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An Essay on the foundations of Rumanian Identity, Nationalism and Ethnic Cleansing -

CONCEPTUAL CONFUSIONS CONCERNING THE ROMANIAN IDENTITY: NEAM
AND POPOR AS EXPRESSIONS OF ETHNO-NATIONALISM (PART 3)

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RACIAL CONNOTATIONS OF THE CONCEPT OF NEAM

In Walachia and Moldova (later, the Old Kingdom of Romania), cultural borrowing from French sources did not entirely vanish after the revolutionary year of 1848, but in Transylvania German influence would become dominant for a long time. In order to understand more accurately the evolution of the Neam concept -- the idea of ethnic purity as shaped by the late 18th- and early 19th-century Latinist Transylvanian School [Scoala Ardeleana] is definitely related -- we should examine the thoughts of some disciples of that school's most prominent personality, Petru Maior. Such an approach is necessary because the school would eventually mark Romanian identity theory in the 19th century. Timotei Cipariu wrote in 1848 that "Romanians do not like to intermingle with foreign blood. They preserve this domestic antipathy [for foreigners] to this day.... And preserved it would remain in future, too, for we see no ground to challenge its reason." Likewise, writing in 1843, George Baritiu was confident that the Romanian peasant "cannot stand seeing his sons interbreeding with, or even wearing the clothes of, other peoples" (both cited in Mitu, 1997, p. 219).

That opinion was shared by Damaschin Bojinca and Moise Nicoara, both obsessed with racial purity. Transylvanian and Banat scholars who researched into the local "collective imagery" point out that in ethnic Romanian communities, mixed marriages were an exception, and that as a rule the prospect would be rejected. Partisans of ethnic purity and their defenders are not short on arguments justifying their position. However, a credible or convincing explanation has yet to be produced. One does not simply deal in this case with an identity crisis specific to early modern times, as Sorin Mitu claims in his 1997 study. Rather, one deals with

a crisis whose duration extended over two centuries (the 19th and 20th) and that has affected the Romanian collectivity's cultural and political thought. Furthermore, the 1848 Transylvanian intellectuals were not the only ones to back ethnic purity.

An even sharper identity crisis emerged in late 19th century and particularly during the decades preceding World War II. The later fascist and national-communist dictatorships would intensify that crisis even further. These successive crises expose a generalized sense of insecurity and of uncertainty about national identity. In turn, the self-doubting sensibility would periodically provoke an opposite effect: the nationalist-speculative discourse would storm public space, seeking to dislocate any remnant of rational discourse. This type of self-compensatory reaction as a means to overcome inferiority complexes is familiar to psychologists. In regions with multicultural populations (Banat, Bukovina, Crisana, Maramures, and Dobrogea) intermixing and the intercultural profile of local society survived the assault of exclusivist ideological currents -- the country's political-economic crises notwithstanding. Yet these regions' impact on the national "collective imaginary" was never significantly influential and stereotypes of "the Other" endured over time.

We can witness this point by examining the doctrine propagated by Vasile Conta and Aurel C. Popovici. Both intellectuals grasped the conceptual essence of Popor-Neam-Etnicitate-Nationalitate as being entrenched on race. Conta, a historian, stands out for being persuaded that a people is defined by the racial unity of its members. In Conta's eyes, this was as valid for Jews as it was for Romanians: what counted was genesis and entity-conservation through racial purity. "The Kikes are a distinct nation, one that is opposed to, and an enemy of all [other] nations; we can say that the Kikes are the best constituted and the most distinctive among all Nations in the world. First, they lack nothing of what it takes to make up a Nation. Above all, they descend from a race that has always safeguarded its purity." According to Conta, the blood running through the veins of a Popor is one, which -- he is persuaded -- should also lead us conclude that all its members share the same ideas due to their common faith, sentiments, and close inclinations. Conta strove to convince his readers that all Romanians should be of a single mind and that this goal is attainable only by basing the nation on the idea of a single race that shares a single gravitation center: the state. The trinity of Neam-Etnicitate-Natiune is thus incorporated by Conta into the single conceptual god of Race. The theory is an illustration of nostalgia for a distant imaginary past and for archaic peasant culture. Conta fantasized a Romanian identity resulting out of a generational community whose members marry only within their own ethnic group in order to preserve racial purity

(Conta, 1914, pp. 647, 648, 658; author's emphasis. See also Neumann, 1996, pp. 181-184).

