



THE CONSERVATIVE VISION OF MIHAI EMINESCU

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ABSTRACT: *THE AIM OF THIS PAPER IS TO OFFER A PRESENTATION AND AN ANALYSIS OF THE CONSERVATIVE POLITICAL CONCEPTION AS EMBRACED BY MIHAI EMINESCU, WHO IS KNOWN MOSTLY AS A ROMANIAN NATIONAL POET, RATHER THAN AS A POLITICAL THINKER AND IDEOLOGUE. FOR THE ANALYSIS OF MIHAI EMINESCU'S POLITICAL VISION, THE PAPER IS BASED ON THE VOLUME "POLITICAL WRITINGS" (SCRIERI POLITICE), MORE PRECISELY ON THE ARTICLES "STUDIES ON THE SITUATION", "THE UPPER CLASSES", "THE SUPERIMPOSED BLANKET", "THE THEORY OF WORK COMPENSATION", "REAL AND FICTITIOUS PROGRESS" AND "«TIMPUL» AND THE PEASANT PROBLEM" ("STUDII ASUPRA SITUAȚIEI", "CLASELE SUPERIOARE", "PĂTURA SUPERPUSĂ", "TEORIA COMPENSAȚIEI MUNCEI", "PROGRESUL REAL ȘI CEL FICTIV" AND "«TIMPUL» ȘI PROBLEMA ȚĂRÂNEASCĂ"), PUBLISHED BETWEEN 1880 AND 1882.*

KEYWORD: *CONSERVATISM, IDEOLOGY, THEORY OF FORMS WITHOUT BACKGROUND*

INTRODUCTION

In the second half of the 19th century, especially after the War of Independence (1877-1878), two movements began to emerge in Romania, the Liberal and the Conservative, which formed two parties, the Liberal Party (1875) and the Conservative Party (1880). The contradictions between the Liberals and Conservatives fuelled the political debate, giving rise to ideas on either side of the fence, the subject of this essay being the conservative view, particularly that of Mihai Eminescu. Although Eminescu is best known as our national poet, it should not be forgotten his work at the editorial office of *Timpul*, the press organ of the Conservative Party, where he expounded his political ideas.

In the following lines I will offer an analysis on Mihai Eminescu's political vision, in order to see to what extent it fits into the Romanian conservative vision. But to do this, it must first be pointed out that Eminescu was a conservative, and the context in which he writes falls within the early period of the Conservative Party in Romania. To this end, first a description of the political life and social-economic context of Romania in the 1880s must be offered, as well as a description of Romanian conservatism. For the analysis of Mihai Eminescu's political vision, the paper is based on the volume "Political Writings" (Scieri Politice), more precisely on the articles "Studies on the Situation", "The Upper Classes", "The Superimposed Blanket", "The Theory of Work Compensation", "Real and Fictitious Progress" and "«Timpul» and the Peasant Problem" ("Studii asupra situației", "Clasele superioare", "Pătura superpusă", "Teoria compensației muncii", "Progresul real și cel fictiv" and "«Timpul» și problema țărănească"), published between 1880 and 1882.



ROMANIAN POLITICAL LIFE AND SOCIAL-ECONOMIC CONTEXT IN THE 1880S

The political structure of Romania after 1880 remained broadly the same as that of the Principality, the general political framework being provided by the Constitution of 1866. Political life was dominated by two main parties: Conservative and Liberal. The first party represented the interests of the large landowners, while the second focused on the interests of the middle-class, industry, city dwellers, who favoured a protectionist policy, while the Conservatives advocated free trade, favouring the export of their products. A problem within this political system was the exclusion of a large part of the population from political life, with the peasantry remaining mostly bystanders, as the income quotas for voting remained very high. Thus, the peasantry had very little influence in political life¹. Although it had some shortcomings, the political system protected the civil liberties of citizens and freedoms such as of assembly and of association were respected. The press also had the widest freedom of expression².

The political life of the ninth decade of the 19th century was dominated by the Liberal Party, which governed for ten years between 1878 and 1888, which made the Liberal president, Ion Brătianu, increasingly powerful in his double capacity as party leader and prime minister, especially after the proclamation of the Kingdom and the controversial constitutional amendment of 1884. The Brătianu government launched far-reaching political and economic plans that brought the country closer to the modern forms of development that marked the birth of a bourgeois-style democracy. Between 1888 and 1895 several governments led by conservatives followed, the most important cabinet being the one led by Lascăr Catargiu between 1891 and 1895, their major reforms also being made during this period³.

