

# Perennialism and Modernism in Romanian National-Communism. An Ideological Dilemma?\*

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**Abstract:** This article analyzes the theories of nationalism incorporated into the national-communist discourse active in Romania between 1965 and 1969. Although insisting upon its Marxist ideological core, Romanian national-communist discourse did not, however, embrace the Marxist vision upon nations and nationalism, namely modernism. Furthermore, its vision in this regard, primordialist perennialism, was typical of right-wing, even extreme right-wing ideologies. How was that possible is the main question of the following pages.

**Keywords:** Dacians, unity, continuity, national-communism, primordialism

## Introduction

During Gheorghiu Dej's leadership, especially after 1960 and after the shy, yet undeniable separation from Moscow, the nationalist elements gradually appearing within the ideology of the Romanian communist regime indicated perennialist preferences, an intriguing evolution for a discourse pretending to be Marxist in its essence. Perennialism is a theory of nation which insists upon the symbolic and, to a certain point, social continuity between antique ethnies, feudal peoples and modern nations. The modern, liberal and Marxist, theories of nation, embrace a totally different position: although they recognize, without much enthusiasm, a somehow pure symbolic continuity between ethnies/ethnies and nation, they quickly add that the last one is selective and partisan constructed and instrumented, with the aim of obtaining certain political benefits, and that the new economic and political elites brought forward by the industrial revolution have the interest to create, through administrative and educational means, a working force able to sustain the necessities of an internal market in the making. While liberals tackle the national problem by mainly political means, appraising the civic and participative benefits of modernity and

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arguing that, in the whole, the evolution from feudalism and absolutist monarchies to the industrial societies of consumerism and mediatic spectacle was a positive one, Marxists consider that the new political economy of capitalism already proved its limits, despite a progresist stage consisting in the dismantling of feudalism and absolutism, and argue in favor of abandoning it for a new mode of production in which the division of labor and thus social polarization would be absent (see Gellner 1993).

Coming back to the Romanian communist regime, if at the end of Gheorghiu Dej's leadership perennialism was present, in a moderate manner, in the party propaganda, the 'Golden Age' will witness the primordialist nature of Romanian national-communism. Unlike perennialism, primordialism is not satisfied with a fluctuant and insufficiently articulated, at a discursive level, historical continuity, although a 'bimillennial' one; starting with the last millennia before our age, when Dacians were considered absolute masters of a territory twice the size of modern Romania and located in the north of the Danube river, going through the 'Dacian state' created by king Burebista in the first century of our age, through the Roman conquest and the 'ethnogenesis' process, through the voivodates of medieval vlachs, the period of Otoman suzerainty over the Romanian provinces and arriving to the 1859 union, the 1877 independence and the 1918 union – the whole historic discourse was rewritten to assess not only the historical continuity and the permanent ideal of 'unification,' but also the supremacy of the Dacians and of the Romanians, later, with reference to all other ethnies, peoples or nations which inhabited or continued to inhabit the territory of the Romanian Socialist Republic (RSR).

### **Romanticism, the Central Ideological Component of Romanian National-Communism**

Just as in the case of German culture, by which it was massively inspired, Romanian modern culture embraced romanticism as its core set of values. From the second half of the XIXth century and to the interwar period, various types of nationalisms, inflamed by a dominant right-wing political culture, made use of the romantic myths and stereotypes that were perpetuated from generation to generation. With the partial exception of Dej's communist leadership, Ceaușescu's national-communism recuperated previous elements of romanticism and mixed them into a new ideological formula. The cult of heroes, of a mythical and heroic past, the cult of medieval hierarchies, the cult of an organic unity between the leader and the people, the need to affirm, both internally and externally, an assertive and ostentatious political identity (see Râmbu 2001) – all these elements were combined with the Leninist ideology to form an unique ideological mixture: Romanian national-communism.

