

Romanian Cultural Identity: Remembered, Recorded, Invented

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Abstract This contribution points to one of the main turning points in the cultural representation of Romanian identity: national communism. For Ceausescu's national dictatorship the landmarks of Romanian identity were both products of a cultural effort and canny political instruments. Our analysis aim to highlight the main part assigned to the intellectual and artistic discourses of the time (para-science, history, film, fiction, poetry, fine arts) in the construction of a fake collective memory meant to distort the public perception of the present and to legitimize the existing political power. The staunch communist campaign for the construction of a Dacian homeland was based mostly on an integrated dictatorial memory, unselfconscious, commanding, all powerful, spontaneously actualizing, a memory without a past that ceaselessly reinvents tradition. From Ceausescu's perspective, the Master Trope of the "Dacian paradise lost" was designed to create a space for intellectual production and to become literally constitutive for academic disciplines such as history, geography, ethnology, philosophy and linguistics but first and foremost for the artistic associated practices as well as for the production of a nationalistic oriented literature.

Key words cultural identity; memory; spatial landmarks; commissioned literature

A Communist Master Trope of Romanian Cultural Identity

Linking the present to bygone times, memory currently enhances, extends and prolongs history, even when openly contesting and challenging its meanings and its acknowledged interpretations. Therefore recollection has an overall engineering function and sometimes it can even take on the main functions of history (Lewis 89). In addition there are highly significant occasions when memory deliberately falsifies history. This is a particular type of fake memory that does not want to reconstruct but to create a non-existent past, ignoring historical data, compelling official history to comply with its counterfeit "evidence". In such cases, the purpose of reconstructing the past is to distort the public perception of the present and to manipulate cultural memory.

In what follows I will analyze this issue explicitly and systematically. Unveiling its ideological and symbolical strategies my contribution focuses on the process of building ancient Thrace and a particular area of it called *Dacia* as the spatial mould of Romanianess, through fake and commissioned memories.

In 106 AD Dacia was annexed by Trajan as a province of the Roman Empire. Following this historical event, the Romans became Romania's main and best-known ancestors and Romanian developed as a Romance language. The main goal of the counterfeiting process initiated by the communist dictator Ceausescu was to remove imperial Rome from its paradigmatic position and, subsequently, to cut the traditional cultural ties between Romania and contemporary Western Europe. Presented as the pre-Roman primeval mold of the Romanians, the "Dacian realm" was overloaded with a specific type of symbolic meaning: national-communist ideology.

In Ceausescu's Romania the nation was a master symbol with structuring properties on all possible levels: ideological, scientific, economic, moral, aesthetic, etc. (*Programul Partidului Comunist Român* [*The Program of the Romanian Communist Party*] 1975) During Ceausescu's dictatorship national ideology became an aggressive superiority complex known as "proto-chronism" ("temporal priority", in old Greek). Its main cultural expression was an arrogant rejection of any sources, models or forerunners, in almost all intellectual spheres, for benefit of a paradoxical theory of local priority, which claimed to have been ignored by Europe because of Romania's peripheral status. Over the last decades of communism and especially in the early eighties being a Romanian became a privilege, a miracle and bliss (Verderey 152 – 204).

For Ceausescu's national communism the spatial landmarks of Romanian identity were both products of cultural effort and political instruments. The theory that saw the ancient Dacian pattern prevailing over Rome, the central model of Romanian civilization, was one of many Ceausescu's means of celebrating his own victory over Romania's prestigious European relatives.

The following paragraphs illustrate this interplay between history and memory in this falsifying process and the multiple faces of memory it involves.

What History Had to Say

Unfortunately, history has very little to say about the mentality, the language, the social life and the political structures, the food, the architecture and the habits, the culture, the religion, the army and even the looks of ancient Dacians. Accurate historical information about the semi-mythical pre-roman cradle of Romania is poor, scattered and above all doubtful (Boia 172 – 179).