From a social and political point of view, from the second half of the 19th century, Romanian society began to see some progress, moving towards modernity. The population grew, especially in urban areas, industry developed and the infrastructure of an advanced economy began to emerge. Alongside these elements of modernisation, many features of a poorly developed state remained: agriculture was widespread and underdeveloped, peasants did not benefit from the advantages of economic progress, and poverty and high mortality still remained high. Industrialisation was uneven, the relationship with agriculture was developing at a slow pace and Romania was not treated on an equal footing with the European economic powers, increasing Romania's dependence on the great Western powers. Even though many people had migrated to the cities, the rural population still represented an overwhelming majority in Romanian society⁴.

ROMANIAN CONSERVATISM

Conservatism is an ideology that arose as a result of the reaction of the aristocratic, feudal and agrarian classes to the French Revolution, liberalism and the rise of the bourgeoisie, phenomena that manifested themselves at the end of the 18th century and in the first half of the 19th century. Moreover, conservatism is defined in universal terms, through the prism of values

¹ Mihai Bărbulescu et al., *Istoria României*, Editura Enciclopedică, București, 1998, pp. 395-396

² Ibidem, p. 397

³ Ibidem, pp. 397-398

⁴ Ibidem, pp. 399-400



such as justice, moderation, order and balance¹. In the Romanian space, an important characteristic of the conservative doctrine was the defence of the large property, seen as obsolete at the time, in the context of the agrarian problem, and conservatives such as Barbu Catargiu saw the nobility as the driving force of modernization and the process of acquiring national autonomy².

In the sixth decade of the 19th century, a theoretical, traditionalist conception, namely "Junimism" (Youthism), was born, whose main means of dissemination was the press, more precisely through the magazine "Convorbiri literare" (Literary Conversations). The main members of this movement were personalities of the Moldovan intelligentsia: Titu Maiorescu, Iacob Negruzzi, P. P. Carp, Vasile Pogor, Theodor Rosetti (founding members), A.D. Xenopol, Vasile Alecsandri, Ion Creangă and, last but not least, Mihai Eminescu (adherents). Criticizing the generation of 1848, they found it morally guilty for introducing new models from the West into Romanian society, disregarding the level of historical development of the Romanians and their mentality at that time³. Some of the above-mentioned personalities made their mark in the literary activity of the "Junimea" (Youth) society, patronized by Titu Maiorescu, with his publication called "Convorbiri literare", thus marking the history of Romanian culture and literature⁴.

Inspired by German culture, the "theory of forms without substance", besides representing a way of doing literary criticism, was also a conception of the type and pace of modernization of Romanian civilization⁵. Criticizing the path Romanian society was taking at that time, Maiorescu said:

The false direction once carved by the three works at the beginning of our modern culture, the Romanian intelligence easily advanced on the open path, and with the same untruth inside and with the same untruth outside all the forms of modern civilization were imitated and falsified. Before we had a political party that felt the need of an organ, and a science loving public to need reading, we founded political journals and literary magazines, and falsified and despised journalism. Before we had village teachers, we established schools in the villages, and before we had able teachers, we opened gymnasiums and universities and falsified public instruction. Before we had a culture developed beyond the school-house borders, we made Romanian athenaeums and cultural associations, and despised the spirit of literary societies. Before we had even a shadow of original scientific activity, we made the Romanian Academic Society with its philological section, its historical-archaeological section and its natural science section, and falsified the idea of the Academy. Before we had the necessary artists, we made the Conservatory of Music; before we had a single painter of merit, we made the School of Fine Arts; before we

¹ Samuel P. Huntington, *Conservatism as an Ideology*, in "The American Political Science Review", vol. 51, no. 2, pp. 454-455, June 1957, available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1952202>

² Mihai Zodian, *Conservatorismul*, in "Ideologii politice actuale. Semnificatii, evolutii si impact", ed. de Mihaela Miroiu, Polirom, Iași, 2012, p. 172

³ Sabin Drăgulin, *Rădăcinile teoretice ale tradiționalismului românesc la junimiști, semănătoriști, poporaniști și socialiști. O istorie a ideilor politice*, in „Sfera Politicii”, vol 18, no. 11 (153), Nov. 2010, p. 35, available at https://revistasferapoliticii.ro/sfera/pdf/Sfera_153.pdf

⁴ Nicolae Isar, *Istoria modernă a românilor. Partea a II-a: 1848-1878, ed. a II-a*, Editura Fundației România de Măine, București, 2005, p. 162

⁵ Mihai Zodian, op. cit., p. 172



had a single dramatic play of merit, we founded the National Theatre - and we depreciated and falsified all these forms of culture [own translation]¹.

However, what Maiorescu criticized were not Western institutions, but rather the way they were imitated in our country, both from a literary and especially political perspective, so that later Eminescu, in his political articles published in “Timpul”, the official newspaper of the party, combined conservatism with evolutionism, work cult and nationalism².

