

The Political Metamorphosis of Cioran

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Abstract. This article insists on the nature and message of Cioran's ideological writings. Lately, there have been published many studies, which attempt to demonstrate his commitment to the extreme right, also his oscillation between liberalism and totalitarianism. The article also tackles the issue of commitment of his colleagues of generation.

Keywords: Cioran, "young generation", Iron Guard

1. Cioran and his relationship with History

2011 was a benchmark year for Emil Cioran, as we celebrated the centenary of the Romanian philosopher who chose to exile himself in Paris. Cioran is nowadays almost forgiven for his extremist views, tackled during the period between the Two World Wars. Still, his anti-Semitic writings cannot be ignored, even if he gave up defending his extreme right ideas after the defeat of Germany. Cioran was exonerated because he changed of country and the collective memory was no longer acting in his case. Once arrived in France, he began to apologize himself to the West for the sins committed in his youth.

The anti-Semitic views of Cioran were encouraged by the international economic environment dominated by Jews in the period between the Two World Wars. The Jew was the negative prototype of the new rich, of the man who wanted to get rich at any price. Accordingly, the historical context was favouring anti-Semitism in France, as well as in Romania. In France, the Popular Front government, led by Léon Blum was accused of trying to push France into war against the Germany of Adolf Hitler. In Romania, extremism was fuelled by the poverty of the predominantly rural population, by the inability of politicians to manage the "Jewish problem", by the pro-fascist politics of the king Carol the second and of the Marshal IonAntonescu, even if neither the former nor the latter was committed to fascism; they simply found that fascism could be a solution to counter Russian threats. The Romanian capitalism was brought in by Jews, which showed wonderful skills in trading, negotiating etc. In France, the Dreyfus Affair fed a lot anti-Semitism. The same as in Romania, the French capitalism was dominated by Jews, which held industries, banks, big businesses by ruining thus the small shopkeepers.

At the beginning, Cioran showed his disgust for the war and for the political involvement of some writers. But he will, step by step, evolve towards fascism, even towards bolshevism. In 1933, Cioran published in the journal *The Calendar*, the article *Between spirituality and politics*, where he blamed the involvement in politics of his generation. At the time, Cioran was still captured by pure philosophical ideas, such as death, futility, absurdity. He was admiring the failures, the beggars, the sick, bringing therefore tributes to individuals ignored by the society.

When he made his debut in 1934 with the volume *On the Heights of Despair*, Cioran won the Prize for young writers, non-published before, and the price of The Young Romanian Writers. Two years later, in 1936, he will be involved in a literary scandal, once his volume *Transfiguration of Romania*, is published. Cioran will self-censor his volume in the second edition appeared in the 1990s at Humanitas Publishing House in Bucharest. This discriminatory volume will be completely translated into French (meaning including the chapter where Cioran referred to his hate against Jews and Hungarians) late enough, in 2009 at L'Herne Publishing House, translation done by Alain Paruit.

Cioran will start progressively to support the Iron Guard who wanted itself to be anti-communist and which finally got to power in 1940, prevailing itself of anti-communist demonstrations and having the

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support of young intellectuals; the leader of the Iron Guard, Codreanu instigated people by alarming exclamations such as : "What if the Bolsheviks invaded Romania? "(C. Z. Codreanu, 1936: 9). His propagandistic cry seemed utopian at the time, but soon, his intuition proved to be a cruel reality! But once he arrives in France, Cioran tries to distract the attention of readers from his earlier political involvement. In the interview granted to François Bondy, he denies completely his former membership in the Iron Guard, "The Iron Guard was a complex of movements, rather a crazy sect than a political party." (Convorbiri cu Cioran, 2004: 10). Cioran denies that he was interested in the national revival stimulated by the Guard, in its revolutionary attitude, but he sustains having been attracted mostly by the metaphysical cult of death that the Guard promoted; as regarding his generation, he describes it as a group of desperate people in the heart of the Balkans, with the mission of a Port Royal. Moreover, Cioran finds as motivation for his totalitarian inclination his moralist and his philosophical readings. As all revolted thinkers, nourished by the school of Nietzsche or Spengler, Cioran could not bear the humble destiny of his country, proved inefficient for centuries and he felt the need to destroy, he felt malice and hate against his country's petrified submission. The mature Cioran argued that at the time of his youth, he believed Romanian liberalism was fuelled by fatigue and democracy by excess of reason. Democracy means the construction of a suitable economic policy, therefore democracy is a cerebral act, and "one is not liberal because he is tired and democratic by reason", argues Cioran.

