‘Mystification is a brutal process’

On the paradoxes of Romanian identity

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In an interview with Andrea Pipino, Romanian historian Lucian Boia talks about Romanian identity from its Roman-Dacian beginnings through Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian rule, modernization, fascism, communism, and the paradoxical present, in which this extremely nationalistic country has no openly nationalist political party.

We could call it the ‘Romanian paradox’. Perhaps the most nationalistic country in central and eastern Europe has no explicitly, openly nationalist party. Romania has always proudly asserted its Latin-based ethnolinguistic uniqueness to distinguish itself from its Slavic neighbours, and celebrated national ideology and identity more than others. But the last political force built around the idea of the glorification of identity was that of Partidul România Mare (Greater Romanian Party), founded in 1991. Led by Corneliu Vadim Tudor, the court poet to Nicolae Ceauşescu, and a refuge for far-right fanatics and those nostalgic for Romanian communism, the party slowly descended into irrelevance after its candidate, Tudor himself, finished second in the 2000 presidential elections. However, he left no noteworthy successors. The cult of national identity, on the other hand, is still going strong in Romania, well-represented in almost every political movement. Like all identity cults, it is essentially an artificial construction, founded on more or less idealized versions of historic events that cannot always be documented.

In the case of Romania, three myths explain and justify the existence of the nation: continuity (Romanians have always inhabited the lands now contained within their state borders); unity (the country has always been a compact, unified entity); and ethnocultural homogeneity (the tendency to rule out or disregard the cultural and linguistic influences and role of other peoples or minorities).

The scholar most committed to deconstructing the layers of Romanian historiography and ‘identifying the myth-making inclinations intrinsic to the human soul and the consciousness of communities’ is Lucian Boia. Trained during the communist years, Boia remains one of the country’s best-known intellectuals. In the introduction to Myth and Consciousness in Romanian History, Boia issues a warning that may well be worth bearing in mind in an age of shamelessly peddled historiographic falsities and triumphant
souverainisms. It relates to what he calls the necessary ‘distinction between two different words and concepts. Mystification is a brutal process that has nothing to do with the sophisticated substance of the myth. It consists of lies, deceptions, and deliberate disinformation. The myth, on the other hand, defines and illustrates the considerable faith that spurs a people on’. We are, it should be noted, far more accustomed to dealing with mystifications than myths in contemporary political narratives.

Our conversation takes place in the tea room of a Bucharest bookshop. We are but a stone’s throw from Cismigiu Park, the site of the most famous portrayal of Romanian history. Costin Petrescu’s circular fresco, which decorates the perimeter of the Romanian Athenaeum, reconstructs the history of the Romanian people, from its foundation to the reign of Carol II and the eve of World War Two.

One image stands out. Against the background of the advance of Trajan’s troops in their victorious conquest of Dacia, a Dacian woman kneels at the tomb of her husband, who died in battle, lovingly observed by a young Roman legionnaire with his head bowed. They are the Adam and Eve of the Romanian nation which, according to the Dacian-Roman interpretation, emerged in the second century AD from the union of the Dacians and Roman soldiers who remained in the newly-conquered territories. Is this the Romanian origin story with the widest consensus?

**Lucian Boia:** Various interpreters have tried to clarify the origins of the Romanian people since they discovered their Latin ancestry in the seventeenth century. We are referring to these narratives whenever we speak about Romania’s founding myths. According to the so-called ‘Latinist’ theory, the Romanians are the direct descendants of the Romans that conquered Dacia at the beginning of the second century AD. On this view, the Dacian component was completely wiped out, defeated, and erased from history. This idea of the ‘Latin purity’ of the Romanian people – which underscores the clear separation between the national community and the Slavic world and goes hand in hand with the tendency to regard the West as a political and cultural model – was called into question in the mid-nineteenth century. At this point, there was some consensus around the ‘Dacian-Roman’ theory, according to which the Romanians were born of the merging of Latin and Dacian components. This synthesis, which establishes an equilibrium between nationalism and the desire for Europeanization, is captured in the image from Petrescu’s fresco. At the end of the nineteenth century, however, it was joined by a third, ‘Dacian’, interpretation. This excludes the Latin element and claims that Romanians descended exclusively from the Dacians. This is the mirror image of the Latinist theory, but it is not supported by arguments about the Romanian language, which the Latinists had employed with some efficiency. Romanian is clearly a neo-Latin language. This historiographic interpretation, which tends to dissociate the country from the western world and Europe, was promoted in the inter-war period by the extreme right and taken up again by Nicolae Ceauşescu’s nationalist communism in the 1970s and 1980s. This may seem like a paradox, but it is not.