Later, in the “Era Nouă” (New Era), a speech that became a political program, P. P. Carp adopted the liberal ideas of the Constitution, but promoted gradual change, precisely to avoid internal conflicts and disunity, and later, Take Ionescu proposed an opening to new social groups, but left the party in 1908, following rivalries with leaders like Carp, founding the Conservative-Democratic Party, which sought a greater harmonization between the peasants and the interests of the big landowners³. Looking more generally, the Conservatives can be said to have been tied to the censor vote, to big property, open to influential intellectuals, but sceptical of changes of a radical nature. The Conservative Party was broadly highly personalized, organized at the level of clubs of notables, plagued by rivalries between major political actors as well as factionalism⁴.

THE POLITICAL CONCEPTION OF EMINESCU

First of all, Eminescu expressed his distrust of the political programs that had appeared in the Romanian space four decades before he wrote this article, saying that they brought only disappointments, and that a program in the true sense of the word is a “series of confessed principles, sincerely shared by thousands of citizens, achievable” and that it must be in line with the legitimate feelings and aspirations of the country, while also being adapted to its institutions⁵. This means that Eminescu rejected ideas that did not take into account the true state of affairs of the country at that time. The programme had to be adapted to the situation of the time and not the other way around. Eminescu saw progress as achievable only through physical and intellectual work, which had to develop gradually and continuously, emphasizing that true progress represents a “natural link between the past and the future, it is inspired by the traditions of the past” [own translation], but “it does away with improvised innovations and hazardous adventures” [own translation]⁶.

Going on the idea of form without substance, Eminescu argued that after the Peace of Adrianople Romanians came into contact with Western civilization and ideas, which made their way into Romanian society without them having any reaction against them, adding that the past generation imagined “freedom without work, culture without learning, modern organization without analogous economic development” [own translation], and a series of cheap phrases from abroad replaced to a great extent the effort to learn for themselves, hindering their own judgment. In short, Eminescu was stressing that there could be no freedom

¹ Titu Maiorescu, *Critice*, Editura Librăriei Socecu & Comp., București, 1874, pp. 334-335

² Mihai Zodian, op. cit., p. 172

³ Ibidem, pp. 172-173

⁴ Ibidem, p. 173

⁵ Mihai Eminescu, *Scrieri politice*, 2021, p. 102, available at <https://archive.org/details/mihai-eminescu-scrieri-politice>

⁶ Ibidem, pp. 102-103



and culture without work, which was replaced by professing of some phrases¹. Continuing with the idea of independence, Eminescu said that it comes from the time of feudal lords like Mircea the Elder or Stephen the Great, not having a modern origin and that it is not a "foundling". All the governments that followed after 1866 had nothing to gain except the recognition of an independence that had always existed, the liberals being attributed the sole role of making public life a masked ball of ribbon cutters and peddlers of words².

Elaborating on the hereditary monarchical state, Eminescu emphasized that the idea of the state as an organ harmonizing national interests, as opposed to the republic where individual, party interests prevail, was sheltered, at least in principle. In the state, there must be an economically strong middle class to balance the backward and noisy tendencies of today's lower classes. Where this class is poorly developed to resist extreme tendencies, the republic becomes a form by which the general interest is acted upon, and the state, besides being able to harmonise interests, can also set right the bad things that come from the present. Putting the state at the discretion of one party is a dangerous thing, especially as the middle class in our country was underdeveloped, because the emphasis was no longer on work but on hierarchical positions and the so-called "pen proletariat", the only capital being empty words and a multitude of meaningless phrases. Under the "constitutional fiction" the parties actually pursue their own interest, to the detriment of the general interest of society³.

Using a comparison with the mechanism of a steam engine, a clock or a human body, Eminescu said that the mechanism of the state is disturbed by too much power left to the parties, which compromise state interests both internally and externally. Apparently, political life was carried out under the spectre of perfect legality, but when more important things, of an economic and financial nature, were discussed, the real will of the citizens was not taken into account. To pursue their interests, the governors applied more and more taxes, intended to support the mass of officials created to support the regime, a constitutional regime that Eminescu categorized as an illusion, the bodies that were supposed to mediate between the Crown and the people being false. Everything that stood between the country and the throne became a fiction, a ministerial illusion⁴.

In an article from 1881, entitled *Upper Classes*, Eminescu said that "the most normal and healthy form of development of a human society is oligarchy" [own translation], agreeing with Machiavelli's idea that the demagogic state is a weak one both in terms of internally as well as externally, as it is driven by personal interests. Under oligarchy, political freedoms manifest themselves most profoundly, while in demagoguery a class of politicians is formed, who make profiteering out of politics, as well as a way of living from it; in the oligarchy there is the best symbiosis between the elements of the past and the future, ensuring the state a continuity in its development, without making sudden jumps. According to Eminescu, the Romanian state ended up being dominated by some declassified people, leading to physical and moral degeneration, the appearance of vices, or the decay of family life. Lying, intrigue and corruption were also practices encountered in this context⁵.