### **Primordialist Perennialism and the Invention of Romanian Antique History**

According to Mușat (1986, 8), Ceausescu believed that

Within the character of the Romanian people, in its inextinguishable yearning for freedom and independence one can find embodied the high virtues of ancestors: the resoluteness, pride and wisdom of Dacians and Romans, the heroism and fearlessness of Decebal and Traian.

The combination between Dacians, named by the ancient historian Herodotus 'the most fearless and rightful among the Thracians' – and the 'proud' Romans resulted in a superior synthesis, 'a new people based on the most esteemed virtues' both of the winners and also of the losers of the Dacian-Roman wars, the Romanians, characterized from immemorial times by their 'love of truth and justice.' The Romans supposedly left us their language, while from the Dacians we inherited 'the ownership of this land' and our 'thinking' (Anghel 1983, 26). The tasks of the party propaganda were therefore clear: "The Dacian-Roman origin and the continued existence on this land," the general secretary of the Romanian Communist Party (RCP) argued,

constitute fundamental characteristics of the Romanian people. The establishment in history of the place, the origins and the continuity within the Carpathian-Danubian basin of the Romanian people constitutes the fundament of every ideological, theoretical, and politically educative action. One cannot talk about socialist patriotic education without knowing and honoring the past, the work and struggle of our ancestors (Preda and Pătroi 1986, 324).

If during Gheorghiu Dej's period the Dacian-Roman filiation and the 'bimillennial' continuity of their descendants on the territories of Moldavia, Wallachia and Transilvania was rarely mentioned, the 'Golden Age' will transform it into one of its cornerstones, amplifying it in a 'Dacian' sense. Latinism and Dacism represented two major interpretations of the origins and of the identity of Romanians, both coming into shape during the XIXth century – within a promising political context. The Latinism of the Transilvanian School was centered on the idea of total identification of the Romanians with the West, these being the descendants of the Roman colonizers which populated Dacia after the presumptive decimation and enslavement of the autochthonous population, following the wars against Rome, which they have lost; therefore, Romanian identity would have not contained anything 'eastern,' oriental, being, despite historical vicissitudes, of the migrations that gradually placed Romanians at the periphery of Europe – purely western. The Latinist discourse corresponded with the aim of obtaining political independence. Once this realized in 1859, the Dacist discourse will progressively affirm itself, through the writings of philologists and historians like Bogdan Petriceicu Hașdeu or Vasile Pârvan. Dacism meant the consolidation of the new found independence, sustained resistance against centuries of external colonization or at least absence of an adequate political organization and the assertive affirmation of the

new political status to which the contribution of European powers, widely recognized until 1859, was entering into oblivion (Verdery 1991).

From obvious reasons, the national-communist discourse opted for the 'dacist' version regarding the origins of the Romanians. It was much more fitted for the independence aspirations of RSR with reference to the imperial capitalist powers or with the Soviet 'hegemonism' and for the arrogance and ostentatious pride with which Romanian national-communism discursively recuperated two millennia of history in order to present itself as a natural and unique continuity of them. This whole Dacian mythology reminded sociologist Henry Stahl of the legionary mentality: mystique, chauvinistic, excessive (Rostás 2000, 67). Presented as 'ancient inhabitants of this land' with reference to the Greeks with whom they developed intense commercial and cultural relations, the Dacians or the Gets were considered two of the most powerful tribes from the north of the river Danube, 'who have imposed their names to the other ones' (Daicoviciu 1968, 15). But Zoe Petre convincingly argues that even the Dacians or the Gets denomination forcibly overlaps a much more fragmented and dynamic identity, much more opened to the Greek space than the communist historiography presents (Petre 2004).

