Ştefan Borbély

The Ethnic Map

> *"As a Romanian, it is very difficult to be objective when it comes to the peoples that surround you."*
> *(Cioran)*

While avoiding hasty generalizations, as a preliminary working hypothesis we would like to consider an essential syntactic difference between Romanian and Hungarian traditional ethnicity. Romanian ethnicity is predefined by a certain space, by the simple and organic geography of the community, while Hungarian ethnicity looks back in time towards its august and noble origins located in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance period. The outcome of this asymmetry is manifest at the social and cultural level on which the two identity constructs operate: Hungarian identity is dominantly urban and associated with the sophisticated refinements of civilization, while Romanian identity is deeply rooted in the rural world.

The very manifestations of these identities also differ: Hungarian nationalism is political in nature, sanguinary and often suicidal, drawing on the Renaissance equations of power (culminating in the glorious portrayal of King Matthias), while Romanian nationalism is essentially retractile, typical for a people always ready to withdraw in front of the enemy and seek shelter in the mountains or in the woods. In geo-

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graphic terms, the morphological difference leads to two distinct representations of space: the symbol of Hungarian identity is the *puszta*, with its implicit infinity, while Romanian identity gains contour, in a utopian fashion, within the confines of a closed human and geographic environment. We see this in Nicolae Bălcescu's "Ardealul" (Transylvania), where the "land beyond the forest" is presented as a fortress protected by high, impassable mountains, offering potential shelter in front of any danger.

In his classic 1942 text titled *Etnicul românesc* (Romanian ethnicity),[1] C. Rădulescu-Motru examined the syntax of this retractile nationalism, defined along a process of evolution—deemed classic by the author—from the "awareness of the common origin" to the "awareness of the common language" and finally to the "awareness of the common destiny," the latter representing, of course, the spiritual fulfillment of the first two functional premises. While language and geography are organic realities inherited from tradition, the "awareness of a common destiny"—said the author—takes shape in time (namely, in history), amid a defensive, belligerent anxiety: "The nations whose existence was threatened by war had to secure their future by developing a new common awareness, the awareness of a common destiny. This does not mean that origin and language were henceforth forgotten, but they were relegated to a secondary position: first came a nation's will to survive by facing the war."[2]

It is interesting to compare this concept of a defensive identity with the definitions of ethnicity found in the classical literature of political science—the pieces collected, for instance, in the volume called *Ethnicity*.[3] The differences become instantly obvious: for example, Paul R. Brass, quoting George De Vos (*Ethnic Pluralism*, 1975), also argued that the transition from *ethnicity* to *community* occurs by way of differentiating identity strategies (one community defines itself in relative or radical contrast to another), but contended that the means thereby employed are not the simple tools of belligerence, coming instead from the arsenal of religion, of spiritual symbols, of the cultural archetypes which a community employs in defining itself in relation to its neighbors. This approach made it possible for the author to include the *intellectual elite* among the mechanisms that shape the identity of a community, and he argued that this elite usually functions as an agent of modernization, as opposed to the diffuse influence exerted by the awareness of a common space, language, or destiny.[4]

When it comes to the awareness of the Romanian identity, dominant are, however, the withdrawal behind the confines of the community and the sense of vulnerability that accompanies it. The most bitter text devoted to the issue of the Romanian identity, Emil Cioran's *Schimbarea la faţă a României* (The transfiguration of Romania), contends that Romanian nationalism is in fact barracks nationalism: "How can we blame the poor fellow [the Romanian soldier, our note] for the fact that Romania has no ideal, that its historic dimension is insigni-

ficant, despite its thousand years of existence? He hears only one thing: we must defend our borders. And that is all he can hear. Because Romania has identified its ideal with a factual situation: its physical and moral borders. Romania *exists*, and that is enough. Lacking the passion of frantic becoming, it implanted the acceptance of its own existence in all consciences."[5]

The psychosis of the permeable, unsafe border—argued Cioran elsewhere—makes the Romanian awareness of identity fatally subjective, especially in relation to its geographic neighbors: "As a Romanian, it is very difficult to be objective when it comes to the peoples that surround you."[6] From among them, the most incomprehensible are the Hungarians, whom Cioran—deeply Nietzschean in the syntax of his interpretation, and as a matter of fact in his entire book, inspired by Keyserling—admired for their collective energy, unbound, frantic, telluric and decanted in suffering, claiming that "this is the only people in Europe still keeping alive the tradition of Dionysian exaltation."[7] However, he could not become attached to Hungarian history, to the identity ideology of the Hungarian people, and to the exacerbated political manifestations of this ideology, seeing them as a strategy of converting the defeat suffered at Mohács into a proud, eruptive, nosily melancholic sadness: "The Hungarians are an island in Europe. Although they participated as best they could in the events that troubled Europe, their involvement was never honest. Spengler's theory of the *original soul* of cultures is best illustrated by the case of Hungary. The initial impulses lie underneath every cultural form developed by them. There is too much blood in the Hungarian spirit for Hungary to be anything else than soul."[8]

There is an essential difference between the manner in which the Hungarians and the Romanians with an existential, ontological perspective understand Pannonian identity. For the former—as manifest especially during the Romantic period—the Hungarians stand for a high level of civilization, defined during the Renaissance period and later turned into a general axiological norm, also leading to the later political alliance with Vienna. For Emil Cioran—Mircea Eliade, while on his diplomatic mission to Portugal, voiced the same opinion—the Hungarians are, in Spengler's terms, a *culture* that is yet to become a *civilization*. The reduction is most intriguing, as the Hungarians are thus located on the organic, cultural level where the Romanians traditionally position themselves, eliminating from the dialogue between cultures the intrinsic spirit of axiological competition. Indeed, regardless of the commentator—Crainic, Rădulescu-Motru, Blaga, or one of the biased protochronists of Ceauşescu's period—, in all Romanian texts dealing with the issue of identity we find no references to the fact that our neighbors—Russians, Hungarians, Bulgarians, Serbs, etc.—ever managed to surpass us in terms of culture and civilization. Gaps are ignored and attention is paid only to similarities, fundamental in this agglutination being the dominant Orthodoxy of the Balkans and the similar openness towards the East.

