

Miscellanea

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THE DISCOURSE OF COUNTER-MODERNIZATION. CONSTANTIN NOICA'S REACTIVE NATIONAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Abstract: Nationalist philosopher Constantin Noica (1909-1987), like many other public intellectuals in Romania, felt that modernization and modern civilization were traumatic to his culture. In this article, I mean to address the discursive templates he used to formulate his version of a traumatized Romanian identity. These templates are structured by master tropes (cf. Kenneth Burke's "Appendix" to *A Grammar of Motives* and Hayden White's "Introduction" to *Metahistory*) and are ideologically charged. Relying on suggestions from François Hartog (*The Mirror of Herodotus*) and from Ruth Wodak et al. (*The Discursive Construction of National Identity*), I propose alternative master tropes which are generally used in shaping national identities, as well as in dealing with the particular situation of cultures that feel threatened and traumatized by modernization.

Keywords: national identity; discursive constructs; master tropes; ideology; nationalism.

Nationalism and Ideology

Nationalism is currently presented as an ideology in respectable reference books such as, for instance, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Kohn, "Nationalism") or *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Political Thought* (Barry 352). In this article I will offer

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an alternative view, in keeping with the reservations of Benedict Anderson (5) or Terrence Ball and Richard Dagger (Ball et al. 7 and passim), and claim that while nationalist discourse is ideologically loaded, it is not a fully formed ideology itself, rather it makes use of various templates of ideological discourse in order to formulate its political statements. To substantiate and clarify the reasons for my theoretical stance, I must first provide brief accounts and working definitions of both ideology and nationalism.

(Political) ideologies are alternative, shared discursive constructs that provide extensive explanations and evaluations of social and political realities with the intention to propose general attitudes and sweeping projects for managing and improving such realities. On the one hand, an ideology verges on political philosophy given its elucidatory ambitions, on the other, it offers grounds for parties and movements to articulate their various political platforms and action programs. Ideologies may be understood as either concrete or abstract, that is, they can be viewed either as collections of actual related texts or as the shared tenets and perspectives, be they explicit or implicit, that one can detach from such concrete formulations. It is the latter understanding of ideology that I find more productive and even more accurate, as ideological canons are subjective selections, whereas the reconstructed generic framework of an ideology is more stable and provides the basis for selecting relevant texts and ideas.

I take ideology to be the common *manner* in which various political representations are organized, it is a generic discursive style of formulating explanations and envisaging action plans for societies or social groups. An ideology is not so much the inventory of ideas and topics it proposes as the way in which it addresses and confers discursive coherence to such ideas and topics. Liberty, justice, progress, democracy, social cohesion or dissension etc. are approached by almost all ideologies, yet these ideologies remain distinct in how they understand the nature and imagine the solution of, such issues that are inherently contestable (Gallie passim, Connolly passim, Eccleshall 7).

Nationalism is a political discursive construct that shapes the identity of a nation by focusing on its history and its putative political agenda, and as such it is ideologically charged. The predominance of the theme of a nation's identity and historical evolution does not, however, generate a new or different political ideology to be listed alongside liberalism, conservatism, or socialism—not even a “thin” ideology as Freedman calls it (*Ideology* 97-100). Nationalism is rather ideologically opportunistic—it applies liberal, conservative, socialist etc. formulas to approach relevant nation-centered issues. Nationalism makes the nation its

predilect theme, but extant, bona fide political ideologies are the ones that furnish it with modes and styles of broaching the theme of the nation. In other words, the nation is the topic of nationalist discourse (*what* it talks about), while ideology is the manner of discoursing on it (*how* it talks about the nation as its main topic). As a result, nationalism is more specific and restrictive in terms of its scope, whereas ideologies approach a much broader array of topics (Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory* 749 and foll., Alan Finlayson in Eccleshall 100-1).

