

“BABEȘ-BOLYAI” UNIVERSITY

CLUJ-NAPOCA

FACULTY OF HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY

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*The Synchronistic Idea in the Romanian Philosophy in the
Late 19th Century and Early 20th Century*

ABSTRACT

PhD Coordinator:

Prof. Dr. Rodica Marta Vartic

PhD Student:

George State

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KEYWORDS

Romanian philosophy, the late 19th century, early 20th century, T. Maiorescu, C. Dobrogeanu-Gherea, G. Ibrăileanu, E. Lovinescu, Ștefan Zeletin, Marx, Junimist criticism, the theory of forms without substance, conservatism, moderation, gradualism, 1849 revolutionaries, liberalism, revolutionism, socialism, Marxism, neoserfdom, critical spirit, synchronicity, imitation, adaptation, bourgeoisie, capitalism, occidentalism, populism, ideological factor, economic factor.

SUMMARY OF THE KEY IDEAS

By choosing a research topic such as “The synchronistic idea in the Romanian philosophy in the late 19th century and early 20th century,” I considered that it can now speak not only about the past, but – indirectly – also about our present. This is because, on a closer look, most of the contemporary ideological debates take up and resume (overtly or not) ideas, concepts, arguments of what might be called the great controversy between traditionalism and modernism in the Romanian culture.¹ On short, the stakes of the Romanian modernity are still being debated today (even if in disguise). Personally, I stand on the side of modernism. Traditionalism (which also envisages in background a certain “exceptionality” which I find deeply suspect and repugnant) can lead (and has led) – when used politically – to catastrophes. Finally, I would say that – by choosing to study a number of authors representing roughly the “positive” pole of the Romanian critical reflection – I do it acknowledging the existence, next to many extremists (and even against them), of some lucid thinkers. Those whose ideas I will further analyze are: T. Maiorescu (1840-1917), C. Dobrogeanu-Gherea (1855-1920), G. Ibrăileanu (1881-1936), E. Lovinescu (1881-1943) and Ștefan Zeletin (1882-1934).

Even if today we are inclined to regard the writings of Dobrogeanu-Gherea, Ibrăileanu, Lovinescu or Zeletin as part of the same modernist, pro-capitalist, pro-Western direction, back then the authors emphasized their dissimilarities, regarding their differences as important. That is why they have engaged in controversial disputes, sometimes virulently: for example, C. Dobrogeanu-Gherea corrected G. Ibrăileanu, Ibrăileanu accused E. Lovinescu of plagiarism, Lovinescu revealed the differences between them, criticized Dobrogeanu-Gherea,

¹ In a summary of the history of the Romanian philosophy, Costică Brădățan identifies as the fundamental problem in the Romanian cultural space “*the modernity-archaism dilemma* (or history-eternity, or mimicry-organicism, or revolution-evolution, or synchronism-protochronism, or Europeanism-indigenism: all mean, rigorously, the same thing); a dilemma that would be considered in the next century in aesthetic-cultural, political-economic and sociological, metaphysical-ontological, mystical-religious, linguistic-hermeneutics, etc. terms and would preoccupy many of our philosophers. Moreover, the scope, the terms, the underlying anxieties, the solutions, the general tone of this great debate (established especially by the Junimists and their opponents) will continue, sometimes almost literally, throughout the 20th century. Therefore, almost the whole Romanian serious philosophy of this century is contained, *in nuce*, in its very first moment, i.e. the Junimist challenge.” (Costică Brădățan, *O introducere la istoria filosofiei românești în secolul XX*, 14)

Maioreescu and Zeletin, and Ștefan Zeletin accused the Junimists and the socialists. At that time, the writings of these theorists (especially Lovinescu's *Istoria civilizației române moderne* [History of Modern Romanian Civilization]) have been widely disputed by authors with various ideological orientations, often translated into political sympathies. I should mention, finally, that works of the "synchronists" are now (re)read and (re)interpreted from the most diverse intellectual and political positions.