Considering the dominant importance given to borders in the definition of Romanian identity, it is not by accident that *the ethnic map* got to play a central role in the Romanian-Hungarian dispute, especially in the years following the Union of December 1918, when history proved to both nations that maps could indeed be revised. In 1919, Count Paul Teleki published an interesting geopolitical study, called *La carte ethnographique de la Hongrie basée sur la densité de la population*, in which he naturally included both Transylvania and Banat, with Lugoj as a city of reference. In drawing up an accurate demographic map, argued the author, one must start from the general feature of the *civilization* present over a certain area. Thus, traditional Hungary, where life is symbolically concentrated in aristocratic nuclei and revolves around the dominant city of Budapest, operates in a manner different from that of the organic demographic regions located elsewhere, where the dominant structures are the rural ones. One can easily make a mistake when drawing an ethnic map without paying due heed to this dominant urban concentration, because the territorial representations thus obtained could lead to simple mathematical disproportions, more pertinently approached from a civilizational perspective focused on quality. Consequently, suggested Count Paul Teleki, the only criterion employed in the preparation of an accurate ethnic map must be the criterion of the qualitative density of population, and simple arithmetic should not take precedence over elements like access to schooling and social advancement. In other words, it should focus on the manner in which a cultural ethnic group seeks to become a civilization.

This approach, with its underlying political agenda, was challenged by E. de Martonne ("Carte de la densité et la répartition des nationalités en Roumanie," 1920[9]), who returned to the conventional mathematical criteria, eliminating the political factor from the ethnic map. Apart from the large number of Hungarians living in Transylvania, E. de Martonne mentioned a significant number of Jews, Roma, Russians, and Ukrainians, statistically conveying the image of a multiethnic region that came to contradict the psychotic iteration of an undifferentiated, organic unity so common with Romanian scholars.

In methodological terms, the issue was more subtly approached only in 1941, when Vintilă Mihăilescu published his "Harta etnică a României transcarpatice" (The ethnic map of Transcarpathian Romania),[10] a relatively late evaluation of the 1930 population census, whose results had only been published in 1940. This is the reason why the author stated that "until today, we have not seen the publication of an ethnic map of Romania drawn up by a Romanian on the basis of a unitary scientific census." According to the same author, processing the data of the 1930 census had taken so long also because those involved had had to face considerable criticism: "the Hungarians claim that the number of their fellow nationals was diminished too much," "the Romanian critics: the num-

ber of Jews is too small and the number of Russians too high," and a nearly canonical accusation: "no distinction was made between Hungarians and Szeklers."

The methodology of the 1930 census provided for the development of questionnaires based on three criteria: ethnicity, language, and religion. The first category was, of course, dictated by birth: ethnicity was biologically determined and derived from the ethnicity of one's father. The third category, religion, was ultimately of secondary importance, as it could be a matter of individual choice, free from community constraints: the criterion was relative enough and failed to stir any controversy. The most interesting—and implicitly the most vulnerable to political interpretations—was the *language* criterion, understood by the authors of the questionnaires to mean not only an instrument of communication among people, but also the sum total of the cultural symbols and beliefs employed by individuals in the definition of their identity. You are born as part of a nation, you choose your religion (or let others make that choice for you), but you "embrace" a language and a culture. Language became thus the main variable of identity mobility. As Vintilă Mihăilescu contended, "one's ethnicity is a matter of individual self-determination and is decided on the basis of the spiritual bond with the chosen nation."[11]

Modern political scientists would say that the criterion of the volitional "spiritual bond" is relative enough to define an ethnic identity, especially since emotional ties are a culminating point and not a premise, as opposed to free choice or economic constraints, educational mobility or—why not?—the all too human political opportunism, so useful in the acquisition of symbolic values. The "spiritual bond" comes to account for the dynamic mechanism of ethnic assimilation, which paved the way for the social engineering systematically cultivated during all the censuses taken in Romania after 1930.

Addenda

Below are the statistical data communicated by Vintilă Mihăilescu:

Notes

1. C. Rădulescu-Motru, *Etnicul românesc: Comunitate de origine, limbă şi destin. Naţionalismul: Cum se înţelege. Cum trebuie să se înţeleagă*, edited with an introduction and notes by Constantin Schifirneţ (Bucharest: Albatros, 1996). The first text was initially published by Casa Şcoalelor, in 1942; the second appeared much earlier (Bucharest: Lumen, 1909).
2. Ibid., 15.
3. John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, eds., *Ethnicity* (Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).
4. Paul R. Brass, "Ethnic Groups and Ethnic Identity Formation," in Hutchinson and Smith, 84–90.
5. Emil Cioran, *Schimbarea la faţă a României* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1990), 137.
6. Ibid., 197.
7. Ibid., 199.
8. Ibid., 198.
9. *Annales de Géographie* 29 (1920).
10. *Buletinul Societăţii Regale Române de Geografie* 59 (1941).
11. Ibid., 4.

Abstract
The Ethnic Map

The study focuses on the different mechanisms and criteria involved in the definition of Hungarian and Romanian ethnic identities, surveying a number of contrasting elements such as space, history, and the level of culture and civilization. The conclusions of the analysis come to account for the various approaches to the issue of an accurate ethnic map and for the interpretations given to the results of the 1930 census of Romania's population.

Keywords
ethnic identity, political bias, ethnic map, language, religion, census