Categorically, nationalism is a reflexive and consistently structured cultural-identitarian species of discourse, unlike the rather incidental verbalizing of non-conceptual, un- or pre-conscious emotional states and experiences such as, for instance, patriotism or xenophobia (Ștefănescu, *Patrii din cuvinte* 43-6). Other species of discourse on collective identity, like ethnicism or racism, are generically related to nationalism, but they differ in that they do not concentrate on a collective history (their predilect categories are trans-historical) or on a common, unitary political strategy (since ethnic and race are mostly seen as perennial and inescapable realities, beyond human control). Given its political interest, nationalist discourse is therefore more prone to resort to the stylistic matrices of existing ideologies.

The Tropology of Nationalist Discourse

When looking at genuine ideologies, one may find a noticeable set of basic and recurrent discursive patterns (Freeden, *Ideology* 32 and *Ideologies and Political Theory* 77 and passim, Kettler 235, Eccleshall 12), or, as Hayden White put it, “general ideological preferences”/“positions” (*Metahistory* 22-4) that pressure ideological pronouncements into repetitive molds and provide a core structure for ideological discourses. As I have shown elsewhere (see, for instance, *Patrii din cuvinte*, “Peace Talks”), nationalism may employ any of these discursive patterns and consequently should not be regarded as an ideologically uniform manifestation of discursive collective identity. The relationship between the national self and its cultural other is constructed by means of four master tropes (antithesis, simile, metaphor, and irony) that operate as generative, structuring principles within four alternative paradigms for discoursing on national identity (cf. Ștefănescu *Patrii din cuvinte*, “Peace Talks”). These four figurative modes correspond to the four “basic ideological positions” that Hayden White singles out in the wake of Karl Mannheim: Anarchism, Radicalism, Liberalism, and Conservatism (22-29). White talks of “four principal modes of historical

consciousness" that rely on these discursive strategies (xi); similarly, I think we can identify *four principal modes of national(ist) consciousness* that obtain from the operation of the four master tropes and the corresponding ideological positions.

White's four ideological matrices relate to one another in a cross-polarity as they form pairs in sharing one similar feature and opposing each other in one respect. Thus, in White's account, Liberalism and Conservatism both desire to preserve the *continuity* of the existing order and only accept slow and gradual changes, but Conservatism relies on an *irrationalist*, intuitive knowledge of the natural order and evolution of society, while Liberalism envisages them in a *rational* manner and aspires to manage them by means of political structures and legislation. Anarchism and Radicalism, on the other hand, share an attraction for social *discontinuity* both as a cataclysmic transformation of the extant order and as an interest in the particular profile and interests of individuals or groups, but while Anarchism shares with Conservatism an *irrationalist* belief in the natural sense of humanity of the individuals associating by virtue of empathy, Radicalism shares with Liberalism a *rational*, scientific approach of the concrete conditions of social progress (White 24-6). Consequently, both Radicalism and Liberalism seem more realistic and intuitive than Anarchism and Conservatism. Elsewhere, I have described extensively these four discursive matrices of nationalist discourse: Radical-Antithetical, Liberal-Analogical, Anarchist-Metaphorical, and Conservative-Ironic (*Patrii din cuvinte*, "Peace Talks"). Here, I will be focusing on the first and last of the four to describe and explain Noica's nationalist discourse on Romania's cultural traumas.

Radical-Antithetic Nationalism

The Radical version of nationalism is perhaps the most frequent which has misled many into reducing nationalism to the more excessive or even extremist pronouncements that employ a Radical framework. The most common intuitive master tropes used to construct the images of self and other are Antithesis and Simile. In his imagological study of Herodotus, François Hartog concluded, for instance, that inversion and analogy are the basic „figures" or „schemata" used in the rhetorical construction of alterity (210 and passim). Critical Discourse Analysis experts have confirmed Hartog's intuition as they identified two discursive mechanisms used to shape national identities, namely 'assimilation' and 'dissimilation'. Wodak, Reisigl, De Cillia, and Liebhart explain them as strategies by which similarities and differences are heightened (Wodak et al. 33-42).