An analysis of the synchronistic ideas in the Romanian philosophical thought in the late 19th century and the early 20th century must begin with Maioreescu's theory of forms without substance, outlined by the author of the *Critice* in the article "În contra direcției de astăzi în cultura română" ["Against the Present Direction in the Romanian Culture"] (1868). This theory is T. Maioreescu's original contribution to the philosophy of culture, providing an answer for the problem raised by the Romanian historical reality of that time. His contemporary culture and civilization are analyzed from evolutionary philosophical positions, Maioreescu indicating a way out of the intellectual and social crisis he had observed.

On short, the crisis derived from the fact that the Romanian culture is based on a lie. The explanation for this state of affairs is described by the *Junimea* mentor as follows: after 1820, when the Romanian society came into contact with the Western civilization, the Europeanization of Romania, i.e., the import of Western institutions, began. However, by only assimilating "shallow forms of civilization," the Romanians did not realize the lack of "deeper historical foundations." Therefore, the result was "forms without substance." Such "forms without substance" are, for example, the institutions imitating the Western model (without an "intelligent appreciation of this culture" and only out of "the vanity to show the foreign peoples, at any cost, even with contempt for the truth, that we are their equal in terms of civilization," as Maioreescu writes), political journals and literary magazines, universities, athenaeums and cultural associations, the Romanian Academic Society, the conservatory of music, the school of fine arts, the national theater, "even a constitution." Being taken up without the (historical, cultural, civilizational) basis from which they sprang, these forms of culture were forged.

In addition, the borrowing of Western forms resulted in the occurrence of a fracture in the structure of the Romanian society, a break separating the ruling class from the ruled people. The solution envisaged by the critic is the Europeanization of the country, the assimilation of the Western civilization structures that is to be made, Maioreescu noted, through education: the lower class should be educated through the effort of the upper class.

As for the posterity of Maioreescu's ideas, since he used the phrase "forms without substance" to characterize the real situation in Romania, the *Junimea* mentor was wrongly

labeled as being against Europeanization/ synchronization. However, after reading his texts, it seems obvious that to place T. Maiorescu among the enemies of the modernization is an exaggeration. It is true that the article “În contra direcției de astăzi în cultura română” neither presents systematically the theory of forms without substance, nor details it, but it doesn’t say that the Western forms are harmful in themselves. It is only harmful to take them up indiscriminately, unselectively, since Romanians lack the European substance that makes them suitable for these borrowed forms.

In short, Maiorescu envisaged the pace in which the borrowing of Western institutions was done and not the opportunity of importing the forms. At stake is the need to transform the local substance in order to match the forms taken up from the West and not to abandon the borrowing.

Although best known in the field of literary criticism and ideology, the disagreement between T. Maiorescu and C. Dobrogeanu-Gherea also has a (less studied) political dimension. Despite the fact that there are texts that can illustrate such a dispute and, moreover, ever since the very first major critical evaluations of Gherea and Maiorescu’s² heritage the distinct positions (most often opposite) of the two theorists were noted, there is no comparative approach – in terms of the “synchronistic idea” – of the two thinkers’ theories. I tried to sketch one, without regarding my approach as comprehensive.

This social-political controversy of the two personalities of the Romanian culture is not easy to reconstruct comprehensively, because, on the one hand, most of the times it is not straightforward (but implied), and on the other, because C. Dobrogeanu-Gherea’s position towards the Junimist criticism (and generally toward conservatism) is ambiguous: he is influenced by it, but he also criticizes it or delimits himself from it.

The author of *Neoiobăgia* [Neoserfdom] takes up from the Junimists Maiorescu’s theory of forms without substance, using it in his doctrinaire work. By this, he acknowledges the Junimist critiques’ justification and its resemblance to the socialist one. (It is worth mentioning here yet another common trait of Maiorescu’s conservatism and Gherea’s socialism: the privileged role of the “cultivated class” in the process of modernization.) Appropriating T. Maiorescu’s formula, C. Dobrogeanu-Gherea interprets it in a Marxist way: the substance is the “forces of production,” the “material basis” and the forms are the “relations of production,” “the superstructure.”