**Andrea Pipino:** Romanian communism made effective use of rhetoric and slogans to form peoples’ identities; this is an essential detail for understanding pervasive nationalism. We will return to this issue, but the question of the founding myths of the nation requires further examination. I wish to explore another much-discussed topic,
which diverges from (and causes much disagreement with) other countries’ historiographic schools, particularly Hungary. I am referring to the matter of historical continuity, that is, the uninterrupted presence of a particular national group in a given territory – in this case the Romanians – in the areas now delimited by their national borders.

This is the idea that being the first to arrive somewhere – perhaps two thousand years ago – is justification enough to claim certain rights over it. This eternal, irresolvable problem also affects other national communities in Eastern Europe. In Between the Woods and the Water, dedicated to Romania, Patrick Leigh Fermor unravels the historiographic and political debates on continuity that have divided Hungarians and Romanians for centuries. He ultimately bows down to the impossibility of uncovering the slightest truth.

**LB:** If only I could ascertain what really happened with Aurelian’s retreat! Yet we have nothing, not the slightest fact. The silence and darkness persists for a millennium. This void is hugely beneficial for the contrasting visions of history: any theory can be elaborated within it. Indeed, the debate on this question is not over, and probably never will be. The problem is that there is hardly any information available between the thousand years following the Romanians’ retreat from Dacia under Emperor Aurelian (from around the end of the third century AD) until 1300. As a result, many different theories have emerged, all driven by ideological and political needs. According to the ‘continuist’ interpretation, the Romanians have always inhabited the territory of present-day Romania. Advocates for the ‘immigrationist’ theory, on the other hand, maintain that the Romanian people developed in an unspecified area far from the country’s current borders, possibly south of the Danube or in the Banat region, the most north-westerly corner of the Balkan Peninsula. This is the vision espoused by Hungarian historians, since it follows that Transylvania was originally a Magyar region, to which Romanians arrived later. There are arguments supporting both theses. The question is very complicated, however, and raises linguistic problems. What matters is to recognise the complete senselessness of such a debate. The borders were traced not according to historical criteria, but demographics. The Magyars can also claim – perhaps rightly – that they arrived in Transylvania before the Romanians, but Romanians now make up 80 percent of the population in the region, with Hungarians making up the remaining 20 percent. The historic right might continue to be invoked, but ultimately it is demographics that decide.

**AP:** These kinds of disputes are a constant in regions where different ethnolinguistic groups have co-existed with varying degrees of peace. They are often fostered deliberately to generate tensions that can lead to open clashes and violence. One need only think of the Caucasus and the former Yugoslavia. Yet the polemics over who inhabited a particular geographical space a thousand years ago – Kosovo, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Abkhazia, amongst others – should be nothing more than a subject of historiographic interest.

**LB:** Invoking a historic right allows historians to reconstruct processes and reorganise sequences of events to suit their motivations, even if there are great differences between accounts of what happened. Ultimately, however, this always results in deceptive outcomes. Hungary is a good example. While it may be true that the Magyars were already in Transylvania around the year 1000, it is undeniable that they were much
further east two centuries beforehand. They were on the Volga towards the Ural mountains. If we only take historical rights into account, present-day citizens of the United States should return to Europe and America should be returned to its native peoples. The solutions presented by such a relation to the past are worthless and misleading, because a country consists of the people that inhabit it at a given moment, not a thousand years earlier. Nevertheless, at least from the perspective of which symbols they use, different national communities will inevitably assert their own historic rights. However pointless it might be, Romanian nationalists will continue to claim that they arrived in Transylvania first and remained there for centuries without interruption, and the Hungarians will do the same.

AP: Let us move away from myth and turn to the history of Romania’s present. A critical moment for the birth of modern national Romanian consciousness came about in the first half of the nineteenth century, on the eve of the 1859 fusion of Wallachia and Moldavia. This signalled the birth of the first embryo of independent Romania. In these few decades, the country changed face.

LB: This marks the beginning of Romanian modernization and westernization. Until the early nineteenth century, Wallachian and Moldavian elites would wear Turkish clothing, used Greek as the main language of culture, and wrote using Cyrillic characters, like the other Slavic peoples. Then there were dramatic changes in the space of twenty years (between around 1830–50). They abandoned eastern clothing and began dressing in a western style, French (and to a lesser extent German) replaced Greek, they began using the Latin alphabet, and Romanian institutions, cultural and intellectual life, and law and administration conformed to the western model.

