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The Nation Against Democracy

State Formation, Liberalism, and Political Participation in Romania

DANIEL BARBU

The 1876 parliamentary year commenced and was concluded in Romania by an implied agreement of Liberals and Conservatives with respect to the artificial and burdensome character of the state, which they would take turns in running. On January 21, the Conservative Minister of Public Instruction and Religious Affairs, Titu Maiorescu stated that, under the Organic Regulations (1831-1848), the country was wrapped up in a public outfit made out of customs that, except for a few "detrimental principles", were wholly compatible with the administrative requirements of a modern state. Moreover, these customs and regulations had the comparative advantage of not furthering the emergence of political liberty, which was not yet considered desirable by the Romanian society. Between the Revolution of 1848 and the Constitution of 1866, Romanians found themselves politically "undressed", and they had to cover themselves up with a new form of state, with a constitutional dress that did not suit them at all¹. A couple of month later, the National Liberal Party formed a new government and called for elections that strengthened the position of its radical wing. On December 15, the Prime Minister Ion C. Brătianu echoed the statement of the former minister, now in opposition, and agreed that, without taking the time to reproduce "the modes of production of a civilized society", the Romanians "draped" themselves in modern political "clothes" by merely copying the Western "pattern of political organization" together with the entire legal apparatus that the original blueprint brought along. The leader of the Liberal Party admitted that he deserved to be counted among "the unfortunates" who, during and after the 1848 Revolution, had given the state a "wonderful roof" but no foundations, since nothing significant had been done in the meantime by any government or political group in order to boost up agriculture, industry and commerce. Instead, the only significant, if perverse, achievement of the generation that conducted the process of constitutional and legal modernization of the country was the creation of a broad category of professionals of the state trained to exploit the sole viable and tangible gross national income generated by the peasants' labor².

What is surprising about this indirect dialogue is its bi-partisan character, rather than the issue under debate. During the same period (1864-1884), the Portuguese elite, as peripheral to modernity as the Romanian one, was engaged in similar disputes regarding the balance between a society still attached to the values and customs of the Ancient Regime and made out of a backward and illiterate

¹ Titu MAIORESCU, *Discursuri parlamentare cu priviri asupra dezvoltării politice a României sub domnia lui Carol I*, vol. I, Socec, București, 1897, p. 413.

² Ion C. BRĂȚIANU, *Discursuri, scrisori, acte și documente*, vol. II, partea a II-a, Imprimeriile Independența, București, 1912, pp. 107-111.

peasantry, on the one hand, and a dramatically liberal and progressive transformation of the institutional framework of the government, on the other hand¹. Both in Portugal and in Romania, for instance, mandatory primary school education and the abolishment of death penalty were legal innovations introduced in the absence of any concern for mobilizing resources necessary to craft a national elementary school network or agencies capable of enforcing law and order.

Were the Romanian Liberals, like other political elites from the periphery of modern Europe, just "a class of importers"² facing the difficult assignment of adjusting a form of government and an ideal of political reform that they learned to admire elsewhere to a benighted and unyielding traditional society? It seems that the replication and the rapid multiplication of external *forms* of civilization, inspired by the legacy of the French Revolution and triggered by the events of 1848 failed, at least before 1876, to touch the Romanian social *foundations* in any significant way – immobilized as they were in a permanent resistance to change. Indeed, Titu Maiorescu famously believed that the "radical vice" of the Romanian culture of the 19th century was the "untruthfulness"³ of the public life *forms* – be they political, economic, cultural or of any other nature. These forms, acquired from the West, did not match the inbred "essence" of the Romanian society. Parliament and the Constitution, elections and the free press, the academic world and the public education system, the museums and all the other Westernizing institutions, were all just "pretences with no basis", "shapeless phantoms", "illusions without truth", in short, *forms without foundations*⁴. Maiorescu's claim was that the Liberals had produced the fruits of modernity without bothering to reproduce their rationale, their "deeper historical fundament". They merely strived to translate the "appearances of the Western culture", expecting to achieve freedom and form a modern representative regime out of this "outside polish"⁵. But what exactly was the content that did not receive the proper forms, the foundations that refused to cast themselves in the mould of the liberal? Could these societal *foundations*, the ultimate and unreformed *truth* of the Romanian body politic be defined in a positive way?