He wrote two texts about Jews, founding himself on two different positions, absolutely incriminating in 1936 (the chapter *National collectivism* being otherwise eliminated from the volume once it was republished at Humanitas Publishing House in 1990) and the praising text published in 1956 *The Jews – a solitary people*, which was included in the volume edited in French, *The Temptation to exist*. In 1936, Cioran was mostly convinced that the Romanian nationalism was based on anti-Semitism that the Romanians had to revolt themselves against the Jews who occupied their positions and which proved, first of all, to have a kind of material instinct, the Romanians always lacked. Furthermore, the Romanian nationalism was thought by Cioran as being a messianic one: it had a dual aim, to get rid of the Jews and to make history: "our nationalism must revive from the wish to revenge our historical sleep, from a messianic impulse, from the will to make history" (Cioran, 2009: 110). Sometimes, Cioran writes in a very resigned manner that: "the Jewish problem is absolutely undesirable. It remains the curse of history...." (Ibidem 111). The presence of Jews in the world always meant the seed of dispute, but also the engine of a commercial society, a mercantile and capitalist one, thinks Cioran. Even Cioran notices, as Stefan Zeletin¹ has done it before him, that in Romania, capitalism was brought into by the Jews, who always proved a certain brutality serving them perfectly in doing business. In a very naïve manner, totally deprived of economic knowledge, Cioran asks himself rhetorically why Romanian capitalists are not as good as the Jewish capitalists. Cioran insists on his invectives addressed to the Jews, writing that they are the mainly responsible for such a weak national and political identity in the Romanian territory: "the Jews were always against any trial to consolidate nationally and politically the Romanian territory" (Ibidem). In addition, the Jews always benefited from the protection of the Romanian capitalist state, because the Romanian state is, here we find again reiterated the opinion of Zeletin, a kind of capitalism-partnership between the Jews and the Romanian novices in the domain of the free market: "the Romanian democratic regime had no other mission but to protect the Jews and the Jewish - Romanian capitalism" (Ibidem). The Jewish problem for Cioran is undesirable and unsolvable. If in 1936 Cioran wrote, full of hate, that the Jew is first of all a Jew, meaning mercantile and mercenary and only after that he is a man, 20 years later, in 1956, he pities their destiny, dramatic by origin: "to be a man is a drama; to be a Jew is another drama: that is why the Jew has the privilege to live twice our condition" (Solomovici 2001: 337). As concerning the famous "Jewish problem", we know that Romanians do not suffer from the obsession of turning themselves into a pure race by eliminating any foreign body, the Jew included; at the time, there was more a kind of saturation against the Jewish economic monopole, saturation correlated with an anti-Semite European political environment.

¹Stefan Zeletin (1882 - 1934) was a Romanian philosophe, economist and sociologue. In his famous book *The Bourgeoisie, its Origin and its Historical Mission*, he defended the role of the bourgeoisie in pushing Romania into civilization, fighting against traditionalist and agrarian points of view

Cioran was born in very instable political context. The period between the Two Wars was one of the most effervescent, politically tensioned, but flourishing from the cultural point of view in the history of modern Romania. From the fights between the political parties, the ideological variety, the social repercussions, to the intensity of the cultural productions, each aspect perfectly interconnected, all of them have built together an acid, but interactive reality. The febrile period starts with the year of creating the unified Romania, 1918 and ends up with the year of the proper coming in of communism, 1944. It is about almost 30 years where democracy and authoritarianism have been fully exercised, years in which, we could say, this country tried to get closer to the Western model of capitalism.