Another interesting aspect in Eminescu's thinking is the *superimposed blanket theory*. According to Eminescu, there is no racial difference between Romanians from Moldova,

¹ Ibidem, pp. 103-104

² Ibidem, pp. 104-107

³ Ibidem, pp. 107-108

⁴ Ibidem, pp. 111-113

⁵ Ibidem, pp. 116-118



Muntenia, Transylvania and Hungary, but in Bucharest and in the cities located on the Danube a new and hybrid ethnic element had appeared, which gave the generation of the governors. These were reminiscences of the Phanariotes. They had no physical or intellectual qualities, no nationality, no traditions and no homeland, being criticized for introducing laws that were not related to the interests of the Romanian state. Eminescu estimated that only in 1921 Romania would have gotten rid of these elements, which were of Greek or Bulgarian origin, being called "caradales". At the same time, there was also a struggle between the Romanian historical element and the superimposed blanket¹. Therefore, according to Eminescu, the Romanians did not lead themselves, but were led by foreigners who came from the south of the Danube and who had no connection whatsoever with the historical tradition of the Romanian people, perhaps only a tiny connection that came from Phanariotism.

As for the Jews, Eminescu did not show any hatred towards them, but he did not consider them as beneficial for the Romanian society, which had to support them in large numbers. Being persecuted by other peoples, the Jews began to engage in activities such as trade, especially specula, producing no intrinsic value. Even if the Jews were persecuted, this did not mean that the Romanian people, without having any fault, had to bear the consequences of their persecution. Also, Eminescu added the fact that, by their number, the Jews constituted a force worth taking into account, but, most importantly, the Romanian state had to remain national and not cosmopolitan, where the Romanian element had to remain decisive². In another article, called *Theory of labour compensation*, Eminescu added about the Jews that they represent intermediate parasites in all states who, through commercial activity, make products more expensive and create a monopoly on them, and the states where they were faced poverty. They had to be forced to perform manual labour to generate production and stop exploiting the working classes. They were not to be denationalized, but subjected to such treatment would end up denationalizing themselves or emigrating. A very important thing for Eminescu was the process of hindering the activity of the Jews³.

In *Real and Fictional Progress*, an article written in 1882, Eminescu criticized the progress made in the last three decades that followed before the writing of this article, saying that there were no significant discoveries in the field of science and no significant progress in the field of industry. To the elements that are inherited are added others acquired through the ability to adapt, but this happens over a long period of time, so that people have time to adapt to the new requirements. In Eminescu's view, the Romanian people had a government much too expensive for their level of culture, and its work could not satisfy the numerous needs of the upper classes. The Romanian people were uneducated, agricultural, barely emerging from primitivism, and the needs of society and the state were even ultramodern, belonging to an industrial state⁴.

Regarding the peasant problem, Eminescu said that the peasant represents the unique and true Romanian people and who is not given anything, but who preserves the Romanian character and national unity through language and customs. Eminescu also made a comparison between the situation of the peasants during the period of the Organic Regulations, when they had to work 22 days a year, with the liberal period since then, when the work of the peasants

¹ Ibidem, pp. 123-125

² Ibidem, pp. 125-126

³ Ibidem, pp. 130-131

⁴ Ibidem, pp. 142-143



had increased. Even if the peasants worked more, they were poorer than ever¹. Here it is clear once again that Eminescu was in line with the conservative vision, defending the interests of the peasants in relation to the new customs, while at the same time highlighting the harm produced by the liberal order that worsened the situation of the peasants.

CONCLUSION

From the analysis of Eminescu's political writings, it emerges that he was a follower of the theory of forms without substance, saying that the Romanians took over from the West a series of models that were not consistent with the character of the Romanian people. Eminescu saw the state as an instrument through which the interests of the nation are harmonized, and regarding the Romanian state he followed the idea of a national state, rejecting the idea of a cosmopolitan state. Eminescu argued that the Romanians were not capable to lead themselves, instead they were led by a superimposed blanket, of South-Danube origins, which had its roots in the Phanariot period. Eminescu saw no real scientific or economic progress under the liberals, but rather a backwardness of the people in relation to the needs of the modern state and the upper classes. For Eminescu, the basis of the people was the peasantry, as a depository element of the character of the Romanians and of the national unity. To emphasize again the harmful character of liberalism, Eminescu tried to argue that the situation of the peasants had worsened under the liberal government compared to the period of the Organic Regulations.

¹ Ibidem, pp. 144



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