Of these two more common schemata, the Radical imagination relies on inversion/dissimilation to create antagonistic representations of self *against* other. The underlying master trope that structures this type of discourse is Antithesis. In this ideological pattern social change comes from the clash between benign and malignant groups, or between new and old regimes. Radicalism works by antagonistic representations of societal change. Synchronically, it pictures society as divided by conflicts between totally incompatible individuals or groups: from the *homo homini lupus* grounding of capitalist competition to the “class struggle” of anti-capitalist critique. Diachronically, it preaches the need for cataclysmic transformations (White, *Metahistory* 24) as the only valid option for transforming society by discarding a totally objectionable old order and replacing it with an entirely new and opposing one. (See, for instance, the universal suffrage proposal of Ch. James Fox in 1797 and the pre-1848 French radicals, or the sweeping social reforms upheld by Clemenceau and the Radical Party in end of nineteenth century France).

While many critics take the antithetical representations of in-groups versus out-groups to be a sign of tribalism or sociopathology, it may just as well be that this is simply a basic mechanism of the human psyche. This would explain why the Radical-Antithetical pattern of social representations sailed intact throughout the modern era from the British radical philosophers who founded the so-called classical liberalism to the most virulent critics of capitalism, and it even partly informed the postmodern mentality which according to scholars like David Hawkes is radical and oppositional (8-9). Wendy Brown finds that exclusionary rhetoric is the essential ingredient in delineating the “oppositional political formations” in late modernity (211-219) while Fredric Jameson defines culture as “the ensemble of stigmata one group bears in the eyes of the other group” (271). John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith even identify the classical Greek modeling of the polis and of civil liberties on “the ideological *contrast* between Greek liberties and barbarian servitude [*my emphasis*]” as the source for the modern political humanism inaugurated by the Northern Italian cities of the Renaissance (5-6). All this seems to point to the conclusion that the Radical-Antithetical form of representation has accompanied modern social and political consciousness from its inception.

The discourse on national identity in its Radical version is structured by the oppositional dynamic of a continuous confrontation with alterity in the epic mode. The resulting nationalist action stories, quite likely taking Napoleon as the heroic model, envisage nations as similarly possessed by the sense of a “historical mission” (Kohn, “Napoleon and the Age of Nationalism” 111-2). One finds that

the theme of an elect nation that is perceived as exceptional in opposition to all others and meant to perform a divine or historic mission was widely embraced by the more advanced Western nations and empires. In his pamphlet *Areopagitica* (1644), Milton called England “this Nation chosen before any other [for] reforming all our neighbours” (Snyder 81). With imperial fervor, Charles Wentworth Dilke proclaimed in 1868 that “Saxondom will rise triumphant” against the “cheaper races” (Snyder 90). In 1900, J. A. Cramb invoked the classical distinction between the Greeks and the barbarians to support his belief in Britain’s “world mission” (Snyder 96). Ironically, the United States, while trying to define itself in stark opposition from its British oppressor, resorted to the very same missionary rhetoric. This discursive pattern runs from John Winthrop’s “City upon a Hill” and J. Hector St. John Crèvecoeur’s definition of the American as a “new race of men” through John O’Sullivan belief in Uncle Sam’s “manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence” and Lincoln’s belief that America’s mission was to ensure “that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth” to the “outward-looking” foreign policy and president McKinley’s interventionism or the more recent forms of unilateralism and exceptionalism. The excesses of this sense of a mission were diagnosed with bitter premonition by William James at the turn of the nineteenth century:

...we have to deal with a factor peculiar with our belief, namely, in a national destiny which must be ‘big’ at any cost, and which for some inscrutable reason it has become infamous for us to disbelieve in or refuse. We are to be missionaries of civilization, and to bear the white man’s burden, painful as it often is. We must sow our ideals, plant our order, impose our God. The individual lives are nothing. Our duty and our destiny call, and civilization must go on. (Kohn and Walden 108)

But the “less advanced” nations that felt dominated by more powerful ones and threatened by the onslaught of modernization also found the Radical-Antithetic vision handy in creating their antagonistic “defensive” or reactive scenarios. Theirs are no longer stories of victorious and redeeming heroism, but of martyrdom and tragic victimhood at the hands of an alien force (Hutchinson and Smith, *Nationalism* 117, 128). And they seem to fit well the colonial frame of mind: Edward Said claims they are typical anti- and postcolonial narratives of resistance against imperial occupation (Deane 74), Terry Eagleton finds colonized nations to develop “negative collective identities” opposing the forceful foreign political

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order (Deane 37), Seamus Deane proposes a “vengeful virtuosity” of the Irish in using the language of the English conqueror (10), and Michael Hechter and Margaret Levi argue that even the “internal colonies” of Western Europe, such as Ireland, Wales, Brittany, Corsica, Galicia, or Frisia, suffer from a “reactive” formation of group identity because they were deprived of their own history (Hutchinson and Smith, *Nationalism* 185).