Banat-born Popovici, a trained medical doctor who became active in politics, promoted the idea of federalizing the Austro-Hungarian empire to reflect the ethnic make-up of different Neams. His works are permeated by biological racism, particularly so "Stat si natiune. Statele Unite ale Austriei Mari" (State and Nation. The United States of Greater Austria), originally published in German in 1906 and translated into Romanian in 1939 and "Nationalism sau democratie?" (Nationalism or Democracy?), published in Romanian in 1910. In the former tome, he wrote: "Pertaining to the qualitative makeup of peoples who stemmed from all sort of interbreeding, all serious researchers are in agreement that only peoples that did not intermingle are of strong character. Experiments performed by animal breeders demonstrate that any great racial differences in cross-breeding are conducive to inharmonious, wavy specimen, in other words precisely to fickleness of character." Furthermore, Popovici wrote that "in order to create a superior nation, racial cross-breeding, the mixing of blood and ethnic promiscuity must be avoided. The famous Count [Joseph Arthur de] Gobineau, who was the first to draw the attention to the relationship between RACES and the impact on civilization, believes even that racial intermingling is the main reason for the extinction of peoples. According to the Norman count, no people would ever become extinct if it were to be permanently composed of the same elements" (Popovici, 1939, pp. 65, 66; author's emphasis).

The People-Ethnicity-Race link is obvious in the discourse of the Banat-Transylvanian intellectual. He abhorred the introduction of civil marriages in late 19th-century Austria-Hungary, referring to the measure as "mating bastards" or "interbreeding" bound to lead to racial degeneration. Popovici warned that "all nations that became great carefully avoided ethnic assimilation" (Popovici, 1939, p. 67). As ideologist, he thus not only exalted the old autochthonous ethnonationalism but also supplied it with novel elements deriving from the theory of racial classification proposed by Gobineau in his "Essai sur l'inegalite des races humaines" (Essay on the Inequality of Human Races) and by Houston Stuart Chamberlain "Die Grundlagen des Neunzehnten Jahrhundert" (Foundations of the Nineteenth Century). Popovici's nationalism claimed racial Romanian superiority. This is evident when one examines the terminological significance of "nationalism" for Popovici: nationalism for him is not merely an awareness of difference, but "awareness of superiority vis-a-vis other nations," as well as "the struggle to impose that superiority" (Popovici, 1997, as cited in Roth, 1999, p. 26).

Frequently used by the educated, the concept of Neam, with its simultaneous inferential of People-Ethnicity-Race, is as conducive to discriminatory ascriptions as the German concept of "Volk" is. In the first half of the 20th century it was widely employed in Romanian cultural and public discourse and remains so to this day. Yet the concept never underwent a process of decoding and its sense was never made explicit. The same ambiguity applies to the set of values that might have rendered to "national identity" its modern European civic connotation. According to linguist Alexandru Niculescu, the option for Neam reveals an inkling for defining Romanian nation and Romanian people in exclusive rather than inclusive terms. This inkling, Niculescu writes, has "long been rendered obsolete by the times and by [modern] mentalities;" as a consequence, its oddity is all the more remarkable (Niculescu, 1997). "Is the Neam, as [historian Nicolae] Iorga believed, to include just the Romanian Neam, which is not only Christian but on top also Orthodox, leaving out of the Neam all other integral components of the Romanian nation, all -- as one would formulate it today -- other ethnic groups and faiths?" (Niculescu, 1998).

Indeed, no one contributed more than Iorga to the powerful dissemination of the concept of Neam in Romanian political discourse. His lectures and articles may be said to have fulfilled a "formative" role for that discourse. It is therefore warranted to examine closely his grasp of Neam. In one of those lectures, the historian was discussing the contribution of the Latinist Transylvanian School to the discovery of a Romanian national identity. To fully understand his criticism of the school, one must keep in mind that the Transylvanian School founding fathers converted from Orthodoxy to Greek-Catholicism (Uniate Church), accepting the pope as head of the church but safeguarding most Orthodox ritual. According to the prestigious historian, in order to "demonstrate the nobility and the mission of the Neam" (that is to say, its descent from the Romans), the Latinists "turned to books, which they were taking from shelves, whereas they might have taken the same [demonstrations] from life itself, from the depth of their Neam, onto which they never descended." Had they done so, they would have been in the position to "pick up priceless elements from the customs of the PEOPLE from its art, not only to bring the NEAM in sight, but also to -- at the same time -- show others how much unity there is in this NEAM (Iorga, 1987, pp. 198-199; author's emphasis). He believed that the discourse on the ancient past was unnatural, as the Transylvanian Enlightenment adepts had not internalized an unmitigated relationship with the large masses of Orthodox Romanians. What Iorga's political thought nonetheless shares with the thought of the Transylvanian School is their common exploration into Romanian genesis and their overemphasis of forefathers' glory. The term Neam was mobilized for this purpose; it attests to an ambition to

construe as well as to disseminate in the world an image of national unity that would serve the purpose of its makers. Bequeathed, fine-tuned, and multiplied from generation to generation, the stereotype of pure origins would be turned into a credo whenever the past, present, and future of Romanian society was debated.