² G. Ibrăileanu, *Spiritul critic în cultura românească*; E. Lovinescu, *Istoria civilizației române moderne*; Ștefan Zeletin, *Burghezia română. Origina și rolul ei istoric*.

The author of *Neoibăgia* was also concerned with rejecting the thesis (which all his opponents in terms of ideas – be they conservative, liberal, “poporanist” – clearly stated) of a mismatch of the socialist conceptions with the realities in the country. Dobrogeanu-Gherea’s answer to this question which he offers in the study called “D-l Maiorescu” [“Mr. Maiorescu”]³ (1892) somehow resembles Lovinescu’s later synchronism. Gherea’s arguments against the claim that, in Romania, socialism is an “exotic plant” are: (1) Socialism is just as “exotic” as liberalism was at the time of its introduction, (2) Romania takes up the forms of the Western civilization through the influence of the internationally environment and socialism will assert itself in our country just like it did in the West.

Because there were no objective conditions (an industry and a proletariat) for the development of socialism, C. Dobrogeanu-Gherea will push for the capitalist modernization of the country, for the Westernization of Romania, meeting the Junimists on this point. Moreover, because the most important social problem in Romania back then was the “agrarian problem” (“the peasants’ problem”, as it was called), not capitalism or the condition of the workers, the originality of C. Dobrogeanu-Gherea’s writings was that he analyzed this problem, whose systematic presentation received its clearest expression in the writing entitled *Neoibăgia* (1910),⁴ the most original work of the Romanian sociologist.

For a Marxist sociologist, the essential issue (also noticed by the conservative Romanian thinkers and politicians) is the contradiction between “our actual state of fact and the formal state of law.”⁵ If, however, in terms of describing the situation the conservative may be right, one cannot say the same about the suggested solution. Dobrogeanu-Gherea identifies two ways – diametrically opposed – which can dissolve this social contradiction: the conservative one (“to reduce the state of law to the state of fact,”⁶ i.e., to make the legislation consistent with the social reality, giving up some liberal institutions that remain dead) and the social-democratic one (“to raise the state of fact to the state of law,”⁷ i.e., to transform the social reality by democratizing it, according to the law).

The existing social-economic system is called “neoserfdom”, a “*hybrid and preposterous making*”, because it preserves the old substrate within the new modern capitalist system. For such a serious issue, the solution can only be “*the total, complete, undelayed abolition of this evil regime, the regime of neoserfdom,*”⁸ which included the following measures:

³ Constantin Dobrogeanu Gherea, *D-l Maiorescu*.

⁴ Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea, *Neoibăgia. Studiu economico-sociologic al problemei noastre agrare*.

⁵ Ibid., 108.

⁶ Ibid., 109.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 282 (my italics).

“— the total and final abolition of all medieval relations of production and servitudes: tithes, tallage, pacts for the winter and so on, the total abolition of the agricultural contract and its replacement by relations of production that exists in the capitalist West;

— the total and final abolition of all so-called tutelary exception laws, the abolition of the inalienability of the land and of the whole sludge of agricultural laws and bargains and of all the regulations that derive from it;

— the transformation of apparent small properties of today – a feature of the ne-serfdom regime – in genuine small self-reliant peasant property, with sufficient land for a family to work and feed on ;

— the transformation of the state of law from lie to reality, its realization in the political and legal-social relations in the country.”⁹

Neoiobăgia contains detailed descriptions of the material and moral condition of the peasantry, detailing the legislative measures which various governments have adopted to somehow solve this big problem of the country and arguing equally with liberal and “poporanist” ideas, both perspectives being at the time more influential than the socialist one.