Thus far, we have learned what Romanians were not yet ready for. Reading Titu Maiorescu and Ion C. Brătianu, we simply find out that, in its state of authenticity, the 19th century Romanian society was incompatible with alien forms like Constitutions, universities, modern bureaucracy or credit. Met with ironic skepticism by Maiorescu⁶, the first attempt to establish what could have been this definitive *truth* of Romanian politics is to be found in the Conservative Party program, issued on February 16, 1880 by Manolache Costache Epureanu. For the Conservative leader, the "substance of truth" – to be opposed to the fallacious liberal "wording" – was not, however, an essence, but rather an action: "To observe properly the

¹ Antonio COSTA PINTO, Pedro TAVARES DE ALMEIDA, "On Liberalism and the Emergence of Civil Society in Portugal", in Nancy BERMEO, Philip NORD (editors), *Civil Society before Democracy. Lessons from Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, 2000, p. 7.

² I use the language of Bertrand BADIE, *L'État importé. Essai sur l'occidentalisation de l'ordre politique*, Fayard, Paris, 1982, p. 152.

³ Titu MAIORESCU, "În contra direcției de astăzi în cultura română", in *Critice*, vol. I, Editura pentru Literatură, București, 1967, p. 147.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 151.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 147.

⁶ Titu MAIORESCU, *Discursuri parlamentare cu priviri asupra dezvoltării politice a României sub domnia lui Carol I*, vol. III, Socec, București, 1899, p. 4.

principles of representative government"¹. Despite Maiorescu's historicism and philosophical pessimism, most of the Conservatives and even the majority of the Liberals would have agreed with such an assessment.

It seems that in the European peripheral societies, where modernity was still overdue and industrialization was late to visit the 19th century², the intellectual juxtapositions between *form* and *foundation*, *illusion* and *reality*, *words* and *facts* allowed for an artificial polarization of the political actors of the representative regime, between a "red", liberal and progressive Left and a reactionary, conservative and traditionalist Right. Liberal partisans of the natural law and conservative proponents of historicism, in almost complete agreement as to the ways and means of government, could thus express their conflicting views in the press or in Parliament. The purpose of political competition was not to compare the merits of these stands, but to determine to which side the symbolic and social benefits of modernization should go. At the very beginning of the 20th century, Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea noticed, somehow against his Marxian criteria of analysis, that the Romanian elites did not represent particular and competing economic or social interests, but merely protected and promoted the overall interests of a "political industry"³ developed by a unified oligarchy located in Parliament. According to Ion C. Brătianu's observation of 1876, the civil service itself was but a branch of this industry. In this respect, Romania was not so different from 19th century Spain, where politics was completely neutral in terms of representing economic interests, and fully convergent in exploiting the state apparatus. Elections were won and lost according to the ability of the parties – embedded in the same social background – to mobilize the resources of the civil service and to set up territorial networks of patronage⁴. In the early 1880s, Petre P. Carp described as follows the procedures of electoral mobilization that matched the Spanish ones to the letter: "You would ask me, what does the prefect do? What does he do? Electioneering. What does the permanent committee do? Electioneering. What does the deputy prefect do? Electioneering. What does the mayor do? Electioneering. Our entire administration is nothing but a giant electoral device"⁵. Like in the neighboring Greece, the country was under the unquestioned authority of a *parliamentary oligarchy*, since politics was the exclusive trade of a limited number of prominent families and associated clientele, organized in parties lacking the will and ability of mass mobilization and resolved to preserve the *censitaire* representative system, which qualified and classified voters in conformity with their income⁶. Hence, representative government did not represent the citizenry, but the convergence of interests between a cartel of landlords or land leasers ("agricultural industrialists" as they were called in the last two

¹ Ion BULEI, *Conservatori și conservatorism în România*, Editura Enciclopedică, 2000, București, p. 33.

² John R. LAMPE, "Varieties of Unsuccessful Industrialization: The Balkan States Before 1014", in *The Journal of Economic History*, vol. 35, no. 1, 1975, pp. 56-85.

³ Constantin DOBROGEANU-GHEREA, "Despre oligarhia română", in *Opere complete*, vol. V, Editura Politică, București, 1978, p. 185.

⁴ Juan J. LINZ, "A Century of Politics and Interests in Spain", in Suzanne BERGER (editor), *Organizing Interests in Western Europe*, Cambridge, University Press Cambridge, 1981, pp. 367-375.

⁵ Constantin GANE, *P.P. Carp și locul său în istoria politică a țării*, vol. II, Editura Ziarului Universul, București, 1936, p. 333.

⁶ Nicos P. MOUZELIS, *Politics in the Semi-Periphery. Early Parliamentarianism and Late Industrialisation in the Balkans and Latin America*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1986, p. 3.

decades of the century) and a conglomerate of urban and rural renters that lived of a double – and sometimes combined – exploitation of land and the public debt.