As Iorga and many of his peers readily admitted, the concept of Neam was imported from Transylvania into the Old Kingdom. Here, however, its original meaning underwent further traditionalist magnification, as well as acquiring the ethnic-Orthodoxist connotation that it lacked at the start. The term thus evolved into one designing ethnic identity in an exclusivist perspective and practically is evading rigorous control over its usage. For Iorga, Neam was explicitly nation and race at one and the same time. Iorga, an otherwise prolific historian of awing stature, was both in his lifetime and after his 1941 assassination by the Iron Guard, THE inspiring model of Romanian historiography. From that position, the famous professor promoted for decades a racist understanding of the concept of Neam. Unfortunately this was multiplied uncritically by many of his numerous disciples.

Hundreds of examples are available to illustrate this point. A few, however, should suffice here. The Romanians, Iorga told his audiences at another conference, should "create...political forms stemming from the very roots of our Neam, which are single. Let us get rid of the rags that do not fit our body, that are now a curse for it, hindering its development." Differentialism in attitudes to "the Other" is obvious, and it just as obviously reflects "organicist" thought. In the eyes of the Romanian historian, the nation is the equivalent of a body (hence an "organism") that must be cleansed of "rags" unfit for its nature. Only by so proceeding can organic unity be brought about integrally, once and for all. In order to transform actual reality that "does not yet reflect" this desirability, Romanians must first internalize its importance -- or, as Iorga put it "the duty that each Romanian consciousness must recognize" (Iorga, 1987, p. 213). Neighboring nations are perceived by him as being -- each and every one of them -- separate races: "Medieval Hungary...did not emerge as the crowning [of a separate] national existence; rather, the pope presented the prince, the duke, with a Byzantine crown in order to add new provinces to Catholicism, not [to acknowledge the existence of a] Hungarian heritage. If only the generation rising now among Hungarians would understand this, we would gladly extend our hand in collaboration to a country that only nowadays has evolved into representing that organic form the RACE whose name it carries" (Iorga, 1987, p.264-265; author's emphasis).

Iorga forged several generations of intellectuals who -- following in his footsteps -- would be oblivious to imbalances between ethnic Romanians and linguistic minorities in the Old Kingdom, on one hand, and in Transylvania, Banat, Crisana, and Maramures, on the other. Iorga's organicist approach to interpreting the identity of human groups was appropriated by his numerous followers, disciples as well as political adversaries. Nae Ionescu, a philosophy professor and an intellectual mentor of the Iron Guard, considered Iorga's ideas to have laid the cornerstone for the construction of a Romanian civilization: "The first to lay the foundation of a genuine Romanian civilization was Iorga... His profession, his temperament, and his spiritual structure recommended him. And thus we learned that the Romanian state and civilization can only rise on autochthonism, that is to say on extrapolating from the Romanian national specificity, and that they can only feed on the peasantry class" (Ionescu, 1930 in Florian et al; 1994, pp. 195-196; see also Volovici, 1995).

Alexandru C. Cuza, Mihail Manoilescu, Mihail Polihroniade, Nichifor Crainic, Radu Gyr, and Dan Botta embraced, enhanced, and relayed the old signal portraying "the Other" as foreigner, minoritarian, Jew. In using the concept of Neam, they clearly attributed to it a racial connotation, one that would make a distinction between Romanians and ethnic minorities -- Hungarians, Germans, Russians, and Jews -- and foster Romanian collective self-consciousness. As a consequence, Neam would more and more acquire the value-ridden semantic significance of the German "das Volk," though it would never reflect the complexity of the latter. One of the most strident attempts to indulge into theorizing collective identity belongs to A. C. Cuza, who at the turn of the 20th century was Iorga's close associate. According to Cuza, "Nationality is the natural, organic, spiritual power of the unified blood -- that is to say of the race -- imbued with a number of positive traits that are lost though interbreeding and degeneration, leading to sterility and impotence". Similarly, the "Nation is the totality of individuals of the same blood, forming a collective personality animated by the natural power of Nationhood, each of whom tills a plot as living, productive organisms" (Cuza, 1928 in Florian et al., 1994, pp. 192-193).

Those who devised the racial legislation elaborated under King Carol II's royal dictatorship and under the regime of Ion Antonescu were not merely inspired by the Nazis. As shown above, there was plenty of locally produced samples on which to lean when interpreting the concept of nation. Among the autochthonous products, Neam, with its racist meaning, assumed the role of factotum in promoting discriminating attitudes, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism. It idiomatically justified exclusivism as practiced under

Antonescu's regime. Transnistria might well be viewed as a "reservation" set up with the goal of solving the issue of ethnic purification -- or, as it is now labeled, "ethnic cleansing." The extermination methods practiced by the Romanian dictator might have been different from those of the Nazis, although they also share similarities, such as point-blank shooting. In essence, however, they are fully comparable, as regardless of the means employed, the motivation and the goal was common: racially determined mass murder.