In the second half of the first century A. D., the Dacian civilization would have reached its peak. In support of the hypothesis of the 'high degree of civilization our ancestors have reached' are brought the constructions, the diverse skills and the progress of art. "Nowhere are to be found bigger settlements, more powerful cities, better tools, more beautiful works of art" (Daicoviciu 1968, 143). One could not find a better political legitimation for this miraculous civilization than the creation, between 60 and 48 B. C., by king Burebista, of a 'centralized Dacian state' which "expanded to the West and North-West until the middle Danube and Moravia, to the North until the wooded Carpathians, which bordered in the East the Tyrageis from the Dneestr river, encompassed Dobruja in its entirety and reached, towards South, until Haemus (the Balkans)" (Daicoviciu 1968, 107). The best proof supporting the (in)existence of this immense Dacian state resides in the fact that, after Burebista's assassination in the same year with that of his potential rival Caesar, 44 B. C., the first falling victim to the Dacian aristocracy unhappy with the threat of a centralization that would have substantially reduced its traditional powers and the last one loosing its life among one of the most important civil wars from ancient Rome – Burebista's political construction, "The great state which he had built with the sword but which lacked a true economic unity" (Daicoviciu 1968, 102) dismembered almost instantaneously. Despite this aspect which invalidates his hypothesis, any state, if one can talk about states in the politological sense of the term before our age – earns its name functioning on institutional, not on personal bases, and therefore surviving the passing of one leader or another: however, Daicoviciu insists that he does not talk about a simple and temporary, although huge Dacian 'tribal union;' moreover, "the development of the

production forces in the Orăștiei mountains (the military centre of the Dacian's political organization during the short and intermittent unification periods of the majority of their tribes by a leader more ambitious and more determined than his rivals, m.n.) and the complex of the cities built here by Burebista presupposes the existence, in the Dacian society from South-West Transylvania, of a precursory phase towards the construction of a state *before* Burebista" (Daicoviciu: 1968, 110; italics in orig.). Because Burebista was king, Daicoviciu further argues, his state could not be anything but an incipient form of monarchy, named, in order to maintain the Marxist cannon distorted through Leninist lens, an '*apprentice slave-state.*' Apprentice because slavery, although did not obtain a central role in the production process of Dacian political economy, represented nevertheless an element of innovation, progressist with reference to the anterior period of the 'primitive commune' which, 'according to the *objective laws* of history,' was destined to replace (Daicoviciu 1968, 118-119; italics in orig.).

Although in a flagrant discontinuity with the research methods used in the fields of history and political science, the syntagm 'centralized Dacian state,' sometimes completed with 'independent,' made, with the blessing of the 'genious of Carpathians,' an astonishing scientific career before 1989 (Ceașescu 1989, 18; Potra 1982, 10). On his turn, Burebista becomes, as his illustrious descendant over millenias, 'the artisan of a wise policy' rather than a warrior; the ones he led were equally brave and wise: "they cultivated as supreme moral values the pride of liberty, the bravery of defending it, moderation" and, flagrantly contradicting Daicoviciu's concept of 'apprentice slave state,' formulated in 1965 and already outdated with reference to the ideological intensification of national-communism, for which Dacians became the most democratic ancient people, beside the fact that it already was, as Herodotus mentioned, the 'bravest' and the most 'righteous' - "in an epoch of slavery, they rejected slavery." Externally, "Peaceful neighbors found in them reliable partners for economic and cultural exchanges, benefiting all; but the conquerors received from the Dacians the rebuff of a general took to arms and often had to learn the bitter, but deserved price of defeat" (Gheorghiu 1982, 292-293). Kind of what the Soviet Union would have experienced in the case of taking into account the possibility of repeating the Prague experience from 1968: it would have been confronted, as the Dacians did with the Romans, by a 'general' resistance, through what has been called 'the war of the entire people.' But the Soviet Union never had this intention. It did not matter anyway. What mattered is that the regime had the ambition to discursively overlap Burebista's 'unitary and independent centralized state,' representing a major danger for 'Roman imperialism' (read American and/or Soviet) through Dacia's capacity (RSR) to mobilize, 'through its example the fight for freedom of the peoples from the South of the Danube enslaved by Rome.' Thus to obtain, by indirectly competing with Maois and post-maoist China, the support of the nonaligned movement against a possible 'imperialist' or Soviet

aggression. The danger of a Soviet invasion, because an 'imperialist' invasion can be excluded from the start, was out of the question; however, it was used as a rhetorical weapon in the western press, where Moscow did not enjoy, in general, a favorable attitude.