In the Romanian state set up by the Constitution of 1866, this "class of professional politicians"¹ was the result of "a patriotic agreement over the relations of production in agriculture"²: the nation-state had to be planned and built from the roof down by political engineers recruited from the traditional privileged social strata, with the explicit exclusion of the peasantry from any participation in public life. Undoubtedly, such an approach to politics was anti-Toquevillian, since it intended to make use of the state as the driving force of modernization, and did not consider the involvement any form of civil society into the process. Romanian radicals shared the general compunction of their European fellow Liberals about the right of free association, behind which they saw the potential danger of a democratic and popular mobilization against the liberal state and its parliamentary oligarchy. The Orleanu law of 1909, prohibiting the creation of trade unions and professional associations of employees, and suppressing the right to strike³ was promoted by a National Liberal government and voted by a Liberal majority. As in Italy⁴, equally peripheral to modernity, Romanian Liberals showed no real concern for establishing a constitutional system based on checks and balances and were seduced instead by the idea of a strong government, able to reshape the institutional framework of the polity and to advance gradual social reform. Romanian progressive politicians understood the later as an incremental "solidarity" between the state and the rural majority through such instruments of self-improvement as generalized education and easy access to credit.

Upward social mobility was acceptable, if not desirable, but only as an individual solution. Therefore, corporate interests or political militancy were not deemed legitimate agencies of social promotion. Taking advantage of public instruction and national cheap capital was by 1900, according to Ionel I.C. Brătianu, the only reasonable avenue of political enfranchisement⁵. The social philosophy of Romanian liberalism was indeed summarized at the turn of the century by the principle "By ourselves", which expressed the trust, shared by most European Liberals⁶, in self-help and personal improvement as devices of social advancement. Even the conservative Maiorescu agreed in a private note that the Constitution can be also viewed as "a training school for the people", which would be encouraged with time "to be mindful of itself", to mature politically and "to rise above itself by its own merits"⁷. Yet constitutionalism may be a learning process, but is hardly a political solution, as it cannot expand the scope of representation in a natural way. In reality, both Liberals and Conservatives interpreted the rules of exclusion

¹ Constantin DOBROGEANU-GHEREA, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

² *Ibidem*, pp. 180-181.

³ Apostol STAN, Mircea IOSA, *Liberalismul politic în România*, Editura Enciclopedică, București, 1996, p. 355.

⁴ Alberto Mario BANTI, "Public Opinion and Associations in Nineteenth-Century Italy", in Nancy BERMEO, Philip NORD (editors), *op. cit.*, pp. 43-44.

⁵ *Discursurile lui I.I.C. Brătianu*, ed. de George FOTINO, vol. I, Așezământul Cultural I.I.C. Brătianu, București, 1933, p. 249.

⁶ Allan MITCHELL, "Bourgeois Liberalism and Public Health: A Franco-German Comparison", in Jürgen KOCKA, Allan MITCHELL (editors), *Bourgeois Society in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Berg, Oxford, 1993, p. 347.

⁷ Titu MAIORESCU, *Însemnări zilnice*, vol. I, Socec, București, 1937, p. 132.

engrained into representative government as a fallout of the hierarchy of ranks brought forth by the Organic Regulations. Not surprisingly, Ion C. Brătianu emphasized that the post-medieval assemblies of orders, the general assembly of the Organic Regulations, the legislative body introduced by the Paris Convention and the Statute of 1864 belonged all to an uninterrupted representative tradition which buttressed "a very liberal regime and, I might say, a parliamentary one" that distinguished the Romanians from other neighboring people, condemned in the past to "absolute despotism"¹. It was precisely this sense of the historical continuity of political representation that slowed down the pace of democratization, which was more likely to take off in societies that move directly from "despotism" to parliamentarism, as Stein Rokkan argued².

Everywhere in 19th century Europe, the liberal dilemma was how to set a political agenda simultaneously distant from both aristocratic privileges and democratic expectations. For their part, Romanian Liberals proved themselves to be more concerned with the necessity of containing any popular taste for electoral democracy that Alexandru Ioan Cuza may have stirred up than by the landowners' conservatism. The coup d'état of 1866 was thus prepared and enacted by various "red" groups in collusion with most of the reactionary circles. This "monstrous coalition", as its contemporary critics called it, aimed at restoring the representative logic of 1831, threatened by Cuza's flirt with the idea of universal suffrage. In addition, just like George III in the first part of his reign³, the prince used to appoint cabinets of his own choice, ignoring by and large the patronage networks controlled either by radical and moderate liberal factions or by conservative bosses. Hence, the main purpose of the constitutional arrangement of 1866 was to reverse the political consequences of the Paris Convention (1858) and of the Statute imposed in 1864 by Cuza. If the avowed purpose of the Constitution of 1866 was to firmly establish a number of public freedoms, it was also meant to cancel the very possibility of an autonomous peasant electoral constituency that could have weighted on the decision-making process. To be sure, in the ad-hoc assemblies of 1857, which were highly instrumental in shaping up the politics of modernization, peasant deputies made 20% of the membership. Ten years after, the Liberals were still haunted by the memory of the peasant deputies speaking on their own behalf and trying to include the rural question on the public agenda. Liberals strongly believed that peasants were not politically qualified to have representatives of their own. Hence, it was rather the radicals and not the conservative landowners that committed themselves to blocking on that particular occasion the issue of landless peasants working on large estates in onerous conditions⁴, an issue that loomed larger than any over Romanian society other until the land reform was accomplished in the aftermath of World War I.