AP: The primacy of the French language and civilization are hardly surprising. This merely confirms the strong roots of Romanian Francophilia. But how can we explain the German influence just as the country was proudly rediscovering its Latin origins?

LB: It is important to remember that the regions that later became part of Romania (Banat, Bukovina, and Transylvania) formed part of the Austria-Hungarian Empire at the end of the nineteenth century. Consequently, these Romanians tended to use German as their language of culture. This is the only reason. It was, however, the principalities of Wallachia and Moldova, the so-called Vecheul regat (‘Old Kingdom’), that governed the direction of the political and cultural life of the new country. It was the country known as România mica (lesser Romania) that in 1918 expanded to include Bukovina, Transylvania and Bessarabia (which approximates to the current Republic of Moldova), becoming Greater Romania. The Romanian state continued to exist in this form until the Second World War. During this phase, the main cultural influence remained resolutely French, even if interest in German culture persisted and there was a growing curiosity about Italian culture. Until the start of the war, it was obligatory for young people leaving high school to have perfectly mastered French.

AP: Along with the West, the other key centre of attention for Romania was the Ottoman Empire. What was the political and cultural legacy of the centuries spent under Turkish rule for the country?

LB: The Romanians and the Turks have a curious relationship. On the one hand, the
struggles against the Ottoman Empire are an essential chapter in Romanian historical mythology. Romanians fought, from the Middle Ages, to preserve their independence from the Turkish invaders, thereby also defending the Christianity of Europe. On the other hand, the current Romanian fondness for Turks is not shared by other groups in the region, such as the Greeks or Bulgarians. This sets Romanians apart from the other Balkan nationalities formerly under Ottoman rule. Things unfolded differently in Romania. Moldova and Wallachia were never annexed to the empire, but always maintained a certain degree of autonomy. The Turks could not settle in these regions, for one thing, which explains the absence of Islamic places of worship. The situation was, of course, very different in Dobruja, which was conquered and governed directly by Istanbul. Overall, however, this may explain Romanians’ ambiguous attitudes. Then there is the question of language. Despite the mid-nineteenth-century ‘re-Latinization’ of Romanian, a large number of words of Turkish origin are still in use. In some fields, such as gastronomy, they may even be predominant.

AP: You have said that parts of Romania remained under Ottoman influence (or direct control) for centuries, but Transylvania and Banat were part of the Austro-Hungary. It is often tempting to imagine that the Ottoman/Austro-Hungarian border carved out an extremely deep chasm in Romania, dividing it between a more modern, advanced, richer, ‘Central European’ area and less developed, poorer ‘Balkan’ one. Is there such a ‘civilizational rift’ in Romania, as in the other countries riven by a border between the two empires, like Serbia?

LB: I would not say that such a rift exists. The Romania that emerged out of the debris of the empires, between the second half of the nineteenth century and the end of the First World War, was a solid, united entity capable of withstanding the challenges of history. Of course, there are clearly differences between Wallachians, Moldovans, and Transylvanians – even in their political orientations – but they are not as significant. This can be ascribed, in part, to the enormous influence of the Romanian language, which served as a fundamental unifying force. There are regional ways of speaking with minor local differences, but Romanian is a cohesive language and has no real dialects. Orthodox Christianity played a central role in maintaining a united social space, too. The areas administered by the Austro-Hungarian Empire can, from this perspective, undeniably now be considered as ‘Central’ Europe, rather than ‘Eastern’ or ‘Balkan’ Europe. What we might call a ‘Mitteleuropean’ spirit persists in Banat, Transylvania, and Bukovina, but it has never been powerful enough to break down Romanian unity.

AP: The rise of the Romanian national identity in the mid-nineteenth century, from which the first unification of the country derives, was accompanied by the dissemination of liberal ideas and the recognition of the need to modernize society. However, these were also the years of romantic nationalism, encapsulated by the poet Mihai Eminescu, for whom ‘nations are nothing other than the nuances of the prism of humanity, and the difference between them is natural, explicit, understandable such is any difference between individuals due to specific circumstances’. Eminescu’s patriotism, centred on the idea of the nation’s ‘sacredness’, which he understood as the incarnation of the ‘spirit’ of a people, displays the first elements of distrust of the Jewish minority, and a certain hostility to democracy. The modernizing and liberal forces in Romanian nationalism waned in the following decades, and reactionary and occasionally xenophobic tendencies took over. Might this shift to the right, which peaked in the late 1930s, be somehow
connected to the birth of Greater Romania in 1918, since this was the first clear demonstration of the problem of the presence of different ethno-linguistic minorities within Romania’s national borders?