2. Cioran and his hesitation between totalitarianism and liberalism

The representatives of the young generation”, to which Cioran belonged, rejected the parliamentarianism, as a symbol of the democratic regime, and the Revolution of 1848², as a symbol of the beginning of Romanian’s copying Western patterns. Cioran, on the contrary, he is modernist, pro-European, he accepts the merits of the Revolution of 1848 namely the beginning of our synchronizing with Europe, he accepts the bourgeoisie, the liberalism, the democracy, but as phenomena which, even if they justify their existence at a certain point in time, they do not last forever. He recognizes the merits of democracy (he considered as Zeletin and Lovinescu³ that the contemporary Romania is indebted towards the modernist passion of the Romanian liberalism), but he thought that, at the time liberalism could not but hinder the transfiguration of the country and he sustained its replacement by a dictatorial regime (because he had in mind an industrialized Romania, a civilized one, and the solution could not be offered but by a revolution). As well as Lovinescu, Cioran insists on the Romanian’s transfiguration, so as for it to step into modernity, to have a population mostly urban, an industrial life, without big social fissures, therefore a capitalist country, but this change cannot be made by imitating Western models, but by imposing itself by means of proper resources. Nevertheless, the gap between civilizations cannot be recovered, but by those civilizations which imposed themselves by means of the “historical jump”: they “cannot increase their level but by defeating their continuity. The discontinuity towards their own destiny is the necessary condition to small cultures in order to impose themselves. Their only obsession has to be: the historical jump” (2009: 65), jump which accomplishes itself by means of a messianic revolution. He reproaches to the Romanian nationalism its traditionalism, the idea of an evolution but only within the limits of keeping the national specificity, which was after all impossible: the Romanian nationalists “suffering from the obsession of keeping the national specificity, they forgot of Romania (...) Instead of asking themselves: what Romania has to become, they did not ask themselves but what Romania has to remain” (Ibidem, 67). Cioran militates therefore for a revolutionary nationalism: “the reactionary vision does not understand the historical paradox of small cultures and which consists in the fact that they cannot re-make the levels of evolution of important cultures, but they have to integrate themselves into a rhythm, without continuity and without tradition” (Ibidem, 80).

Cioran reproaches to the Romanian nationalism its indifference to social problems, to the crisis of the masses, to the problem of property: “a revolution which does not modify the role of property is a masquerade” (Ibidem 164) that is why he prefers a messianic nationalism, an apocalyptic one, which had to replace democracy with dictatorship. The final answer to his Romanian adventure, we find it in the solution he gave it on the 3 of May 1944 to his colleague of generation, Vulcanescu, which he dedicated him *The Romanian dimension of existence*: “it was not to be” (Cioran, letter from Paris, 3 May 1944, to Vulcănescu). In the same time, the Romanian thinker sustains that Romania owes the epoch of modernity, in which he merely stepped into at the beginning of the 19th century when all the great civilizations already started their decline, to the passion of liberalism of pushing the country into this new stage. The bourgeoisie and the liberalism, in the person of I. C. Bratianu, even if they appropriated all the merits and many material advantages, they pressed Romania towards the stepping out of feudalism: “the bourgeoisie was our only revolutionary element. That is why, the liberalism assumed itself so many glorious titles, so as you cannot

²The Revolution of 1848 was a well-known Romanian revolution, which aimed to push the country into civilization, trying to put an end to feudalism. The revolution was done by a group of intellectuals, supporting liberal ideas. They practically copied the Western democracy, trying to impose it, as such, in their own country, without applying it to the appropriate Romanian context. Cioran and his generation criticized their gesture

³Eugen Lovinescu (1881 – 1943) was an important Romanian literary historian, literary critic, who supported liberal ideas

refuse it whiteout disintegrating yourself from the modern Romania” (Cioran, 2009: 121). As usual, Cioran is contradictory; sometimes he praises liberalism, other times, he despises it!

3. Cioran and his colleagues of generation

Despite his deep implication in understanding and eventually solving the problems of his country, Cioran, once he arrives in France, forces himself to forget his past and the past of his country of origin. His former colleagues of generation consider him an opportunist, such as Mihail Sebastian, who notes in his *Journal*: “Cioran, despites his participation in the rebellion organized by the Iron Guard, keeps his post of cultural representative in Paris, which was assigned to him by HoriaSima several days before his collapse. The new political regime increases his salary. He will leave the country as soon as possible. Here it is somebody who really takes a profit from his participation in the revolution” (M. Sebastian, Jurnal 1935 -1944: 306). The “young generation” to which Cioran belongs to, numbered around thirty intellectuals, who intended to change the history of their country, Romania and impose it on the international political and economic scene. Their ambition was to push their country from its cultural isolation, and the only way of doing it was by a revolution, solution also envisaged by the Iron Guard. The corruption of political parties determined a large number of intellectuals to embrace the resolution offered by the extreme-right. One of the active members of the “young generation” was ConstantinNoica, a name unfortunately almost completely unknown in the West. The philosophe Noica did not agree with the miseries and crimes committed by the Iron Guard, he dreamed at a different world, a world where the individual is first of all respected! Noica wanted another Romania. This appears very clearly in his articles published in the period between the two World Wars, as in the article appeared in the journal *Buna Vestire*, namely *Be frighteningly good!*, where Noica wrote that the Legion aimed to determine people wanting a new and completely different country. The Legionaries are, according to him, awfully good, so they stimulate the Romanians to follow them and achieve a whole new transfiguration of their country. The Legionnaires have the mission to stir the warmlycharacter of Romanians, passive character which only caused trouble in history. Meanwhile, Cioran was also struggling himself with the gentle typical Romanian charisma in hispolitical articles and in his volume *Transfiguration of Romania*.