By removing the peasantry from the public sphere in 1866, the parliamentary oligarchy reinforced the social power relations and the social hierarchies established in 1831 by the Organic Regulations, still regarded in 1876 by Titu Maiorescu

¹ Ion C. BRĂȚIANU, *Acte și cuvântări*, vol. III, Cartea Românească, București, 1941, p. 178.

² Peter FLORA (editor), *State Formation, Nation – Building, and Mass Politics in Europe. The Theory of Stein Rokkan Based on His Collected Works*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999, p. 249.

³ J.G.A. POCOCK, *Virtue, Commerce, and History. Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985, pp. 81-82.

⁴ Apostol STAN, Mircea IOSA, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

as a constitutional arrangement entirely compatible with the liberal requirements of representative government. Until universal suffrage was introduced in 1919, the political elite of the country did not undergo any structural changes in terms of recruitment and public career. The four-class electoral system ensured the sway of a few hundred families and their clientele over the Senate and two of the electoral classes entitled to vote for the Lower House of the Parliament. Thus, the Romanian parliamentary oligarchy followed the logic of a *paternalist* and *authoritarian* system of government, which, in the 19th century, characterized most post-Byzantine countries entrenched in the Orthodox cultural tradition¹.

"Good institutions are the foundation of the very existence of the state. They are the necessary condition for its progress towards civilization and a thriving future"². This statement, taken from a 1832 memorandum on the implementation of the Organic Regulations in Moldavia, uttered a conviction shared by most Romanian politicians during the age of modernization: good institutions, embodied by the bureaucracy of a highly centralized state and kept together by a stable political elite, should be a prerequisite for the progress of a society that was striving to catch up with the present. Representative government rooted in an exclusive *système censitaire* was by definition the institutional instrument that consolidated a category of professionals of modernization, as liberals used to regard themselves.

One of the questions to which nation-building, as a process designed and carried out by Romanian Liberals in the second half of the 19th century, did not answer was whether the institutions and the legislation of a modern state were able to transform a society of dependent subjects into a community of free citizens. In front of the prince who distributed justice, the boyar who owned the land, and the Church that discouraged both work and knowledge³, the people of the Ancient Regime could represent themselves only as subjects. The social role imparted to them was to obey whoever preceded them in the hierarchy of ranks and status and to command to those beneath them. The liberal state replaced this type of obedience with another, whose mechanics of compliance and leadership functioned according to the place assigned to each individual in the institutional geography of representative government. The progressive elite itself approached modernity with a massive handicap: it was not the social product of the revolution, but rather the offspring of old privileges. Thus "red" politicians, be they radicals or moderates, were not, as a group, genetically distinct from the Conservatives. The official and gradual abolition of medieval privileges between 1848-1866 transformed the traditional "dominant class" into a modern "ruling class", to use the language of Gaetano Mosca⁴. For the parliamentary oligarchy of the 19th century, modernization was first and foremost a problem of political conversion: how to replace a vertical hierarchy of ranks (determined jointly by landowning and by the position held at the Court) with a horizontal aggregate of elites (parliamentary, academic,

¹ See Andrew C. JANOS, *East Central Europe in the Modern World. The Politics of the Borderlands from Pre- to Postcommunism*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2000, pp. 45-48.

² Vlad GEORGESCU, *Mémoires et projets de réforme dans les Principautés roumaines, 1831-1848. Répertoire et textes*, A.I.E.S.E.E., București, 1972, p. 37.

³ Daniel BARBU, *Bizant contra Bizanț. Explorări în cultura politică românească*, Nemira, București, 2001, pp. 89-134.

⁴ Gaetano MOSCA, *Elementi di scienza politica*, UTET, Torino, 1982, pp. 608-632, 929-940, 1003-1042.

professional, commercial, landed, and administrative)? The political engines of this transformation were first the parliamentary factions and, later, the parties. As Petre P. Carp admitted in April 1876, "the essence of the constitutional whirl is the rule of the parties"¹. The oligarchic party with a limited and hand-picked constituency became the liberal form of the privileged order of the Ancient Regime.