Coming back to 'Burebista the founder,' as Corneliu Vadim Tudor names him, we find out that his unique aim was that of foreshadowing the continuation and the improvement of the political ideal of the Dacians by no one other than the general secretary of the RCP, "The supreme synthesis of the millennial wisdom of the Romanian people and of its youth without old age" (Vadim Tudor 1983, 81), legitimized by "the voivodal noblesse inherited from the hundreds of generations of ancestors" (Vadim Tudor 1983, 140). Therefore

the firm wall against migrations, the making of the first statal formations and afterwards, starting from 1290, of the Romanian countries – everything, absolutely everything springs from the common conscience of the borders and of the same ethnic being, conscience that was developed by that gigantic tarabostes that was Burebista. He really existed and offered the first viable measure of our being and permanence, no one can contest these evidences without making himself a fool in front of history. Romanian language, religion and the natural borders from *Burebista's* time constituted the sacred trinity of the national consciousness, the coagulating factors that held the Romanians together, two millennia, around their parental place, no matter how many winds would scatter the earth and the snow, the crops from the field and the ashes, against all sacrileges and barbarian plunders. Eternal praise to the father Burebista, and may his memory be adorned with bay laurels and green bay! *He was the first keeper of the golden tools of our ideals, under his wise leadership begun to shine on the heaven of our homeland the first stars of pride, to him the imperial eagles of the Carpathian and the whole nature swore obedience, to him gave praise the moiras of a great destiny for this people. He is the first great pillar of the Triumphal Arch of the country, while the second is, no doubt, Nicolae Ceaușescu. Between them, as a frontispiece, grows over ages and unites with the iron link of the 'lust that lusted' Michael the Brave. Through them, through these great men, and through the other brave makers of country and traditions, the Romanian people has come today to see with its own eyes its dreams of freedom, unity and prosperity!* (Vadim Tudor 1983, 64; italics in orig.).

The attention is retained, in this painting of cosmic proportions, by the 'natural borders' of the presupposed proto-Romania from Burebista's period, almost twice the size of the present day Romania. Nevertheless, the author does not hesitate in applying the accusation of irredentism, then and now, to the Transylvanian Magyars and to the Magyars leaving abroad Romania, through direct references to the 'loftily tribes' which "did not yet appear on the map of the world and still travelled blindly on the back of their horses, arousing the dust of the steps from sol-oriens" when "they, the Dacians, built in the crown of the Carpathians and on their valleys a classic culture, original and full of beauty" (Vadim Tudor 1983, 61).

Despite being the most 'brave,' 'righteous' and, one could add, the most democratic among the Tracians, the Dacians nevertheless lost the war 'with changing odds' (Gheorghiu 1982, 293) waged against Rome. It is certain that Dacians never stood a chance in defeating the greatest power of Antiquity. But when politics doubled by implacable ideological reasons penetrates not only the scientific field, but everything public and official, we should not be at all surprised when we read that, on the contrary, the power of the Dacians united by Burebista "became so great that at least two times existed the danger that they could occupy the Romans (and not otherwise, as it happened in 106 A. D.)" (Vadim Tudor 1983, 61). Remembering the two opportunities Burebista had to conquer Rome is purely superfluous. However, is not superfluous to mention that Traian waged against the dacians an 'aggressive, unjust' war, while the latter only defended their country, despite occasionally plunder campaigns in the Roman provinces from the South of the Danube. "The danger that the Dacian state represented for the Roman empire was real, but it did not threaten the existence of Rome and the Roman people, but only the Roman possessions at the South of the Danube" (Daicoviciu 1968, 250). Moreover, these campaigns would have not represented plunder opportunities, but tentative encouragements for the dacian tribes in the area to rebel against Roman occupation. Even if Decebal, the last Dacian king, would have conquered these regions during a war with Rome (something he never intended), "his action would not have been a war of aggression, but a war of freedom" (Daicoviciu 1968, 250) of the related and less fortunate tribes, without posing a threat to the existence of the Roman empire. "The expedition Traian prepared represented a mortal danger for the existence of the Dacian state, for the independence of the Dacian people. The Romans would fight in order to conquer, the Dacians for their freedom and their homes. In this sentiment of defending their motherland the Dacians have found the strength to heroically resist almost three years to the most formidable army Antiquity has ever known" (Daicoviciu 1968, 251). It intrigues, if something can intrigue further, the reciprocity the Dacians would have demanded from the Romans: we do not aim to annihilate you, so you should not aim to annihilate us. Ceaușescu's frustrations for not being the leader of a global superpower (Popescu 1993, 307), but of a small state lacking nuclear weapons are transposed in time, becoming the frustrations of a prosperous and independent Dacia against an immoral aggression from an empire its borders has continuously trespassed, even if pursuing some ideals too noble for the Roman comprehension capacity.

