National values in the Romanian press in the second half of the 19th century

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Abstract

This study proposes an analysis of the main national values promoted by the Romanian press in the second decade of the 19th century, a period in which independence and national identity represented vital issues for most European states. The object of this research is one of the best known Romanian publications of that period: the newspaper “Timpul” (The Time). Our analytical approach targets the identification of national values promoted by the journalistic discourse, in relation to the social and political context of the time. The analysis of the articles emphasizes the journalists’ preoccupation with the dissolution of traditional values such as language, culture, history, and faith, when confronted to the temptations brought about by external models. Without pleading for isolation within the borders of national history and culture, the press of the time suggests that institutions and attitudes built according to foreign models should be cautiously adapted to the Romanian realities.

Keywords: national values, the 19th century, Romanian journalism, “Timpul” newspaper.

1. Social and political micro- and macro- context

Labelled by historians “the century of the nationalities”, the 19th century focuses on an issue regarded as urgent by most European nations – the issue of the national state. This is the time when Europe is challenged by ample social and political movements. The Romanians’ fights for emancipation and liberation belong to a larger context of the efforts made by smaller states to earn their place on the map of a modern, independent Europe. The revolutionary moment of the year 1821, along with its subsequent political changes and the movements of 1848 announces a period of great transformations that would lead to the modernization of the Romanian state. In the second half of the 19th century, the years 1859 and 1877 stand out as important benchmarks of the Romanian people’s modern history: the former is the year of the Small Union, when Moldavia and Wallachia become one, following the double election of Alexandru Ioan Cuza, while 1877 is the year when the Romanian state gains its independence on the battlefield. The double election of Alexandru Ioan Cuza, on the 5th of January 1859, in Moldavia and the 24th of January in Wallachia, opens the way for democratic reforms in the Principalities. The constitutional system introduced during Cuza’s reign provides the premises for the inclusion of the Principalities among the most democratic modern structures of that time (Berindei 2002: 137). An important crisis for the country was the dismissing of Alexandru Ioan Cuza, in 1866, when a foreign prince was brought to rule the country. These events generate the danger of an imminent ottoman intervention leading to the annulment of the Union and fuels further issues caused by the diplomatic manoeuvres of the great powers. This crisis situation is overcome due to the implication of domestic politicians and the newly elected Romanian diplomats.

The decade between 1866 – the year when the Principalities are given a modern Constitution – and the moment when the great powers acknowledge the independence and sovereignty gained by entering the Russian-Turkish in 1877 is regarded by historians as a stage of preparation for a moment expected for centuries: the acknowledgment of Romanians as a free, independent, European nation (Berindei 2002: 49). Until the first half of the 19th century the only Romanian political aim was the recognition of our existence as a nation and a state. However, starting with the second

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half of the century we can speak of a genuine Romanian political life, once the Constitution was adopted in 1866. Created according to the model of the Belgian Constitution adopted in 1831 (Berindei 2002: 10), the Romanian Constitution proclaims the Romanians’ rights, emphasizes the principles of separation of powers within the state and ministerial responsibility, thus placing Romania among the most developed countries at the time. According to the constitutional regime appointed in 1866 by the sovereign, political parties took turns in forming the government, ensuring their majority in the Parliament and thus subordinating the local and central administrations.

The second half of the 19th century is characterized by an intensification of the unionist movement in the Principalities, as the union ideal becomes the core of political thinking at the time. Heterogeneous and marked by contrasts, the Romanian society of the time crosses a period of great transformation on its way to modernity, economic, political and social change. This period is regarded as an essential stage in the historical process of the formation of the modern Romanian state. The obsession for the national issue, reflected by the journalism of the time, is generated by the concern that national identity could be lost under the impact of foreign domination and the temptations brought on by Western models. Achieved according to the model of Western civilization democracy, the modernization of the Romanian society in the second half of the 19th century was extremely fast-paced. The precipitation of historical stages did not allow sufficient time for sedimentation. Consequently, the Romanian society of the time seems to lack harmony in several aspects. The theory of “forms without contents” unfortunately finds its best representation in this period in which foreign forms of political and administrative institutions were adopted regardless of their inadequacy with the country’s domestic needs.

2. Romanian journalism in the 19th century

Despite the fact that manuscripts started circulating as early as the 18th century, one can actually speak about a proper Romanian press only beginning with the 19th century, when the transformations occurring in the economic, political, and cultural life of the Principalities provided the premises for the issue and development of Romanian periodicals. The beginnings of the press are also favoured by an intensification of cultural exchanges with foreign countries, by the circulation of material assets, and the permanent exchange of ideas made possible by young Romanian intellectuals who studied in Western European countries. The first Romanian publications are issued in Transylvania in close connection with the cultural activity of the Transylvanian School.

