

ROMANIAN CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY IN THE PRE-GREAT UNION PERIOD

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The philosophy of history deals mainly with the premises of history, their connection, the determinant element, the subject of history, either individual or collective, the sense of history, as well as the methodology of history research.

I will further address only two of the fundamental themes of the philosophy of history, namely the determinant element and the individual subject and collective subject of history. I will analyse the two aspects in the Romanian representative thinking trends affirmed before and after the Great Union of the Romanians in 1918. I will study the ideas specific to the pre-Great Union thinking and the nature of interwar theories and I will demonstrate how the Romanian thinkers, by the solutions given to the mentioned issues, in the context of the European philosophical orientations, contribute to the preparation and later to the consolidation of the Great Union of the Romanians.

1. The determinant historical factor and the subject of history in the pre-Great Union thinking

Of the historians and thinkers who approached the pre-1918 Great Union history from a philosophical perspective as well, I will refer to **Nicolae Balcescu** (1819-1852), **Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu** (1838-1907), **C. Dobrogeanu Gherea** (1855-1920) and **Al. D. Xenopol** (1847-1920). **Nicolae Iorga** (1871-1940) also falls into this category due to his 1911 *General reflections on historical studies (Generalitati privind studiile istorice)*, yet his ideas belonged to the post-Great Union period, for the great historian continued his activity during the interwar period as well, and republished his *General reflections* volume in 1933.

As a representative of the Enlightenment, **Balcescu** stated that the determinative factor of history was the social ideas and ideals, the social theory, while as a democrat revolutionist, he placed emphasis on the blend of the revolutionary theory and practice. On the Enlightenment he stated: ‘and I believe it is wise to prepare, and for that to develop the sense of nationality and the

Romanian's faith in themselves more than in strangers'¹. Also, he judiciously acknowledged a certain precedence of the theory, the fact that 'theory must precede practice', because 'principles underlie the effort'². As for the 'arming of arms', he criticised the romantic school of Rossetti and Eliade which 'despises the material power of a state and promotes moral power, the power of law'³.

As subjects of history, he pointed the historical prominent figures and the popular masses. To that end, the title of his work on the first unifier of the three Romanian countries – Romanians under the rule of Michael the Brave – is suggestive.

B. P. Hasdeu embraced Balcescu's ideas on the blend of the spiritual and material factors and on the role of the prominent figures in history. The elements contributing to the creation of history are mentioned by Hasdeu in his draft work, *Critical history of the Romanians (Istoria critică a românilor)*, volume I (1872), which reads that 'any segment of the Romanian people will be analysed thoroughly from all points of view: territorial, ethnographical, dynastic, nobiliary, military, religious, legal, economic, literary and artistic'⁴. The role he assigns to the prominent figures results from the titles of his historical dramas, one of them being *Ioan Voda the Terrible (Ioan Vodă cel Cumplit)*, written in the same spirit Balcescu had written about Mihai Viteazul (Michael the Brave), while the other is *Razvan and Vidra*, where he outlines Razvan's actions and Vidra's wishes.

By combining the role of the Enlightenment with the role of the material power, Balcescu somewhat introduced **C. Dobrogeanu-Gherea**. A good judge of originary Marxism, Gherea asserted that 'the economic establishes the political-legal-social forms and not the other way around'⁵, namely, as the founders of historical materialism said, he too believed that the economic was a determinant 'in general' or 'ultimately'. That is why he stated, from a creative perspective, that in the past, when the only production resulted from family labour, 'the core factor of development was the production of individuals, the type of sexual relations, the family organisation form'⁶. Moreover, Gherea claimed that in socialism, the intellect became a

¹ Idem, *Către Ion Ghica*, Paris, 26 iulie 1851, in Nicolae Bălcescu, *Opere*, vol. IV, *Corespondență*, ed. cit., p. 376

² Idem, *Către Alexandru Zane*, Paris, 16 iunie 1850, in Nicolae Bălcescu, *Opere*, vol. IV, *Corespondență*, ed. cit., p. 307

³ Idem, *Către Ion Ghica*, Paris, 4 iulie 1849, în Nicolae Bălcescu, *Opere*, vol. IV, *Corespondență*, ed. cit., p. 210

⁴ B. P. Hașdeu, *Scrisori filosofice*, București, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1985, p. 61.