**LB:** The creation of Greater Romania was an important political victory for the country, but it undeniably ignited the extremely delicate question of minorities. In the regions that were part of Romania at the time, Romanians made up the majority, but they were not alone. In Transylvania, for example, they made up around 58 percent of the population, compared to 24 per cent Hungarians and 10 per cent Germans. There was also a significant Jewish presence in the region. In Bukovina, there were sizeable communities of Ukrainians, Russians, and Jews, and Dobruja was home to Turks, Tatars, and Bulgarians. There were all citizens of the Romanian State (though this was only applied to Jews from 1923), but the distinction between Romanians and others – described as ‘foreigners’ – was still very strong. In some cases, these minorities enjoyed better living conditions than Romanians. This was the case in Transylvania, for instance, where most of the richer, better educated urban population was German or Magyar.

Once it had been recognized that Greater Romania was not only the country of Romanians, but also Hungarians, Jews, and Germans – the bearers of determined shares of wealth – a frustration began to develop that fueled the more aggressive, xenophobic nationalism that spread in the interwar period. One example is Corneliu Zelea Codreanu’s Iron Guard – commonly known as the ‘Legionnaire’ movement – combined ultranationalism, antisemitism, Orthodox mysticism, anti-communism, and the cult of the country’s rural tradition. At the end of the 1930s, the Legionnaires gained lots of support. They entered government in 1940 under general Ion Antonescu, whose fascism differed from theirs. The following year, however, the movement was dissolved and annulled by Antonescu himself.

**AP:** This radicalization affected not only political life, but also the world of culture. An interesting case is that of the philosopher Nae Ionescu, an ideologist of the Iron Guard, who wrote an introduction to the novel *For Two Thousand Years* – a kind of antisemitic manifesto – at the request of the author, Mihail Sebastian, a Jewish Romanian. ‘Belonging to a particular community is not an individual choice’, proclaims the notorious preface. ‘It is an assimilationist illusion; it is the illusion of so many Jews who sincerely believe that they are Romanian … Remember that you are Jewish! Are you Iosef Hechter [Sebastian’s real name, author’s note], a human being from Brăila on the Danube? No, you are a Jew from Brăila on the Danube’. The schizophrenic relationship between the young Jewish writer Sebastian and his antisemitic mentor Ionescu, and the polemic these words triggered, may mark a point of no return in the cultural history of the country, unleashing consequences that are difficult to erase. In reality, however, many Romanian intellectuals were seduced by the Legionnaire ideology in the late 1930s, from Emil Cioran to Mircea Eliade, Constantin Noica, and Eugène Ionesco. The direction of public debate in that period cannot have failed to guide the discourse on national identity, fuelling xenophobia, totalitarianism, and antisemitism. What happened in the country during this period, exactly?

**LB:** These developments were partly the result of the emergence of a new type of nationalism that, unlike its open, liberal nineteenth-century form, was far more
autochthonous. In the nineteenth century, the country was keen to assert its place within a European tradition while, in the twentieth century, greater weight was placed on specifically Romanian characteristics and values. This underscored the national character of a growing educated elite, not restricted to the few who had studied in the west. The new, necessary coexistence with other minorities gave rise to a ‘Romanianist’ ideology (românism). This had a bearing on literature, with the movement formed around the newspaper Sămănătorul (“The Sower”), architecture (with the success of the so-called ‘neo-Romanian’ style), history, sociology, and ethnography. Romania shared this tendency with most of Europe at the time. In Romania, however, it was taken to its most extreme lengths, ultimately stirring up the ultranationalist and fascist movements of the ‘30s and providing the ideal environment in which totalitarian ideologies hostile to any type of diversity could prosper.

**AP:** The end of the war brought this phase to a violent close. Communism arrived immediately afterwards. This was an enormous leap for Romanian society, which had never experienced a mass labor movement of a communist or socialist character. At the end of the 1930s, the communist party in Romania had a thousand members, compared to thirty thousand in Hungary and eighty thousand in Czechoslovakia. After an initial internationalist and pro-Soviet phase, the regime refashioned itself as nationalist to underscore its presumed autonomy from Moscow. This process began in the early 1950s under Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej and was consolidated after 1965 by Nicolae Ceaușescu. Romania thus became the country that best embodied the model of ‘National Communism’, even more so than Enver Hoxha’s isolated Albania. Despite a few years of being relatively open to the West, a phenomenon unknown in other east European countries at the time, the regime began to show its true colours in the 1970s: paternalistic and oppressive, a quasi-dynastic system imbued with a brutal nationalist rhetoric. How and why did this political monster come into being?