For the chosen theme (the synchronistic idea in the Romanian philosophy in the late 19th century and early 20th century), another important writing is *Spiritul critic în cultura românească* [The Critical Spirit in Romanian Culture] by G. Ibrăileanu (1909). Ibrăileanu starts by tracing a transplantation of foreign culture on Romanian land since the 16th century; but only in the 19th century – namely, between 1840 and 1880 – the adaptation itself to the Western culture (especially French) occurs in the Romanian Provinces, since this meant a selection (a critical assimilation). As for their specific developments, G. Ibrăileanu starts by assuming a distinction between Moldova and Muntenia, which originates in the difference between the middle classes of the two Romanian provinces (the bourgeoisie in Muntenia, on the one hand, and the little Moldavian boyars, on the other). Specifically, Moldova would be superior in terms of culture, while Muntenia distinguishes itself by the struggle for the achievement of social and national ideals.

E. Lovinescu’s *Istoria civilizației române moderne* (1924-1925) represents a passionate support for the capitalist Westernization, for the bourgeois modernization of Romania. The author confesses that the work is not dependent on an historical vision, but starts “from a sociological and philosophical conception of the problem.” *Forțele revoluționare* [The Revolutionary Forces] (1924), the first volume, is a plea for a fundamental (political, cultural and even spiritual) change, from the East to the West, in short, for the need

⁹ Ibid.

to shift from *ex oriente lux* to *ex occidente lux*. Lovinescu will privilege therefore the 1848 revolutionary movement in Muntenia and will criticize the historical materialism of Ștefan Zeletin and C. Dobrogeanu-Gherea. The creative ideology of the 1848 revolutionaries will be opposed to the socialists' materialist one, the *Sburatorul* mentor combating the latter by arguing that ideology precedes economics (for ideas have “a much greater penetration power; in order to propagate themselves, they do not require, in fact, the existence of an economic substrate.”)¹⁰

Forțele reacționare [The Reactionary Forces] (1925), the second volume, is, as its title indicates, a survey of trends refractory to the revolutionary liberalism which Lovinescu shared. Both the Junimist conservatism (represented by Eminescu and Caragiale, as well as by C. Rădulescu-Motru, with his critique of the “Romanian politics”) and the “semănătorism” and the “poporanism” are denounced for opposing capitalism, namely the development of the liberal bourgeoisie, the modernization of the Romanian society. Also, E. Lovinescu, in trying to give a philosophical explanation for the political ideologies, distinguishes (and values differently) the French revolutionism (of the 1848 revolutionaries in Muntenia) from the German organicism (the Moldavian Junimists).

Legile formației civilizației române [The Laws of the Formation of the Romanian Civilization] (1925), the third volume, aims to provide a sociological and philosophical basis for the processes described in the first two volumes. The law of synchronism, of the interdependence, is presented here in detail. The work of the French sociologist Gabriel Tarde (1843-1903), *Les lois de l'imitation* (1890),¹¹ is the source of inspiration (admitted, but also criticized). Synthesizing, synchronicity means imitating the forms of an advanced civilization by a less evolved one and then gradually accommodating and adapting these forms to the substance of the backward civilization.

Ever since 1924, when he published the first volume of the *Istoria civilizației române moderne*, Lovinescu's writing was badly received and, in general, considered only a response to the older study by G. Ibrăileanu, *Spiritul critic în cultura românească* (printed as a volume in 1909). However, Lovinescu was accused of plagiarism by the *Viața românească* group, but he did not provide a clear and direct answer to the objections that have been made, but underestimated, in turn, Ibrăileanu's contribution and cataloged the “poporanist” doctrine as “reactionary”: “To turn your back to the city and look to the village means to act in a reactionary manner.”¹²

¹⁰ E. Lovinescu, *Istoria civilizației române moderne*, I, *Forțele revoluționare*, 139.

¹¹ Gabriel Tarde, *Les lois de l'imitation. Étude sociologique*. (Chapitre III. Qu'est-ce qu'une société?, 64-96.)

¹² E. Lovinescu, *Istoria civilizației române moderne*, II, *Forțele reacționare*, 174.