⁵ C. Dobrogeanu-Gherea, *Neoiobăgia*, București, Editura Librăriei Socec & Comp., 1910, p. 2

⁶ Idem, *Concepția materialistă a istoriei*, în *Opere complete*, vol. 3, București, Editura Politică, 1977, p. 13

determinant in that joint ownership allowed planning the production and social life at the national level.

As regards the history subject, Gherea criticised anarchism and individualism, in general, placing an emphasis on class solidarity and not on atomised individuals, separated from each other and from the society. He added that people's actions, whether individual or collective, may contribute to the growth of the society provided that they are in line with the historical development directions.

The subsequent views which would be accepted in the Romanian philosophy of history and would facilitate the return to the traditions of the Enlightenment, in their own way, by placing emphasis on the spirit, will face, even if indirectly, Dobrogeanu-Gherea's views, for they will necessarily relate to the Marxist philosophy of history as well.

Indeed, **A. D. Xenopol** would polemicize with historical materialism. In his work *Théorie de l'histoire*, of 1910, a subsequent version of a work released in 1899 also published in French, he would argue that the economic is not a determinant for it does not influence all the social phenomena such as science or art. He distinguished a determinative factor from a dominant factor. In his opinion, the determinant is that element generating novelty in history. In that respect, he argued that the determinant is the human spirit embedded in the various history facts, for no new event can occur in history without a new ideative, spiritual content. The dominant factor causes most of the changes in history. To him, the dominant element is the political area, because it is the political and not the economic that enables people to spiritualise, to fulfil their spiritual needs. Xenopol also acknowledged the cases in which the economic has a causal role in relation to 'a lot of facts', which means that it becomes a dominant element yet it is also being influenced. Therefore, 'If the economic exerts influence on some of the other forms of life, it is, in turn, influenced by science, law, morals, the political and the social, all of them holding a strong influence over goods production and distribution'⁷.

He believed in prominent figures more than in the social classes and the class struggle.

As for the history subject, unlike Balcescu who prefers political personalities but also the popular masses, and Gherea who shifts the emphasis on the social classes, Xenopol suggests that the subjects of history are the people and, of course, the personalities of any creation domain, claiming that history facts occur in any field.

⁷ A. D. Xenopol, *Teoria istoriei*, București, Editura Fundației Culturale Române, 1997, p. 334.

Nicolae Iorga, who gathered his notes on the theory of history in his volume *Generalități cu privire la studiile istorice (General view on historical studies). Lecții de deschidere și cuvântări (opening lessons and speeches)*⁸, published in 1911 and re-edited by the historian himself in 1933, had a similar yet different view from Xenopol's, who had been his mentor. He identified the idea as a decisive historical fact, since it can be found within the texture of all the historical facts. However, it is not about, random ideas, but only the ones recommended by the powerholders as social ideals because these ideas had served their interests: „The powerholders, the leaders of human labor have always felt the moral need to entitle everything they represent and is useful to them. And this entitlement is merely an idea, an idea that used to be an ideal and became a principle that underlines a tradition and sanctifies”⁹ When the supporting ideas are no longer effective, they are replaced by other guidelines, which are leading to change and development of the society. After becoming obsolete, the ideas that commanded the modern world until the 18th century were taken over by the ideas of the French Revolution, the true ground for the new society. The ideas inspiring people and defending the historic revivals cannot be only political, but also religious or other. They can be laid down by several people or by one person. The ideas of the 1789 French Revolution were stated by four great personalities, namely Diderot, Montesquieu, Voltaire and Rousseau. In the past, the Roman Empire was defeated by only one person, who was fighting in his spirit and this spirit conquered the world.

The ideas turning into driving forces of history can therefore be of many types, from political to religious, but they only prevail when they uphold a more rightful society, coming with a new ideal of justice, which gains people over.

With a great emphasis placed on the ideas, the author of *Generalități* gave priority to the personalities yet he did not neglect those people who had reached to the point of implementing the ideas.