A few names of allegedly brave and fearsome kings such as Dromichet, Burebista and Decebal have survived. A series of reliefs are preserved on the famous *Trajan's Column*, the monument erected by the emperor in Rome after his conquests north of the Danube. Plenty of beautiful golden pieces of jewelry and not so many old coins coveted by smugglers are scattered beneath the ruins of the presumed capital city Sarmisegetusa, fully destroyed and later rebuilt by the Romans. Last but not least there is the evidence, mostly derived from myth and poetry, provided by Mircea Eliade in a study about the worship of the war god Zalmoxis in the area (Eliade 35 – 37).

In pre-communist Romania, such attempts to reconstruct the presumed Dacian matrix were promptly relegated to the realm of national mythology. Between the two world wars, a few far right ideologists and members of the *Iron Guard* endeavored to

manipulate this kind of mythology for political ends but without great success. Only after his ascent to dictatorship Ceausescu initiated a well-orchestrated campaign to promote Dacia as the ideal paradigm of national identity. As it often happens in such cases, the far right and the far left wings meet in a convergent totalitarian effort and become instruments of nationalism (Connerton 42 – 43).

The Institute of History of the Romanian Communist Party took the first step in this direction. A programmatic study published in its official review *Analele de istorie* *The 142 – 1520* stubbornly maintained that the existence of a flourishing complex Dacian civilization in the central area of European Thrace was not a hypothesis but a fact. The marks of the Roman conquest on this sophisticated and well-articulated civilization and culture were thus late and limited imprints on a much earlier and more prestigious fabric (Boia 134 – 135).

As a second step on the same path, political history stimulated a series of para-scientific initiatives. A so-called “new science” was born in Romania: *thracology*. Iosif Constantin Dragan, a former member of the *Iron Guard* who settled in Italy after the war, as a prosperous businessman, became the pillar of this communist initiative (further proof of the fruitful collaboration and similarity between communist and Nazi totalitarian doctrines). At his own expense he launched, in Romania, the “academic” review *We, the Thracians*, published a homonym book and sponsored a scholarly association whose ambitious aim was to aggrandize the part played by the inhabitants of Thrace in the European history. The core area of the fabulous imaginary Thrace was of course Dacia; meaning the present day Romania.

According to the worshipers of the Thracian cult, the inhabitants of this fantasy space were the creators of a civilization dating back 100 000 years, making the Romanian people the oldest ethnic European community. In this way, *thracology* was manipulated by the communist power as a reaction to Romance Studies, which had been an area central to Romanian cultural tradition in the same way as Byzantine studies and patristics.

In its turn, linguistics had to be sensitive to the political command. Scientists did their best in pretending to reconstruct “old Dacian”, starting from seven words at the most, and using a hypothetical Thracian dialect as their source. Huge piles of linguistic studies dedicated to the Thraco-Dacian substratum were systematically published and even a project to fund a department of Dacian language at the University of Bucharest was ongoing by 1989.

What Memory was Commissioned to Say

As Pierre Nora puts it, the above-mentioned type of official national history relied on a dictatorial form of memory, in other words a memory without a past. Its basic strategy was the complex interweaving of three different levels of remembrance: public memory, collective memory and individual memory (“*Les lieux de mémoire*”, *Representations*, 7 – 25). Nation-states are territorially extensive societies most of whose members cannot know each other personally. That is why the reconstruction of the fake homeland begun in the public sphere and only as a follow up it was introduced by means of mass culture into the collective area and eventually into the individual

sphere of personal recollection.

On a public level, the counterfeit “Dacian” concept was more than just history or a told story. It was an “enacted cult”, which displayed a strong “performative” dimension. During Ceausescu’s dictatorship the Communist Party organized an extravagant, costly and ostentatious national celebration of 2050 years from the foundation of the first Dacian “independent kingdom” ruled by Burebista, although all trustworthy information about both the event and its outcome was missing.

According to Paul Connerton, the same dimension of memory had previously been instrumentalized by the Nazis:

“The subjects of the third Reich were constantly reminded of the National Socialist Party and its ideology by a series of commemorative ceremonies. It was a rite fixed and performed. Its story was told not unequivocally in the past tense but in the tense of a metaphysical present. It reminded the participants of quasi-mythic events but even more due to its mnemonic power the sacred event was represented.” (Connerton 43)

In communist Romania the impact of this newly invented canonic sequence pervaded all spheres of collective life, including entertainment and sports. Among similar ritual events, the national competition called “Daciada”, a local brand of “Olympics”, is worthy of mention. First and foremost “Daciada” was another step backwards, overlooking the traditional European sports rituals, such as the Greek Olympics, towards a local primeval model.