Just as 'Burebista the founder,' transformed by Vadim Tudor into the cornerstone of an absolutely ridiculous nationalist mythology (Vadim Tudor 1983, 81), Decebal becomes on his turn one of the antique predecessors of Ceaușescu. The Dacian king, named the 'hero of the ancestors' and the 'ancestor of heroes,' the 'Carpathian vulture' which presumably threatened Rome just as much as Hannibal did some centuries earlier – is considered a 'new man' for

'new times,' a hero whose sacrifice staked, just the remembrance of Burebista's 'Dacian centralized state,' the consciousness of Dacian-Roman continuity and of unity on the territory of modern Romania. "Centuries have passed, but they only increased the urge, the example of Decebal's deeds, strengthening consciousnesses in the struggle to maintain the ethnic being, to defend the liberty of the Land Decebal himself defended with ardor, with the sacrifice of his life" (Achim 1981, 77-89). And today, 'the sacrifice of the great king' is understood and valued more than ever, even the general secretary of the RCP himself proving his "deep understanding and cherishment of the lessons of the past" (Vadim Tudor 1977, 18) by inscribing the memory of the Dacian king "at a righteous place in the great book of the past" (Vadim Tudor 1977, 64).

Otherwise, it is obvious that the migratory populations which passed for almost a thousand years over the Roman Dacia's territory have radically altered the already plural identity of this former imperial province. One cannot talk, therefore, about a biological continuity between the Vlachs, the Moldavians and the Transylvanians from the medieval, modern and contemporary times – and Dacia's population after the Roman conquest, but only about a partial and selective symbolic continuity operated by certain political and cultural elites interested by the attention of a West whose development, prosperity and military capacities begun to affirm more and more and within which the memory of Rome's former glory was far from being extinguished. In Eric Hobsbawm's terms, a very important historian of nationalism, we are dealing with an 'invented' tradition, from purely pragmatic reasons: as an indispensable element within any type of discourse, history never exists beyond certain contemporary stakes, therefore beyond a form of politics. Medieval voivods needed the support of the Papacy and of the ascending Western powers in the attempt to stop or at least contain the Turkish expansion, Ceaușescu needed funds and western technology in order to finish the revolution in its national-communist acception and to transform the RSR into a global middle power.

### **Concluding Remarks**

By transforming the Dacians into the direct ancestors of Romanians and into the symbolic embodiment of the most patriotic force that ever expressed the unity and the desire for independence of the inhabitants living between the Carpathians, the Danube river and the Black Sea – the RCP, the national-communist discourse proved that it had absolutely nothing in common with the modern theories of nation formation. Quite the contrary, Romanian national-communist discourse was not only perennialist, but largely primordialist, thus sharing numerous ideological characteristics with extreme-right ideologies such as the organic nationalist discourses from the end of the XIXth century and the beginning of the XXth century and legionarism, Romania's sui-generis type of fascism. And this was and still remains, for a regime pretending to have a Marxist ascendancy, quite an ideological dilemma.

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