Similar to Xenopol, Iorga also distanced himself from the marxist theory, without calling it as such. He mainly referred to the school that put the large masses and the material interests in the place of personalities and ideas, 'A historic school, even a school that has many followers and produced great works in the second half of the 19th century, denied the role that the

⁸ The princeps edition was published in 1911; the second in 1933; the third in 1944, presented by Liliana N. Iorga; and the fourth in 1999, Iasi, Polirom Publishing House, featuring 21 new texts compared to the 1944 edition and an introductory study by Andrei Pippidi. (A new volume, called *Materiale pentru o istoriologie umană*, was published post-humously in 1968, edited by Liliana N. Iorga.)

⁹Nicolae Iorga, *Generalități privind studiile istorice*, third edition, Bucharest, 1944, p. 74.

outstanding people played in the development of humankind....Hatred against great people, who show the way or enlighten the humans shifted to hatred against ideas. Anonymous hordes replaced the extraordinary men, material needs and obscure interests of everyone are in lieu of ideas.’¹⁰

2. The relationship between the idea of the determinative factor and human explanation

My belief is that the already mentioned views about history, mainly the determinative factor and the history subject, albeit so different, derive their ideas from the same understanding of the human as a historic-social-psycho-biological creature. The dissimilarities between them come from the fact that they highlight one or another facet of the human being or certain of its features. Everybody is placing the emphasis on natural human, even though none of the other human dimensions are neglected. Balcescu is looking at the human soul as a given from nature or divinity, with an inclination to justice (freedom and political equality) and towards fellowship (social unity). This is where the idea about the determinative factor under a two-faced aspect comes – theoretically, it decodes the principles of the action and morally, it sympathizes and mobilizes the humans and pushes them into activity. Gherea, on the other hand, sees the natural man as being with priority biological and, hence, made to move by his living necessities. Herein comes the identification of the determinative factor with the economic factor. For Xenopol, the natural man is both body and soul but he becomes superior thanks to his soul. This is the reason why Xenopol believes that the soul is a determinative factors is its various objectivizations, since novelty in history comes through soul and not the body. At the same time, he states that the body and soul needs are irreducible one to another. He says, ‘all these fundamental instincts of our being do not derive one from another’, but ‘they are labeled as primordial constitutive elements of our existence, via the force that created us.’¹¹. While making the difference between the determinative factor and the dominant element, he argues that the economic requisites do not bring about the spiritual ones and concludes that no line of business can be counted as determinative but it can be dominant. He asserts that the political field is dominant since it contributes more to the human spritualization but he adds that the economic sector also explains

¹⁰Ibidem, princeps edition, online, p. 67

¹¹Ibidem, p. 333

a series of facts. A similar view with Xenopol's is Nicolae Iorga's, except that the latter thinks that the authentic history is determined by the ideas gaining shape of ideals to favor everyone.

The thinkers listed in this paper understand the socio-historic man and the humankind history in its entirety as a continuation and, of course, a change in the data of the natural man. In their vision, so as not to harm the man and history but rather to lead to their accomplishment, the historic modifications should not contravene to the trends in the historic development or to the native data of the human being.

3. Ideas to contribute to the Great Union

I believe that the ideas, albeit different, on the determinative factors and the history subject expressed by these authors helped with their contribution of the preparation for the Great Union, since they underlined the importance for history – including the Union – of either the spiritual or material realm or both, on the one hand, and of the role of the personalities played in conjunction with the action of the popular classes or masses.

Alongside their theoretical ideas, the thinkers above prepared the Great Union through their practical ideas. Balcescu was in favor for the union, as a first step, of Wallachia and Moldavia, in order to free themselves from the Turkish suzerainty and the Russian protectorate and then Transylvania, which would have been supported in its fight together with other oppressed nations for eliberation from under the dominance of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In spite of the fact that Gherea generalized the feudal remnants in the Romanian agriculture and supported the immediate duty to accomplish the development of the capitalist-type economy, he stated that the future of our country lies in the rise of the working class and of the Romanian industry. Xenopol, on his part, voted for the industrialization of the country. Iorga had his contribution, through his works, to the shaping of the national conscience and the history of the Romanian people, as well through his articles on the Romanian issues and the Parliament speeches. His address on 14 December 1916 in the Parliament of Romania is thought to be the strongest patriotic presentation, a real salvation for Romanians, as it was sent in multiple copies and read by the soldiers in the defensive lines, thus helping with their engagement and changing the fate of the war.