Approaching modernity as a process of institutional design and political conversion, the Liberals exerted themselves to substitute the ancient power relations marshaled by the Court and underpinned by land ownership with a method of *gouvernementalité*² whose mission was to replace real estate with the state as their main economic asset. This is why the Conservatives interpreted the founding of the National Bank in 1880 and the generalization of the instruments of credit as an attack on property, as a fraudulent and interested devaluation of real estates³. Almost two hundred years before, the establishment of the Bank of England produced the same reaction within the Tory circles worried by the Whig decision to substitute the real value of land with the nominal value of paper money, which relied only on the belief in the solvability of the state⁴. In short, after 1866 the modern state was for the Liberals (and the government supported or inspired by them) a way to free their pervasive social domination from the dictatorship of the land and to craft a political nation out of illiterate and subjected peasants.

On December 9, 1905, Ion I.C. Brătianu drew in a parliamentary discourse a short history of the party whose president he became three years later: "The National Liberal Party was not born as a spontaneous and theoretical entity, as a mere scholarly conception ... The National Liberal Party emerged as the expression of a real and major need of our state and people. It was constantly the agency that fulfilled Romania's vital necessities and the first need it had to respond to, the one that preceded and encompassed all others, the one from which it took even its national-liberal name, was the need to warrant the national existence of the Romanians"⁵. Here, the nation does not appear to have an explicit ethnic meaning, being regarded rather as a surrogate of citizenship. This explains why the discourse on political capacity, peculiar to 19th century European liberalism⁶, was relatively inconspicuous in the Romanian liberal milieu. Accordingly, the electoral reform bill of 1884, which reduced the number of electoral classes from four to three and enlarged the electoral body, was presented by the official paper of the party as a proof of the liberal trust in the nation, and not as sanctioning the improvement of the level of individual qualification for voting⁷.

¹ Constantin GANE, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

² I use the term as explained by Michel FOUCAULT, "La gouvernementalité", in *Dits et Écrits*, vol. III, Gallimard, Paris, 1994, pp. 635-657.

³ Apostol STAN, Mircea IOSA, *op. cit.*, pp. 214-217.

⁴ J.G.A. POCOCK, *op. cit.*, pp. 196-197.

⁵ Ion BULEI, *op. cit.*, p. 16. The theoretical inconsistency of Romanian liberalism as assumed by Ion C. Brătianu is indirectly confirmed by a somewhat discouraging attempt to find elements of classical liberal thought in Romanian politicians that called themselves liberals: Victoria F. BROWN, "The Adaptation of Western Political Theory in a Peripheral State: the Case of Romanian Liberalism", in Stephen FISCHER-GALATI, Radu R. FLORESCU, George R. URSUL (editors), *Romania Between East and West. Historical Essays in Memory of Constantin C. Giurescu*, East European Monographs, Boulder, 1982, pp. 269-301.

⁶ Alan S. KAHAN, *Liberalism in the Nineteenth-Century Europe. The Political Culture of Limited Suffrage*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2003, pp. 5-8.

⁷ *Românul*, XXVII, 10 aprilie 1883, p. 325.

The boyar factions formed around 1800, both in Wallachia and in Moldavia, under the generic name of "national parties" envisioned the nation under the political features yielded by the French Revolution. A memorandum of 1818-1819 mentioned for instance the "national bond" that fiscal equality, brought forth by the abolition of privileges and immunities, could create for the all Romanians¹. Accordingly, an anonymous liberal author of the 1830s wrote, "That place where a society of many people is dwelling is called fatherland, because of the name of the fathers and forefathers who lived there as a society. It is not the land that should be called a fatherland, but the political dwelling, that is the society of those who live together, making use of and sharing each other, whose sharing is bound by love and the common interests and purposes ... therefore we could not say that Romania is our fatherland, because we haven't had and we still don't have here a society that we may share and make use of"². Thus, "fatherland" is not a place charged with the past of an ethnic group, but the "political dwelling" of a society that is experiencing the fullness of civil rights and duties and is marshaled by the sense of a common good.