After Alexandru Ioan Cuza was elected as Romanian ruler, the political centre of the country is relocated in Bucharest where the most important political newspapers of the time are founded. A strong believer in the freedom of expression of the press, Cuza encourages the issue of Romanian publications, both as a means of reflecting public life and as an instrument of mass education. The first law of the press is elaborated under the reign of Cuza (1862), being subsequently consolidated by the Constitution of 1866, that provided the abolition of censorship and proclaimed the freedom of expression of the press. The main political groups of the time, namely the Conservative and the Liberal parties, are well aware of the necessity to provide financial support to publications that could defend them and promote their interests. Thus, the conservative cause is supported by newspapers such as “Timpul” (The Time) (1876-1884), “Epoca” (The Epoch) (1885) and “Conservatorul” (The Conservative) (1900), while the liberal cause is supported by “Românul” (The Romanian), “L’Indépendance Roumaine” (The Romanian Independence) (1879), “Voința națională” (The National Will) (1884) and “Democrația” (The Democracy) (1888). The discourse cultivated by these publications mirrors closely the ideologies of the two political parties as well as the ideals of the young political class of the time.

Along with the thematic specialization of the Romanian press at the end of the 19th century (economic, juridical, literary, scientific, and military publications are issued, addressed to particular categories of readers) one can also witness the enrichment and diversification of information sources, as foreign press agencies open their branches in Bucharest. The specificity of the journalistic discourse in the 19th century is given, on the one hand, by the cultural character of the language, in a time when the norms of the Romanian language are not yet established, and on the other hand by the particularities of the political referential and the social and historical context that generates the contents. While the first Romanian publications have an eclectic character, including, along official news and communicates, translations from the foreign press, literary texts, letters, telegrams, advertisements, and the like, newspapers gradually start to structure their pages in separate columns, granting more space for domestic and foreign political issues. Important journalists start investing the journalistic discourse with authority, turning it into one of the most efficient weapons on the Romanian political battlefield.
3. National values promoted by the journalistic discourse

3.1. Description of the journalistic corpus

The object of our analysis is the editorial archives of the “Timpul” newspaper from the period between 1877-1889, the selection of this newspaper being motivated by the fact that it was a representative publication with a huge impact at that time. Our analytical approach aims at identifying and analyzing the Romanian national values promoted by the publication in a time when the mirage of foreign models was regarded as a real threat against the preservation of national identity.

“Timpul”, a political and literary newspaper is issued in Bucharest on the 15th of March 1876, being coordinated until 1877 by Gr. H. Grandea. Around its editorial debut, the newspaper has four weekly issues. In the periods 1876-1884 and 1889-1900 it turned into a daily newspaper. A new series is edited between the 2nd of March 1923 and the 7th of July 1924 (DGRL, s.v. Timpul). Founded during the conservative governing “Timpul” becomes the main opposition newspaper after the liberals take the power. At the beginning of the year 1877, the leadership of the newspaper is granted to Titu Maiorescu, while Ioan Slavici is appointed editor-in-chief, being responsible with the political material. At the end of April, when Maiorescu steps out from the leadership, the editorial responsibilities are taken on by Ioan Slavici and Gr. H. Grandea. Left alone after Grandea leaves the editorial office of “Timpul”, Slavici requires that Mihai Eminescu joins the editorial board. At that time, Eminescu was an editor at “Curierul de Iaşi”. The poet joins the conservative publication in October, being followed in January 1878 by I.L. Caragiale. In order to set limits to the polemic effusions of the three gazetteers, the conservatives appoint I.A. Cantacuzino as editor-in-chief in February 1878. Eminescu’s freedom of expression and thought will bring him much trouble: the journalist gets into a conflict with Al. Lahovari, an influential conservative leader and ends up formulating tough criticism against the Junimea members. Starting with January 1882 Gr. C. Păucescu takes over the leadership of the newspaper. On the 16th of February 1883, Eminescu quits his position as editor-in-chief.

The editing board of “Timpul” hosted three outstanding personalities: Eminescu, Caragiale and Slavici. This triumvirate turned the conservative group’s publication into one of the most important newspapers of the time. Even if their names do not appear on the frontispiece, they bear responsibility for the published materials. Slavici contributes with prose, reviews and notes, I.L. Caragiale writes editorials, parliamentary coverage, domestic and foreign news, notes, information, theatre chronicles, while Eminescu is responsible for articles on domestic and foreign politics. Eminescu’s writings go beyond the conservative doctrine, reflecting the journalist’s refusal to remain faithful to the political views of those who supported the newspaper financially whenever his own opinions were different from theirs. Eminescu gives value to the newspaper, turning it into a landmark of journalistic writing of that era.