Romania fits perfectly in this category. Attempts to introduce modernizing social structures met with cultural resistance and adversity from traditionalist and autochthonist intellectual circles. One of the reasons for such opposition was the fear that modernization ran contrary to the local cultural profile and lifestyle, and that it would adulterate Romanian identity. Philosopher Constantin Noica proposed that from the very first encounters with Western style modernization, Romanian elites adopted a negative collective identity. Noica thought he found a tradition of such damaged self-images from the erudite prince Dimitrie Cantemir to Noica’s contemporary and friend, Emil Cioran (Noica, *Istoricitate și modernitate* 29-33, cf. also Ștefănescu, “Romanian Modernity and the Trope of Vacuity” 262-4). He shared this cultural frustration and felt compelled to address it in his philosophical essays. The trauma of understanding oneself as a marginal European, belated and poorly equipped for modernization is arguably the most recurrent theme in Noica’s entire writing career, which he announced in his first published book, *Mathesis sau bucuriile simple* (*Mathesis or the simple joys*, 1934), and on which he was still ruminating in his last published volume, *Modelul cultural european* (*The European Cultural Model*, 1993).

Having been sidelined on the outskirts of the continent, the marginalized (East) Europeans feel ostracized, marginalized, and disregarded. The Western gaze which they internalize forces upon them an unflattering portrait as the late and inadequate distant relative. A heartbroken old Noica bemoans his lot in *Modelul cultural european*:

I wrote these pages with the feeling of a disregarded brother (as are all of us here), who begs an embrace for himself and for the world. If you think a new embrace in the European spirit is not possible, then either your books are a mere *bye-bye* to the world and to culture or the world of tomorrow will toss them into the fire, as your father of skepticism, Hume, required for all bad books¹² (10).

¹² All translations are mine.

He blames it all on minor cultures like Romania's being possessed with a "fever of modernization" according to the standards of modern European civilization. The self-loathing that starts, according to Noica, with Cantemir's *Descriptio Moldaviae* (1714-1716), was still the "drama of my generation" in the early 1940s (*Istoricitate și modernitate* 21). Noica felt his negative national identity was the result of getting the short end of the stick in the process of European colonization which rendered Romania a victim of both the capitalist and communist versions of modernization. In *Pray for Brother Alexandru*, Noica finds that Western and Soviet colonialism were joined at the hip by their "unleashing of reason, that plans and orders, under whose hysteria we also find ourselves now" (*Rugați-vă pentru fratele Alexandru* 64). As a result, for Noica Romanian identity is forever alienated and doomed to see itself as a deficient colonial periphery:

What makes our conflict painful is that, theoretically, at least, it is insoluble. To keep on cultivating predominantly the values of our folk spirit has become impossible (*Istoricitate și modernitate* 21).

Conservative-Ironic Nationalism

So far, it looks like Noica's identitarian discourse is captive in a Radical-Antithetical frame of mind. However, he manages to modulate his grief at the tragic fate of Romania with the help of another template: Conservative-Ironic nationalist discourse. This is a counter-intuitive, "irrationalist" discursive matrix which joins and harmonizes irreconcilable contraries, converting the positive into negative and viceversa (Ștefănescu, "Peace Talks" 23-6).