It is worth noticing that “Daciada” was envisaged as a “mass competition” in which people of all professions, ages and standards were encouraged if not simply compelled to enroll. None of the top Romanian sportsmen and women would have been allowed to attend the “real” Olympics without taking part at least once in the national traditional contest. Participation was sought for its symbolic value rather than for high performance. A so-called “Dacian badge” and similar paraphernalia were created for the event. Year after year, in a typical atmosphere of popular carnival, between the parades at the opening and the closing ceremonies, the ritual evocation of Ceausescu’s exceptional personality was the real high point of the occasion.

We are entitled to interpret such political rituals as operating within political contexts in which power is distributed in a systematically unequal way, so that rituals may be understood as exercising cognitive control by providing the official version of the political structure with symbolic representations such as the Empire, the Nation and in our particular case “the Dacian homeland”.

Emile Durkheim sees ritual as representing social reality by making it intelligible, even if the cognitive content of it must be encoded in a metaphorical and symbolic form. One may thus view rituals as systems of ideas in which the individuals represent to themselves the society of which they are members, and the obscure but intimate relations, which they have within it (Connerton 50).

It is in this way that the strategy of the communist party succeeded in taking full advantage of the confusion between “collecting memories” and “collective memo-

ries”, picking out every possible detail available and patching them all together. One of the main actors on this level was fine art in all its forms, especially the monumental (Mosse 167 – 182).

Even nowadays in Bucharest, in front of the Romanian Military Museum, among the forefathers of the nation, three statues of Dacian ancestors are visible (the presumed kings Dromichet, Burebista and Decebal) and only one of a Roman: the emperor Trajan.

An amazing Romanian museum, dedicated after 1989 to the overflowing manufacture of the communist commissioned art, gathers numerous pieces of sculpture, tapestry, painting, banners, frescos, relieves, jewelry etc. dedicated to the Dacian realm, with the obvious aim to introduce the figure of Ceausescu himself right in their middle, like a “Figure in the carpet”. This type of cheap and transparent allegorical representations explicitly instated Ceausescu as the direct heir of a long line of glorious symbolical figures, descending straight from Burebista: the Dacian king who had the unique privilege of never being defeated by the Romans.

Fiction, Poetry, Film and “*The Dacian Project*”

Ultimately, Ceausescu’s falsifying project targeted the level of individual consciousness. According to Pierre Nora, it is upon the individual and upon the individual alone that the constraint of memory weights insistently as well as imperceptibly. The less memory is experienced collectively, the more it will require individuals to undertake to become themselves memory-individuals (“Les lieux de mémoire”, *Representations* 7 – 25).

The emblems and articulations of memory in flags and films, memorials, museums etc. operate in a distinct register of memory different from that of the individual’s recollection of his own life, although the two may interconnect: “The collapsing of personal and public registers is one of the most prominent features of the turn to memory” (Hodgine and Radstone 8).

Endeavoring to transpose this fake collective memory to the level of individual consciousness, mass culture—fiction, popular poetry of film—was granted a privileged mission.

From the early seventies onwards, the movie industry was the most humble and enthusiastic servant of the political leadership. Producers, directors and scriptwriters hit upon a simple and efficient “Dacian propaganda recipe”. The titles were short and highly evocative: *The Column*, *The Dacians*, *Burebista*, etc. The props were constantly recycled and the actors passed on from one movie to another. The narrative fabric obsessively played on three main tacks: the bravery of the Dacian ancestors in their fierce fight against the Roman aggressor; the idyllic local family life and its strong moral values and, last but not least, the heavenly beauty of the Dacian nest.