Under Antonescu's regime, state legislation was heavily influenced by biological doctrine. The following two emblematic statements by the Romanian dictator amply demonstrate how deeply influenced he was by identity-theories formulated by his generation's Romanian intellectuals. "This is how I grew up: hating Turks, Kikes, and Hungarians. This sentiment of hatred against the Motherland's foes must be forced to its utmost limit. I assume this responsibility" (Arhivele Statului Bucuresti, file 479/1941 cited in Benjamin, 1993, p. XXXVI); and: "...if we do not avail ourselves of the current situation at national and European level to purify the Romanian Neam, we would miss the last opportunity presented to us by history.... I might be able to bring back [into Romanian territory] both Bessarabia and Transylvania, but if we do not purify the Neam we have achieved nothing, because it is not borders that make up the strength of a Neam but the homogeneity and purity of its Race. And this is my first objective" (Arhivele Statului Bucuresti, file 484/1941, cited in Benjamin, 1995, p. 133). Racial doctrine dictates that the genesis of blood is the foremost element that influences both individuals and human groups. Antonescu's speeches and his other verbal interventions as rendered by the records of the Council of Ministers demonstrate that his repeated insistence on "purifying the Neam" was driven by his ideal to build the state on racist criteria, and that this goal was in no way different from the ideal of ethnic identity as perceived and formulated by the Nazis.

In a fragile democratic environment such as Romania's, the reemergence of Neam might prove potentially explosive, undermining both the new order and the country's European integration.

I am convinced that terminological ambiguity renders disservice. Furthermore, there is irony even in etymology. In the all-but-symbolic absence of Germans and Jews in contemporary Romania, the only significant national minority that remains in the country is the Magyar minority (some 1.6 million strong). Those who resuscitate Neam often employ it for the purpose of ethnic border delimitation between that community and the ethnic majority. But as we learned from a memorable study written by Professor Niculescu, Neam itself is

a word of Hungarian origin. It derives from "nem," meaning sex, gender, or, (in cultivated idiom) category, species. From "nem" are derived in the Hungarian language "nemes" (noble, generous) and "nemzet" (national community) (Niculescu, 1998). The Romanian Neam emerged in Transylvania, obviously under the influence of Hungarian language, which was for a long time used as the region's official language. But its evolution took unexpected directions. Beyond tradition, Orthodoxy and autochthony, identified by Alexandru Niculescu as local meanings, I am convinced that Neam in the Romanian language has semantic values similar to Ethnicity-Nationality-Nation. In some situations, it replaces the concept of Popor. Fascinated by the word as a result of the permanent relation it suggested with the rural world and its primordialism, with the land ("jus solis") and with blood ("jus sanguinis"), the intellectuals of the Transylvanian Latinist School transferred it to the elevated, both lay and religious, idiom.

In lieu of concluding, I would emphasize that the term Neam is used by peasants to designate family, kin, village community or tribe. In other words, Romanian rural idiom employs Neam to describe a community of blood of some sort. The term was ascribed racist connotations as it was introduced into the (oral and written) ideological political discourse by (first) Transylvanian ethnic Romanians and (later) by Old Kingdom intelligentsia. The impact of German Romanticism also contributed to channel its meanings in that direction. The German word for tribe or Neam is "der Stamm." For Popor, including the meaning of Neam, the German word is das Volk. The pairing of Neam-Natiune -- just as that of Volk-Nation -- can be viewed as unveiling the core term of Romanian revolutionary language in the age of nation-state formation. It can also be viewed as having contributed, at subsequent times, to construing exclusivist theories. In both variants, the partisans and promoters of Neam transformed the concept into an ideal embodying an alleged cause-effect relationship between species and political thought.

The concept of Neam was not deleted from collective memory during the communist regime. Under Nicolae Ceausescu's dictatorship it reemerged under various forms, in literary life, in history and folklore studies, in popular music, and in idiom. Historiography persistently cultivated ethno-differentialism or Neo-tribalism. Yet as compared to the interwar period, an effort was made to use softer tones when speaking of the Neam. It is interesting to note that despite this toning down, when it reemerged in the postcommunist period, the term lost none of its archaic value and displayed the same old and effective penetration force among target-audiences. As of 1989, it makes its presence felt again in cultural, religious, and political discourse. Albeit controversial in

the public arena, a project to build a gigantic cathedral in Bucharest launched by the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchy envisages the erection of a "Cathedral of the Neam's Redemption." For all its multiple discriminatory nuances, the Neam thus itself underwent both redemption and re-institutionalization.

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