Conservative nationalism disregards rational explanations based on the material aspects of a nation's real life. Instead, it reflects on the nation's organic development as a spiritual whole and explains it by resorting to a secret dialectic of opposing principles which it purports to intuit. The best example of Conservative nationalism is that of Herder's theory of the *Volkgeist*, the spirit of a nation, seen as an organic growth, both highly particularistic and a self-revelation of the universal Divine (Kohn, *Nationalism: Its Meaning and History* 31-2). The master trope of Conservatism is Irony which plays opposites one against the other and teases us with their paradoxical identity.

There has always been a conservative streak in the Romanian sense of nationhood. The desperate fight for national self-preservation against the many

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empires imposed paradoxical strategies, ironic conversions of appearances into their opposites. For instance, historian Vlad Georgescu talks of a theory of capitulation common among the Romanian princes, by which the country was both vassal and autonomous (apud Caragea 12, 19 and passim). After 47 years on the throne of Moldova during which time he fought and kept at bay the Poles, the Hungarians, and, most importantly, the Turks, after defeating the glorious conqueror of Constantinople and being called "Christ's Athlete" by the Pope, Prince Stephen the Great was reported to have left a surprising political legacy. As he lay dying, Stephen supposedly called his successor and his courtiers and asked them to capitulate to the Turk and accept Ottoman sovereignty by paying a tribute.

In this view, it became the strategy of Romanian principalities to identify the auspicious moments when the enemy was less fortified and fight bitterly. Then offer a conditional capitulation to a relieved opponent by which they could maintain their social, political, economic and cultural freedom. Evacuation was the main strategy of Romanian resistance throughout its history. The Romanian military doctrine of defense, devised in the millenary confrontation with sweeping migrations and empires, consisted in scorching the lands and the crops, poisoning the wells and the springs, burning their own houses and retreating into the central region of mountains and forests. The backbone of this strategy was the mental reflex of vacating the external or peripheral and withdrawing towards an elusive, ungraspable center. It was this attitude that helped Romanians survive even when the mountainous and woody retreats were no longer accessible. Historian of religions Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) invoked the Romanian retreat from the "terror of history", poet-philosopher Lucian Blaga (1895-1961) spoke of the Romanians' "boycotting of history" as a cultivation of a sense of permanence through their cultural traditions rather than through engaging openly in a direct fight for territorial supremacy. Folk wisdom also cherishes this lore with proverbs such as "water passes, stones remain" (*apa trece, pietrele rămân*) or "once a wave, you pass like a wave" (*ce e val, ca valul trece*).

In recent history, Romanians switched to a more sophisticated defense: they resisted their inauspicious history through culture. Resistance through culture (see "The Joke Is on You") was particularly favored by parts of the Romanian intelligentsia during communist dictatorship, but is commonly associated with the recluse figure of Constantin Noica. Noica was imprisoned for 6 years and was confined to a forced domicile for another 9 years and was denied for most of this time the right to publish. During the so-called "thaw" starting in the late 1960s, he was once more allowed to publish translations and original work. After serving in

an obscure research position, he retired to a remote village in the center of the country (Păltiniș, near Sibiu) and into the world of culture. Gabriel Liiceanu, one of Noica's disciples, describes Noica's self-inflicted exile and resistance through culture, thus:

In Cimpulung he was found in his room, dressed in his overcoat, his rubber galoshes on, reading from St. Augustine; the water in the pot had frozen. 'The God of culture'... had no doubt blinded him, turned him into a medium, rather than a man, and giving him the right (like all those who intrigued their contemporaries, pushing a community forward) to be measured by different standards. (263)

Paraphrasing Noica's beliefs, Liiceanu talks of this paradoxical resistance as of a "will to culture" that prompts

a lateral, discreet and unspectacular liberation, maybe even guilty in its intellectual egotism, but which always has been the form in which the best of Romanian spirit survived to the present day... If by history we understand the series of events happening to us, but also without and beyond us, then culture for Noica meant, no doubt, a withdrawal from history... (271).

