 10,584 entries from 192 publications. For comparison, volume VIII, dedicated to the period 1989-1994, comprises 10,367 titles, published in 231 periodicals, while volume IX, covering the years 1994-1999, contains no less than 18,500 entries from 309 magazines and scientific revues.

This important quantitative growth (a relative indicator taking into account the fact that the bibliography is a selective work), which, in economic terms, can be formulated as an increase in supply in response to increased demand on the market, stands as a new proof for the popularity of history in post-communist Romania. Another good example to support this idea (and an explanation for the larger demand of history on the market) is the spectacular development in Romania, as well as in other South-East European societies, of the historical higher educational system.

The role of the extended network of history faculties is of an enormous significance, as it clearly is one of the most important factors responsible for the production, dissemination and reception of history. The Academic staff, deeply engaged in developing the historical science, of continuously enriching it with renewed interpretations, is also engaged in the difficult task of promoting history, of making it accessible to the students and to the public, of combining the scientific and didactic finalities of the historical knowledge.

During the Communist regime, when humanities and social-sciences were very elitist enterprises, there were only three history faculties (one in each large historical province of the country: in Bucharest – Wallachia, in Jassy – Moldavia and in Cluj – Transylvania), the necessities of the educational system being covered by graduates from the pedagogical institutes, with solely didactical purposes. The chrono-topical evolution of the historical higher education is impressive after 1989. In 1993, there were twelve Romanian universities holding 12 history sections; in 2003, the number increased to 15 state-funded universities with 38 specialities in history. Adding 6 private universities with history groups and the alternative methods of education (open distance learning) more than 2,000 students are now graduating history faculties each year. It is also

significant that the number of the students paying taxes for their studies is larger each year, an irrefutable evidence for the fact that history becomes more and more popular.

This remarkable development of the historical education brought with it a similar development in post-graduate studies or doctoral research programs, a very prolific reality taking into account the fact that highly-qualified young specialists have the opportunity to engage into continuing the work of their predecessors, being in the posture of rejuvenating the historical research in Romania, of forming the next generation of historians. Another beneficial effect is the establishment of mixed sections (such as history-geography, history-theology or history-foreign languages), as it encourages interdisciplinary researches and results in the implementation of the historical discourse into a larger socio-humanistic perspective.

The increased need for specialised personnel in the Romanian universities attracted many researchers from the history institutes of the Academy in the educational system, a beneficial situation for the dissemination of the latest trends in the production of history, for spreading the newest results in the historical knowledge to an interested and motivated audience. Taking into consideration the fact that many graduates choose, at the end of the Academic studies, a didactic profession in secondary or high schools, the advantages of this fruitful collaboration are of a huge importance, mediating the large spread of a restored, more objective discourse to larger segments of the public, by means of the compulsory courses taught in schools.

The few examples we have given above are sufficient to support the assertion that history is becoming more and more popular in Romania. The positive effects of this situation are probably to be found in its most visible results: the increased production of history and the multiplied efforts for its reception, even in the diluted form of “popular history”. As the expectations and pretensions of the readers will grow, and competition will dictate the rapport between offer and demand on the market, the qualitative factor will definitely prevail. It is an immense opportunity for the revival, for the long expected resurrection of a discipline that produced some of the most reputed specialists in world historiography. As regarding a solution for the equation “production – dissemination – reception” of history in contemporary Romania, it seems to reside in a closer relation with the mass media, in an updating of the marketing policies, which, far from altering its identity, should confer the historical science renewed forces and superior motivations.