3.2. Romanian identity values in the “Timpul” discourse

The young Romanian political class’ haste in adopting Western models triggers Eminescu’s bitter reaction. He states in the issue of “Timpul” on the 2nd of July 1881 that everything is limited to “the same hunt for positions and money, the same sacrifice of the country and of freedom for the sake of personal interests, the same dirt that can be fatal for a nation that starts its life with institutions borrowed from abroad or improvised by foreigners and that is unaware that real progress can only be related to its history and its past.” (Eminescu 1985: 224).

Being an ardent defender of national specificity, Eminescu is accused of nationalism and xenophobia. However, Eminescu’s “nationalism” should be understood in the social and historical context of his time. “His nationalism is not property-related, but contextual, and it is almost exclusively used as a weapon against liberalism, which the poet cunningly argues against, obstinately pursuing his objective – to defend conservative values” (Sereş 2000: 7). In close connection to his being labelled a nationalist, the accusation of xenophobia was generated in its turn by neglecting the social, political and economical context of the 19th century as well as the tendentious fragmentation of some of his articles. Behind his refusal of “foreignness” there is actually the journalist’s preoccupation with the problems his country was facing and his concern for the loss of national identity. Motivated by these concerns, the journalist pleads in his articles for “Timpul” in favour of the respect for and preservation of the Romanian values, emphasizing the fact that history, language, culture, and religion remain the main means for the preservation of a people’s identity. The next
section aims at depicting the importance and effects of these identity values in the configuration of the Romanian people’s spiritual profile, as they are often reflected in the journalistic discourse of “Timpul”.

3.2.1. History

The past represents a fundamental landmark for Eminescu’s journalistic work, his perspective being centred on it. In fact, he explicitly confesses about his fascination with the past and the fact that he feels closer to his forerunners than to his contemporaries. His predilection for the historical past is based on a good knowledge of the sources, the thorough study of old chronicles and manuscripts and his love for history makers. His connection with the past is mirrored, on the one hand, by his respect for the forerunners, and by his nostalgia regarding an ideal social model, on the other hand. As opposed to the vices and vanity of his contemporaries, history provides the journalist with the source of exemplary models and compensations for the lack of authenticity of contemporary values.

Frequently accused of projecting a bucolic perspective upon the past, the journalist turns history into a landmark he compares all present acts which, being absolutely convinced that the future is nothing but a continuation or at most a rectification of the past. Within his journalistic discourse, passéism becomes a sort of explanatory, heuristic commentary meant as a confirmation of genuine national values, in a time when the country’s freedom and independence were just mere dreams. History acquires paradigmatic values, while the past is used to critically evaluate the present and identify efficient solutions for the country’s political problems. This temporal expansion is based on the journalist’s belief expressed in the issue of “Timpul” of January 10, namely that “the Romanian audience, like any audience in the world, live in the present, and few, very few of them are interested in the past of their country” (Opere XII, p. 22) and that ignoring their predecessors’ experience prevents the modernization of the country.

The past is illustrated in the pages of “Timpul” by memorable historical characters and heroic deeds that gain exemplary value for the contemporary generation. Deeply disappointed by the actions of the Romanian political class, the gazetteer turns towards the past, perceived as a compensation, and expressed without hesitation his admiration for personalities such as Ştefan cel Mare, Mircea cel Bătrân, Matei Basarab and others. Such an attitude towards the past accuses him thus of being a reactionary. Eminescu responds to his accusers, in his articles, claiming that “real progress can only occur by means of conservation, on the one hand, and addition, on the other hand” (Opere IX, p. 417) and that “real progress, which is a natural connection between past and future, is inspired by the actions of the past, rejecting improvised innovation and hazardous adventures” (ibidem). Being well aware of the complex relationship between historical past and politics, the journalist perceives them as being complementary, since the past provides the premises for the present and politics should respect the old fundamentals of society in order to adequately its objectives to the society’s specificity.

3.2.2. Language

A means of preserving and cultivating national identity in a time in which the issue of independence is vital for many European states, language is an essential issue in journalism. By drawing attention on the necessity to establish norms and modernize the Romanian language Eminescu launches a virulent campaign against the “incomprehensible language” cultivated by the press of this time and the visible linguistic fluctuations of his fellow journalists’ discourses. He claims that any novelty in the field of language must be based on tradition and emphasizes the dangers of hasty modernization. Without opposing novelty, Eminescu criticizes “empty forms” as well as the journalists that “manufacture new words, undermining the old edifice of the Romanian language, with the mere purpose of saying something and pretending they have a culture or faking abilities they were not actually endowed with” (Opere X, p. 441). In this context, his efforts regarding the cultivation of the literary Romanian language are part of his endeavour to fight against “forms without content” and the excesses they generate.