As different from Cioran, Noica never denied his anti-democratic ideas. He will remain loyal to his totalitarian thoughts, to the astonishment of Cioran. The philosopher Noica found himself the power to resist to the communist regime, perhaps because the idea of nationalism, in all its forms, seemed to him more edifying for the Romanian realities than the democratic one. He refused to flee the country or provide details about the period of both right and left extremisms in Romania, which he was an active witness. His silence regarding these aspects represented a personal solution and an answer to the problems his people confronted with.

Noica demanded in 1946 to the People's Court to be tried for his legionary articles written between September and October 1940. He was arrested in March 1949 and taken to Câmpulung-Muscel, a place where the landowners of the old regime were under house arrest. He spent here ten years, giving lessons of French, English, Latin, mathematics. The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 caused panic among the Bucharest authorities, who feared the outbreak of a similar event in Romania. The philosophic seminars of Noica become suspect. He was arrested in the night of 11 December 1958 and sentenced to 25 years of hard labor. He spent six years in prison at Jilava. The deprivation of liberty alters structurally the human being. When Noica is released, he is completely transformed, reconciled, and unlike Eliade and Cioran, he will always find a justification for the legionary ideology and for the professor NaeIonescu who dragged the entire “young generation” into legionnarismbecause he argued with the king Carol the second and he sought to revenge against him.

Another colleague of Cioran’s was MirceaVulcanescu, a precursor of Noica as regarding the fundamentals of a philosophical system centered on the traditional aspects of the Romanian character. Vulcanescu defended to the end his political and philosophical ideas, as Noica, denying the solution of exile in order to save his life. He died in prison at Aiud, where many of the Romanian intellectuals were also imprisoned. He also held many lectures against his torturers (as the professorNaeIonescu did it before him in his prison of MiercureaCiuc). It will then be punished and isolated in a cell apart, with some colleagues, stripped naked, without beds, in a terrible cold. According to witnesses, when a friend of him falls exhausted, Vulcanescu

rushes to save his life by putting himself directly to the ground and using himself as a mattress. Vulcanescu died on October 28, 1952, at the age of 48, because of a severe lung disease; at that time, Eliade and Cioran had already begun in the West to deny any relationship with the Iron Guard, by disguising themselves into absolute democrats.

As well as Mihail Sebastian, Petre Comarnescu was one of the colleagues of Cioran and Eliade, who mostly recorded the phenomenon of the "young generation" in his journals, articles, essays. At his permanent desire to assert himself, opposes, after the year 1945, the urge to survive in a world that was really starting to "swim" into communism. He dedicates himself to visual arts chronicles, to translating activities in order to earn some money and he tries to turn away from the communist evil. He died in 1970 at the age of 65, alone and marginalized, because of its continuing refusal to cooperate with the communists.

The entire "young generation" dissipated after 1944, some of its members chose to exile themselves, many others died in communist prisons. Their idealism was crashed by the cruel verdict of history. Romania would support another of its many occupations, maybe much harder than others, even if of a shorter period.

Cioran and his generation were responsible for the political and cultural reality of the inter-war period. Mihail Sebastian and Petre Comarnescu had the merit of perfectly recording the political, intellectual and cultural phenomena of their generation, both having the integrity to defend their views until the end. Unfortunately, out of the whole generation, simply Eliade, Eugène Ionesco and Cioran are known in the West. They are not perhaps the most talented, but the only ones who have ignored their past and their totalitarian ideas, who chose to forget everything, to all betray (we refer of course to Cioran and Eliade) and write in international languages.

The ideology of the generation was to follow the professor Nae Ionescu in his nationalism and to push the country out of its provincialism. We consider that it was Nae Ionescu who turned the "younger generation" into the most vibrant Romanian generation, created and hosted by the political realities, realities very convicted thereafter, as the alliance with Hitler made by Antonescu, even if this alliance was not fueled by personal beliefs, but by lack of alternatives. Considered then the ally of Germany, Romania loses the support of the West, which leaves it at the mercy of Russia.

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