The very term *liberalism* was imported into Romanian around 1828 by one of the most cogent reformist political thinkers of Moldavia, Ionică Tăutul³. The pre-revolutionary generations imagined the nation as a sovereign community with a place of its own in the *jus publicum europaeum* and held together by the mechanics of representation. The proclamation of Islaz of June 9 1848, which served as a revolutionary constitution for a few months found that truth, political ideas and knowledge were universal and could not be subject to any limitation of class, status or ethnicity. According to Ioan D. Negulici, a revolutionary philologist that published immediately after 1848 a dictionary of neologisms to be used as a progressive political lexicon, *the liberal* was "the protector of humanity and of the rights of the nations"⁴. Political capacity was then deemed by the liberal successors of the Revolution of 1848 to be eminently indivisible and, consequently, something to be taken into account between (and not within) national communities. In a speech of November 22, 1876 I.C. Brătianu argued that the holder of political qualification was, or should be, the country itself: if the people shall not be educated swiftly, the more educated nations would eventually assimilate the Romanians⁵. The National Liberal Party, created one year earlier, assumed precisely this task of being the political epitome of the Romanian nation.

When they decided in 1866 to postpone indefinitely the extension of political rights – even in the restricted form of the equal vote for all the literate capital or labor owners adopted by other liberal regimes of South-Eastern Europe – the Romanian liberals have resorted to the nation as an intuitive and natural substitute for citizenship. Thus, in 1891, the Liberals honored the passing away of Ion C. Brătianu with a public declaration emphasizing that the National Liberal Party was nothing else than the "nation's consciousness"⁶. Ten years later, Constantin Stere defended

¹ Valeriu ȘOTROPA, *Proiectele de constituție, programele de reforme și petițiile de drepturi din țările române* Editura Academiei, București, 1976, p. 47.

² Paul CORNEA, *Originile romantismului românesc. Spiritul public, mișcarea ideilor și literatura între 1780-1840*, Minerva, București, 1972, p. 208.

³ Klaus BOCHMANN, *Der politisch-soziale Wortschatz des Rumänischen von 1821 bis 1850*, Akademie Verlag, Berlin, 1979, p. 68.

⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 141-142.

⁵ I.C. BRĂTIANU, *op. cit.*, p. 218.

⁶ Apostol STAN, Mircea IOSA, *op. cit.*, p. 276.

the collective enrolment of the socialist militants in the liberal organizations, which some considered as a political betrayal, with the argument that "only this party will accomplish the ideal of a great Romanian nation, master of its own destiny"¹. Since they were not willing to grant all Romanians political participation, and were jealously sharing with the Conservatives the reign of a very restricted representative government, the Liberals placed democratic citizenship and the national idea in the same ideal political frame. Only when the "Romanian national existence" was achieved (a rather unlikely event before 1918), could universal suffrage be an option. The individual capacity to vote should have been the historical outcome of the definitive qualification of the nation on the international arena.

In taking away fundamental political rights from the citizens and assigning them to a would-be unified nation, the founders of the modern Romanian state, Liberal and Conservative alike, shaped a *Rechtsstaat* in which not the individual rights but the positive laws were the only guarantees for the preservation and enforcement of public liberties². Hence, the individual citizen was not conceived as a natural agent of liberty, but as a subject of a rule of law that granted him that amount of freedom and those rights compatible with the interests of state embodied by the Liberal-Conservative parliamentary oligarchy. It is only after 1888 that the liberal ideology welcomed, especially in some of Ionel I.C. Brătianu's statements, the idea of a nation made out of rights and pictured it as a community of citizens summoned up by the liberal project of modernization. Therefore, by the turn of the century, the topics of agrarian and electoral reforms, of Romanianness and democratic citizenship merged in a single liberal discourse close to the model of *social nation*³.

To sum up, the Romanian liberal elite did not cope with modernization as a social advancement of civil and political rights, but as a mere language of political change. Whereas the bourgeois 19th century understood modernity as power over things, Romanian Liberals approached it as a power over words. They were reluctant, or unable, to develop a culture of experience, preferring to wrap themselves in a culture of discourse. "Political matters concern them to the highest degree", observed Jacques Poumay, consul general of Belgium, in 1867, "For ten years now the Romanians have been writing nothing more than newspaper articles and these articles, when they are not written by personalities, develop but empty theories, lacking the sanction of experience"⁴.

If this was the case, was modernization more than a name given to the spontaneous economic, societal, institutional and intellectual transformations that occurred in Romania after the Revolution of 1848? It seems that modernization, as a more or less delayed but constant project of Romanian political elites, was not just a process that directed the life and work of a backward society to the future. Modernization also included those sets of behaviors, attitudes, practices and words whose significance was never contemporary with itself, but was fed by meanings

¹ *Ibidem*, p. 333.

² See Carl SCHMITT, *Verfassungslehre*, 8. Auflage, Duncker & Humblot, Berlin, 1993, p. 130.