**LB:** Initially, the regime had a relatively vast social base, because there was a deep fracture in the country between a very small western-educated intellectual elite and the masses (mostly poor, often illiterate, farmers). This class supported the regime, reaping the rewards of social progress under communism. When the regime later discovered it had nothing more to offer Romanians, it moved towards nationalism. This card was far too easy to play, since it allowed foreign enemies to be singled out for all the country’s problems. This nationalist shift occurred in many communist countries. In Hungary, Bulgaria, and Poland, for instance, the regimes preached internationalism, and then relied on the rhetoric of national identity and belonging, exploiting the logic of ‘us versus them’. Russia was, of course, no exception. The point is that, in Romania, the phenomenon was more excessive and pervasive than elsewhere. The regime assimilated all the expressions of Romanian nationalism, even the most radical ones such as Coreanu’s Legionnaires and Romanianism, and had no qualms about exploiting the intolerance towards minorities, especially Hungarians. The same dynamics arose in Poland against Jews and in Bulgaria against Turks. With some paradoxical irony, the Romanization process advanced even more under communism than the interwar period. The country became far more ethnolinguistically homogeneous; and entire generations were educated in the spirit of uncritical nationalism, following a vision of history according to which Romanians are always right and the fault inevitably lies with others – foreigners. Unsurprisingly, this all heightened the backwardness of the country, particularly evident from the mid-1970s; Romania closed in on itself, isolating itself from
Europe. Anything from abroad was regarded with suspicion. Consequently, today’s nationalism derives less from pre-Second World War fascist and ultranationalist extremism than Ceaușescu’s communist nationalism, which incorporated and assimilated many of their characteristics.

**AP:** This brings us back to the paradox of a nationalistic country without a real nationalist party. On the one hand, nationalism is omnipresent, pervading almost all political forces, and much of the public debate while, on the other hand, nationalist rhetoric has become obsolete as a tool for mobilizing the masses. In the chaos after 1989, the national ideology that took root under communism was readopted and re-presented in various forms. It once again served to bind the national community together. Nowadays, however, I believe we can assert that there is no political force in Romania with a coherently nationalist programme. Even identity discourses seem to have lost their appeal. Instead of encouraging citizens to mobilise against foreigners, achieving and retaining power requires a widespread network of mayors and local administrators who can regulate small rural communities, perhaps by distributing funds or organizing public festivities before elections. Even if the country lacks an openly nationalist party obsessed with sovereignty, the risk of descending into authoritarianism, and the state of law and democracy deteriorating, are more present than ever, following similar paths to Hungary and Poland.

To further complicate the situation, Romanian society is marked by a widespread mistrust of national institutions, but high confidence in the European Union. Between the sovereignist temptations of the political class (especially Liviu Dragnea’s social democrats), the Europeanism of the urban classes, the frustration of the diaspora, and an underdeveloped, traditionalist rural world, it is difficult to define the country’s political orientation. One question is therefore unavoidable: what does nationalism mean in Romania today?

**LB:** The nationalist perspective persists in the interpretation of history above all. Romania was, essentially, born thanks to the force of its national ideology. If Romanians had not believed passionately in certain historic myths, such as the idea of a united, ‘eternal’ Romania, perhaps the country would not exist today. In recent years, Romania has not had any large nationalist parties of an extremist or neo-fascist character. This is at least in part because nationalism has been absorbed by the party in government. If we had to establish a hierarchy of nationalist-leaning political forces, we could say that the Social Democrat Party – in government since 2017, and to some extent the successor to the Communist Party – is the most tempted by ethno-nationalism, conspiracy-theorizing, and anti-Europeanism. There is another real problem today, however. We have to ask if Romania’s post-1989 institutions have true social solidity, or if they are merely, to borrow an expression coined by Titu Maiorescu in the 1860s to describe Romania’s lightning-quick but superficial westernization, ‘forms without content’. The question is still relevant today. And there is no clear answer.

*This conversation is an excerpt from Andrea Pipino’s latest book *Nazionalismi* (Editrice Bibliografica, 2019), with accounts of from Hungary, Poland, Croatia, Austria, Romania and Russia, published in Italian.*