A comparative reading of Romanian publications at the time emphasizes the superiority of the journalistic discourse cultivated by “Timpul”. When compared to the language of the press in the second half of the 19th century, the number of hesitant spellings and grammatical forms is obviously reduced in the pages of the conservatives’ publication, proving that its gazetteers had a better mastery of the language. On the other hand, by using a significant number of neologisms and frequently introducing glossaries in their articles, journalists contribute to the education of their readers by making them aware of the norms and enriching the language, in a period when the general norms generate countless
fluctuations in verbal expression. Eminescu emphasizes the role played by the church in building a unitary national language, claiming that “if there ever was a bias on the dialectalization of our language, it ceased when the church created the literary language, sanctified it and turned it into a sacred language of the state. From that moment on, the unity was expressed by language and nationality, whereas before that Romanians tended to mistake nationality with religion” (Opere XII, p. 363).

3.2.3. Culture

The beginnings of Mihai Eminescu career as a journalist are closely connected to the cultural and political life of the Romanian students studying abroad. After his debut as a journalist he collaborates for a few years with Iosif Vulcan’s “Familia” (The Family), a collaboration that begins with Repertoriul nostru teatral (Our Theatrical Repertoire), printed as an editorial in issue number 18 of the magazine on January, 30, 1870. The text is part of a larger campaign aimed at supporting the foundation of the national theatre and emphasizes the necessity of elaborating a national theatrical repertoire, as well as the necessity of founding a publication that would allow writers the opportunity to publish their literary works.

The journalist has a critical attitude towards young people who idealize borrowed Western European ideas without considering the historical contexts of the phenomena. Believing that the future should not be a mere continuation of the past, but rather the latter’s rectification, Eminescu pleads for the adoption of new “forms” only provided that they are adapted to the national specificity. His journalistic debut reflects his maturity and freedom of thought in dealing with cultural issues, the power of his discourse and the solid argumentation of his viewpoints. In this respect, the journalist does not hesitate to start a well-known polemics with Titu Maiorescu, the Junimea mentor. Eminescu appreciates Titu Maiorescu’s “valuable, clear style”, yet he disregards his attempt to raise the Romanian culture and civilization to the European level in disregarding the realities of our country.

The journalist has nothing against introducing Western cultural institutions in our country, yet he emphasizes the danger of the “forms without content” in the context in which Western models were borrowed disregarding the nature and specificity of the Romanian society. He clearly expresses his belief that “real progress can only occur by means of conservation, on the one hand, and addition, on the other hand” (Eminescu 1984: 371).

3.2.4. Religion

The important granted by Eminescu, as a journalist, to the church in the process of national identity preservation is obvious even since he publishes the article entitled “It is said in the council…” issued in November 1876. This is a text in which the journalist expresses his indignation against Austro-Hungarian policies concerning the abolishment of national institutions in the states under occupation. The gazetteer pleads for Romanians’ rights, claiming that “the church and the schools, that is all that Romanians request from the Austro-Hungarians, and by this they only want to preserve their nationality, and nothing more. In everything we do, especially in this century, we seem to have only one purpose: material needs and physical power; however, even the most materialistic of people work, against their own will or even without realizing it, for a higher purpose. Cultivated people sometimes seem to lack this consciousness that belongs to the people” (Opere IX, 252).

As opposed to national institutions such as the government, political parties or public administration, that are prone to harsh criticism from the journalist, church and school are regarded from a very different perspective. According to Eminescu the church supports and continues the educational process achieved by the school: “church is also a tool for development and its influence upon primary schools is most useful” (Opere X, p. 137). The school and the church play a vital part in configuring the spiritual profile of a people and in preserving its national identity.

Essential for the conservation of the Romanian nation, faith connects the generations and ensures their continuity: „Our ancestors gave their lives to spread this religion amongst the pagans and they suffered and fought heroic battles in order to develop it. Every step I take in knowing the history of my country shows me once again how deeply rooted Christianity is in the very nature of our nation” (Opere X, p. 405).
4. Conclusions

Covering a wide range of topics, from cultural issues to political editorials, from economic studies to pamphlets and ironic comments, the Romanian press in the 19th century depicts the complex issues of the time with a bias towards a rhetoric of identity in an era in which national independence represents one more desiderate. According to the journalists of the time, the preservation and cultivation of identity-related values – language, culture, religion, and history – represent the only solution for the rescue of our national being from “foreignness”. In a world governed by relative values and the eulogy of difference, the study of the 19th century journalism gives one the sense of belonging to a community and a culture. The journalistic discourse emphasizes the fact that extremes (an obsessive concern for identity issues, nationalist, religious or cultural obtuseness on the one hand and the eulogy of cultural plurality, on the other hand) are equally harmful, because of the effects they generate at the level of national identity and the relationships with the others.

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