³ A similar evolution, yet marked by an explicit English liberal positivism, took place in Poland. Brian A. PORTER, "The Social Nation and Its Futures: English Liberalism and Polish Nationalism in Late Nineteenth-Century Warsaw", in *American Historical Review*, 101, no. 5, 1996, pp. 1470-1492, and especially pp. 1470-1473.

⁴ Valeriu STAN, "Un raport consular belgian din 1866 despre caracterul și moravurile românilor", *Revista Istorică*, III, nr. 6, 1992, pp. 1200-1201.

that preceded it¹. In other words, the path followed by Romania in the 19th century was determined not only by the revolutionary breakthrough of 1848, but also by the economic, political and cultural practices the Revolution stood against.

Somehow, the political idiom of Romanian elites was trapped between this invasive past and a future they were unprepared to figure. As soon as it was gradually included in the public discourse, national history itself became more an argument for the present than the shared scholarly memory of a common past. For instance, Titu Maiorescu, uttered his parliamentary speeches facing the past: in his capacity of legislator and minister, he claimed he was actually doing "contemporary history"², not politics. For their part, Liberals also learned that politics might be a useful anticipation of the past. Hence, the failure of the Revolution of 1848 became history. When writing in 1850 *Românii supt Mihai Voevod Viteazul* the then exiled Nicolae Bălcescu wrote in fact contemporary history, trying to bestow on the Revolution the past it was missing. The official Romanian historiography of the 20th century regards Michael the Brave as the eminent unifier of the ethnic nation, a herald of the making of Greater Romania in 1918. For Bălcescu, the prince of 1600 was a retrospective liberal hero who "by himself" and against all odds tried to lay the foundation of a political society out of dispersed and conflicting elements. A long national history of social and political subjection was no longer viewed as being discordant with the liberal values, but as the epic project of the political nation. After 1848, history was the continuous present³ of liberal politics.

Taking in as milestones the Organic Regulations, the Revolution of 1848, and Cuza's authoritarian regime, the interpretation of recent history espoused by the parliamentary oligarchy was, probably, nothing more than a method to avoid facing a basic dilemma: how could a modern and liberal state embed itself in a society not made out of Liberals and ignorant of what individual rights and freedoms are? Or, rephrasing the question, is a new and unfinished state able to produce free citizens by means of positive law?

The original liberal constitutional optimism fed by the democratic messianism of Nicolae Bălcescu and Simion Bărnuțiu included political representation in the sphere of natural rights as a universal franchise the liberal state had to warrant in its capacity of historical commissioner of the "law of liberty"⁴. In the spirit of the French Revolution of February 1848, Nicolae Bălcescu incorporated universal suffrage⁵ into the intellectual heritage of Romanian Liberals. Still, the liberal factions, radical and moderate altogether, were disturbed by the anti-parliamentary inclination of Prince Cuza and by his will to see that the rural majority had a "share in the political society", by expanding the use of civil, social and political rights beyond traditional qualifications of status and wealth. Hence, after 1866, they abandoned any reference to universal suffrage. In this respect, Romanian Liberals followed instinctively in the footsteps of their German counterparts who, despite the radical

¹ Daniel BARBU, "La modernization politique: une affaire des intellectuels?", in *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review*, vol. I, no. 1, 2001, pp. 62-67.

² Titu MAIORESCU, "Precuvântare", in *Istoria politică a României sub domnia lui Carol I*, Humanitas, București, 1994, p. 9.

³ See Bernard LEPETIT, "Le present de l'histoire", in IDEM (sous la direction de), *Les formes de l'expérience. Une autre histoire sociale*, Albin Michel, Paris, 1995, pp. 296-298.

⁴ Nicolae BĂLCESCU, *Românii supt Mihai Voevod Viteazul*, in *Opere*, vol. III, Editura Academiei, București, 1986, p. 11.

⁵ IDEM, "Corespondență", in *Opere*, vol. IV, Editura Academiei, București, 1964, p. 548.

positions adopted in 1848 by the Parliament of Frankfurt, reluctantly accepted the general enfranchisement of the electorate of the Empire undertaken by the conservative chancellor Bismarck¹.