Due to the total lack of information on the subject, the costumes, and the architectural details, the social habits and the structures of the family, the food and the music, the wedding and funeral rituals were borrowed from archaic Romanian folklore. Only a few details of the local army such as clothing, weapons and the ancient Dacian flag, a terrifying wolf’s head with a snake tongue, were copied after *Columna*

Trajana in Rome.

In old blessed Dacia, women were always young, beautiful and hard working, men were brave and devoted to their leader, the countryside was as breathtaking as a tourist trap, the children were angelic, the elderly were exceptionally wise and the kings were brave and devoted to the independence of their homeland. Even the domestic animals cleverly hated the foreign invaders. On every occasion, the overarching lesson aimed at contemporary Romanians was bluntly reiterated: the praiseworthy devotion of the Dacian inhabitants towards their “Conducator” and the faultless self-sacrifice to the benefit of the national community.

When compared to the movie production, literature seems to have been more defiant of the political command. Apart from a collection of extremely poor and propagandistic poetry, only one novel endeavored to promote “the Dacian Master Trope”: *Saruta pamintul acesta* (*Kiss this Sacred Land*), written by Ileana Vulpescu, a scholar, a researcher at the Institute of Linguistics of the Romanian Academy of Science.

The book is a typical novel à thèse. It revolves around the moment of the Dacian-Roman war and around the staunch campaign of the conquerors to subdue the bold natives. The author insists on the family life of the royal dynasty, on their bravery, on their deep religious and spiritual commitment and on their spectacular collective suicide to avoid Roman captivity. In the post-conquest period, when Dacia became a Roman province, the author emphatically underlines the endurance of the Dacian substratum beneath the Roman cultural coating.

This process culminates in the ascent of several Dacian men to the status of acclaimed Roman senators. Needless to say that they all cherished the memory of their homeland and of their non Roman ethnic roots and usually sent their sons back to Dacia to get “real” military training and to marry local women. Every detail in this novel emphatically sends anti-Roman and anti-imperial messages, dwelling on the persistence of the Dacian cultural pattern down to the communist present.

There is hardly any epic structure in this novel, suffocated by the conventional stereotypes of the fearless natives who were defying foreign intrusion, intensely circulated in Ceausescu’s time by history textbooks and through all the official channels. The communist-nationalist dogma was projected onto the remote past and vested in a pompous ancient coat. Everything in this piece of poor literature, printed in a luxury edition, sounds pathetic, meaningless and above all boring. Nonetheless the book was a compulsory reading in literature textbooks in the same way as large groups of school children escorted by their teachers were ritually presented several times a year with films such as *The Dacians*, *The Column* or *Burebista*.

A Few Concluding Remarks

From Ceausescu’s perspective, the Master Trope of the “Dacian paradise lost” was designed to create a space for intellectual production and to become literally constitutive for academic disciplines such as history, geography, ethnology, philosophy and linguistics but first and foremost for the artistic associated practices.

Beginning with the take-over of Romania by the Soviet Union in the late forties, the Nation as a socio-symbolic construct was constantly reworked by underground in-

tellelectuals in a counter-discourse to the exercise of rule. Ceausescu's ambitious target was to force the two, rule and discourse, to come together. A hard currency of false recollections was launched on the market and by means of its representations the communist power tried to legitimate the present social order.

However, due to the poor quality of the cultural material involved in this program, the "Dacian Project" was a total failure.

In Pierre Nora's terms, we might conclude that the staunch communist campaign for the Revival of the Dacian homeland was based mostly on an integrated dictatorial memory, unselfconscious, commanding, all powerful, spontaneously actualizing, a memory without a past that ceaselessly reinvents tradition. An irrefutable proof is that the hierarchy of power largely benefits from the control of collective memory.

Recreating the national past by means of the construction of places worshipped by popular memory is not a singular process. Erich Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger dedicated their well-known book *The Invention of Tradition* to this type of cultural manufacture. However, the Romanian example represents a well-articulated political scenario, targeting various areas of the public and of the individual spheres and aiming to overpower with its weighty ideological significance. In such cases the most common form of signifying practices through which ideological processes occur is culture. In communist Romania, to be a creator of culture has long meant having a central role in defining the nation to itself and to the world.

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