Noica performed an ironic hermeneutic in his many philosophical essays on Romanian cultural identity. He would turn words upside down, he derived unexpected connotations, found contrary meanings in one and the same word, or turned it on itself to produce spectacular fireworks of philosophical nuances. One of the typical ways in which Noica wields Irony is by paradoxically yielding to the conquering discourse of the alien colonist. In *Modelul cultural european*, Noica appears to have succumbed to Western expansionist drives and to identify himself with the European colonist: "We are still pirates, conquistadors, and corsairs, but now we are spiritual corsairs – and that changes everything" (9). Here, too, his last pronouncement on Europe, Noica seems to have appropriated the apologetic vocabulary of colonialism and he solemnly proclaims that "the European cultural model alone may be valid for other cultures as well" (29). But, in an ironic twist, conceding to the apparent victor only allows the vanquished marginal to imaginatively replace the conquering center. Indeed, this is more than wishful thinking. Noica feels that in defeating marginal, minor cultures like the Romanian,

only meant that Europe put down its own spirit and in alienating the peripheries and the subalterns, it in fact became alienated from itself.

The marginal Noica aimed to decenter Europe itself and claimed that it is precisely in marginal Romania (and in marginalized Romanian intellectuals like himself) that the true spirit of Europe is still kept alive. “Since you [Westerners] will not say this, shall we, marginals, say it for you?” Noica rhetorically asks in the preface to *Modelul cultural European* (9), reiterating an intriguing leitmotif: the heart of European culture took refuge in the marginal culture of Romania. In 1940, Noica was proclaiming the superiority of spiritual culture to the Western civilization of motorways, oil drills, and hospitals (“Fiți înfricoșător de buni!,” apud Laignel-Lavastine 215). In the early 1980s, he was still preaching that “the Germany of culture” was to be found in Romania, as the capitalist West was left with the superficial and obtuse “Germany of butter”, that is, of civilization and comfort (Liiceanu 136).

Noica similarly adopts the deceitful strategy of admitting defeat and allowing oneself to become contaminated by the other’s colonizing discourse when faced with the indomitable Soviet Conquista. In *Rugați-vă pentru fratele Alexandru* and elsewhere in his post WWII writing, Noica seems willing to accept communist ideas and vocabulary. This only allows him to publish his non-conventional, idealist texts, and to subvert the ideology from within, like a genuine *ieron*. In such passages as the following, Noica conflates two ideological dialects: by apparently embracing the vocabulary of Marxist dialectic, he in fact reverses Marx’s prophetic revolutionarism:

Anyone who has kept an open mind and, above all has remained uninvolved under a communist regime, will have realized that the results of such a regime are strange. The revolution is eventually in favour of the rich, not the poor, because the rich have been deprived of their wealth, which means little, whereas the poor are deprived of their idealised objective of becoming rich. A man deprived of his ideal – which, at this level gives a meaning to life – is, in a certain way, annihilated. On the other hand, he who once had possessions and through them became alienated, could find himself rehabilitated, or even reinvested as a human being. (*Pray for Brother Alexander* 42-3)

In ironically dealing with both colonial victors, capitalism and communism, Noica accepts the stigma of defeat only to win a surprising victory: that of converting his cultural marginality into centrality, of turning inferiority into

superiority. Irony is the master trope which can perform these transmogrifications which baffle binary thought and zero-sum confrontations. The historical catastrophe of Soviet-driven communism and the historical stigma of being an inadequate European which are encoded in Noica's Radical-Antithetical nationalist discourse are also reconfigured by his adoption of the Conservative-Ironic rhetorical strategy which helps him cope with these identity traumas and find some form of comfort. Noica wielded the weapon of paradoxical irony to rewrite historical calamities. In one of his radio talks on Ardeal, a long-time tragic motif in Romanian cultural history, Noica pleads for this shocking form of spiritual reconversion:

[...] to translate Romanian passiveness into activism; to turn even our expectancy, even our coming to terms into a form of fighting. In other words, to turn the Romanian negative into the Romanian positive (*Pagini despre sufletul românesc* 111).

It was through paradoxes such as these that Noica hoped that a marginal intellectual like himself could ironically turn the tables on historical adversity and re-encode Romanian identity as central and respectable. This analysis, which tries to highlight the discursive patterns of culturally traumatized identity formations may offer a working tool to address identity (re)constructions in other cultures that have encoded historical catastrophes and stigmata in their collective self-images.

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