Quite predictably, one of the most radical revolutionaries of 1848, Constantin A. Rosetti initiated an electoral reform bill thirty five years after, which created a single electoral class made up of all literate people. Nonetheless, only 35 out of his 132 fellow liberal members of Parliament supported this initiative². Within a year, the National Liberal government, led by Ion C. Brătianu, another one-time radical revolutionary, promoted its own bill, reducing the number of electoral classes from four to three and modestly enhancing the weight of the indirect peasant vote. This way, Brătianu showed that he meant every word when, on January 12, 1880, he rejected the right wing opposition's accusations of radicalism, with this statement: "I'm a conservative as well"³. Dissatisfied with a faltering liberal leadership that had transformed a revolutionary ideal into an "untrue illusion", C.A. Rosetti left the party. Ironically, it took for a moderate liberal (and a former member of the February 11, 1866 government that disposed of Cuza's reforms) to affirm in his presidential program of 1892 that the enforcement of the rule of law would necessarily lead to universal suffrage with proportional representation, an ideal – as Dimitrie A. Sturdza put it – that could not be separated from the intellectual history of Romanian liberalism⁴. The National Liberal congress of 1906 contemplated only a limited electoral enfranchisement, and the congress of 1913 pleaded for "the single electoral class of the literate people"⁵ that had been denied to C.A. Rosetti thirty years before. A year later, as the war broke out, Ionel I.C. Brătianu declared that out of patriotism and in view of the international situation, any political reforms, especially the electoral one, should be postponed⁶. The nation as a subject of international law must take precedence over the nation as a community of citizens⁷. It is Stein Rokkan's contention that whenever a state considers its independence at risk, the government of that state feels entitled to slow down the pace of democratization⁸.

It was only in the spring of 1917, on an official visit to revolutionary Petrograd as President of the Council of Ministers, that Ionel Brătianu made public the irrevocable decision of the Liberals to introduce universal suffrage and implement a fair agrarian reform as soon as the war ended⁹. Faced with the demise of Russian autocracy and the breakdown of the bureaucratic and military oligarchies that propped up its survival beyond any political logic, Romanian Liberals understood that the only way to avoid a revolutionary completion of the process of modernization they were in charge of since 1848 was to reshape the representative regime on the basis of universal suffrage. The solution may have seemed only fair and democratic at the end of a conflagration that was sustained mostly by the peasantry, but the reasoning behind it was utterly conservative. Universal suffrage was a revolution from above in the framework of the liberal state, revolution that the

¹ Alan S. KAHAN, *op. cit.*, pp. 94-102, 141-143.

² Apostol STAN, Mircea IOSA, *op.cit.*, pp. 230.

³ Constantin GANE, *op. cit.*, p. 239.

⁴ Apostol STAN, Mircea IOSA, *op. cit.*, pp. 278.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 343.

⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 358-361.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 366.

⁸ Peter FLORA (editor), *op. cit.*, p. 249.

⁹ Apostol STAN, Mircea IOSA, *op. cit.*, p. 368.

Liberals hoped to tame and turn into their advantage. In the November 1919 elections, organized by general Arthur Văitoianu, head of a crypto-liberal government, the peasants were for the first time since 1857 direct voters. Consequently, they cast their ballots for the newly founded Peasant Party, which won close to an absolute majority (46.30%), as a natural political embodiment of the social nation. Nonetheless, the National Liberal Party received in the Old Kingdom and in Bessarabia 21.38% of the votes¹, a decent performance that announced their upcoming return to the helm of a state they were not prepared to let go.

However, from the making of Greater Romania in 1918 to its disbanding by the communist regime in 1948, the National Liberal Party was, politically, a living dead². Over this period, six liberal governments were in power for eleven years. A liberal government reshuffled most of the public institutions and tailored the Constitution in 1923 so as to acknowledge the territorial and political transformation brought forth by World War I. In 1926, the same government introduced a Fascist-styled electoral law that repealed any democratic virtues universal suffrage might have promised. Another liberal government was even credited with the economic boom of 1934-1938. Except that both governments were liberal only by name. In fact, their policies were anti-liberal. Whenever called to form the government, the National Liberal Party promoted protectionism, faked elections, suspended civil rights, dissolved associations, repressed the opposition, silenced the press, and evaded any parliamentary control. Ultimately, the Party apparatus and most of its leadership were instrumental in the reversal of representative democracy by King Carol II in 1938.

At the end of the Great War, the liberal parliamentary oligarchy was completely consumed by its experience of managing a state built from its constitutional cover down to national foundations that did not rest on individual rights and freedoms. Both the war that had laid the responsibility for the survival of the nation on the peasant majority, and the example set by the Russian revolution of February 1917 compelled the Romanian Liberals to revisit their own revolutionary origins and to fulfill their initial democratic agenda. Finally, the past established itself as the political principle of the present.

¹ Cristian PREDA, *România postcomunistă și România interbelică*, Meridiane, București, 2002, p. 133.

² A useful historical survey of this period in Dumitru ȘANDRU, "Partidul Național Liberal în perioada interbelică și a celui de-al doilea război mondial", in Șerban RĂDULESCU-ZONER (editor), *Istoria Partidului Național Liberal*, Editura All, București, 2000, pp. 201-252.