However, in *Istoria civilizației române moderne* Lovinescu has borrowed more than he is willing to admit from G. Ibrăileanu's *Spiritul critic în cultura românească*. For example, the idea of the difference of temperament – derived from the differences between the German, respectively, the French formation environment – of the Moldavian conservatives (influenced by the German organicism) and of the liberals in Muntenia (influenced by the French revolutionism) is formulated as such in Ibrăileanu's research. Acknowledging other influences and suggestions (Tacitus, with the idea of *saeculum*, or Gabriel Tarde, with his 1890 book, *Les lois de l'imitation*, or C. Dobrogeanu-Gherea, to which he assigns correctly the formulation of the “law of interdependence”), Lovinescu unfairly downplayed Ibrăileanu's critical contribution.

Ion Ianoși considers that *Burghezia română. Origina și rolul ei istoric* [The Romanian Bourgeoisie. Its Origins and Historical Function] (1925) by Ștefan Zeletin is “perhaps the most radical pro-capitalist plea in interwar Romania.”¹³ If Ibrăileanu and Lovinescu insisted on the preeminence of the ideology, Zeletin argues that the decisive factor in modernization is the economical-social one. Due to the generalization, in modernity, of the commercial exchange of goods, the European bourgeoisie (especially the English one) brought in the backward countries the liberal ideology of capitalism (which also “gives birth to the modern Romanian state”):¹⁴ “The birth of the Romanian bourgeoisie is due to expansion of English capitalism.”¹⁵ According to Zeletin, capitalist penetration goes through three phases – mercantilism, liberalism and imperialism – and Romania, he argues, must walk the path of mercantilism.

Ștefan Zeletin characterizes the whole Romanian culture as ideologically antibourgeois. But because of the expansion of capitalism, i.e., precisely the bourgeois development of Romania, is irreversible and unavoidable, the state of fact is, for Zeletin, paradoxical: the economy is bourgeois, but the culture is antibourgeois. For this reason, the author of *Burghezia română* will engage in a fight with the “reactionary”, i.e., the Junimists (whose conservatism is perfectly defined by Maiorescu's theory of forms without substance), with “poporanism” (regarded as a mere copy of a Russian doctrine unrelated to the Romanian realities) and socialism (since, through C. Dobrogeanu-Gherea, it supports the peasantry and not the bourgeoisie).

In the debate between the advocates of the traditionalism and those of the modernization (or “between the agrarian and industrialist supporters,” as Z. Ornea characterized them¹⁶), Ștefan Zeletin – by saying that in view of the causal explanation for the

¹³ Ion Ianoși, *O istorie a filosofiei românești (în relația ei cu literatura)*, 121.

¹⁴ Ștefan Zeletin, *Burghezia română. Origina și rolul ei istoric*, 69.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁶ Z. Ornea, *Poporanismul*, 446.

birth of modern Romania, he has passed the critical view and reached the scientific one – adopts the “scientific” method of the Marxist sociology: the birth of modern Romania is the entry, “about 1830-1840”, of the Romanian Principalities “in the ‘sphere of interests’ of the Western capitalism.”¹⁷

According to their distinct doctrinal orientations, Lovinescu and Zeletin explain differently “where modern Romania came from.” If for Lovinescu, “societies ... are not determined only by the exchange of goods,” but “they are modeled after the current conceptions of the time,”¹⁸ for the author of *Neoliberalismul*, the capitalist bourgeois ideology “comes with the foreign goods”.

However, the views of the two authors are similar in respect to the road Romania has to follow (“where it’s heading”, in Zeletin’s words). Both sociologists (whose closeness, E. Lovinescu thinks, “is more organic,” as they are “both on the solid ground of the bourgeois civilization”)¹⁹ have a common national ideal, one that (writes Ștefan Zeletin at the end of his book *Burghezia română*) “does not express anything but the needs of our capitalism, the aspirations of the national Romanian bourgeoisie.”²⁰ In short, the synchronization.

¹⁷ Ștefan Zeletin, *Burghezia română. Origina și rolul ei istoric*, 95.

¹⁸ E. Lovinescu, *Istoria civilizației române moderne, I, Forțele revoluționare*, 145.

¹⁹ E. Lovinescu, *Istoria civilizației române moderne, III, Legile formației civilizației române*, 207.

²⁰ Ștefan Zeletin, *Burghezia română. Origina și rolul ei istoric*, 268.

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