

# History at the Crossroads?

## A Plea for Reconsidering the Status of a Science and a Study Discipline\*

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**T**HE TITLE of the current article may seem redundant, given that a few years ago an important international conference, entitled “The status of history and historians in contemporary times”, took place at the University of Oradea and concluded with a comprehensive volume published at Mega Publishing House of Cluj-Napoca. The volume included and analyzed new documentary sources, proposed new interpretations of the known sources or of the more unique ones, advanced new hypotheses and conclusions that emphasized the mechanisms and the limits of the state in controlling, shaping or reshaping national and world history.

*There was an attempt to create a demarcation between the contact point of historiography, collective memory and politics, as well as to analyze some fundamental documents for the history of historiography. An important part of the volume is dedicated to the status of history in society and to the study of history in school, but also to the evaluation and re-evaluation of the documentary sources... Last but not least, this volume is a plea for a well-written history, an incentive for history to constantly re-evaluate its sources, methods and investigated area. A plea for the beauty of history as a field of study and research, but also a call to make efforts towards reconsidering the status of history and of the history teacher in the new contemporary society<sup>1</sup>.*

The problem remains a topical issue, despite the relevant interrogations launched in the public sector recently or in the last decades,<sup>2</sup> and despite the answers and possible solutions found by the participants at the conference in Oradea. In the following, we want neither to advance unprecedented ideas, nor to overthrow values and hierarchies rooted in historiography and society, but to propose new examples and ways of approaching this topic of the actuality and necessity of history as a science and as a study subject. The

\*. A big part of this article was presented by University Professor Ioan Bolovan, PhD, at the University of Oradea as *Lectio magistralis*, when he was awarded the title of Doctor Honoris Causa, and other fragments have been published by Mr. Ioan Bolovan in various places. However, the article contains plenty of other unique parts.

erudite historian and country founder, the politician Mihail Kogălniceanu, who was part of the generation of 1848, was writing with bitterness in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century:

*But where is our history, who knows it, who reads it, who struggles with it in such a material and selfish era, who thinks of history, of nation, of the future.*

It is unbelievable how actual this desperate call is. It is not solely the call of a scholar, but of a citizen deeply involved in solving the fundamental problems of his nation! Kogălniceanu, Nicolae Bălcescu, Nicolae Iorga and many other personalities can be perceived in terms of the “historian as participant”, in the sense given by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. This because, in the last two centuries, they assumed a double mission: to reveal the past and use it to mobilize the nation for fulfilling the national, social and democratic dreams. Indeed, starting with the Enlightenment and more poignantly during the 1848 movement, the national culture and ideology (which contained historiography), militant by excellence, prepared the public spirit and shaped the fundamental dreams of the Romanian people: the creation of a national state, which is independent, modern and reaches the standards of the civilized European states. The speech delivered on 24 November 1843 by Mihail Kogălniceanu at the opening of the history course at the *Academia Mihăileană* is living proof that the 1848 generation believed in the role of history and in the purpose of historians: “If the Greeks were conquered first by Philip and then by the Romans, it is because they wanted to be Plataeans, Thebans, Athenians, Spartans and not Hellenes; following the same pattern, our ancestors wanted to be Transylvanians, Wallachians, people from Banat, Moldavians and not Romanians; they hardly ever looked at themselves as one nation; and the roots of all the misfortune that can still be seen today in this land lay in their lack of unity... my homeland is all the land where Romanian is being spoken and the national history is the history of Moldavia before it was torn apart, of Wallachia, and of our brothers in Transylvania.”<sup>3</sup>

*Arhiva românească* (Romanian Archives) and *Dacia literară* (Literary Dacia) (published in 1840), edited in Iași by Mihail Kogălniceanu, and *Magazin istoric pentru Dacia* (1845), edited in Bucharest by Nicolae Bălcescu and by the Transylvanian August Treboniu Laurian, had an important role in the propagation of history in that era. A plethora of almanacs, calendars and leaflets, as well as newspapers and magazines that were more or less ephemeral, prepared, from an ideological point of view, the explosion during the 1848 Revolution. They had a crucial role in the dissemination of culture and national ideology, which led first to the Union of 1859 and then to the Union of 1918. Nobody can deny anymore the major role that *Românii supt Mihai Voievod Viteazul*, written by Bălcescu, had in the national identity project and in the creation of the mythology of national unity. The romanticism present in historiography glorified the great rulers from the past and built the national dream, by presenting the “nation’s force and reason for being, which come from the past and head for the future, against the multinational empires.”<sup>4</sup>

Moving from the past to the present, is Kogălniceanu’s message still valid? Is it still valid, in today’s Romania, a country torn apart by vanities, by useless rivalries, a country that finds itself in a state of chaos as a result of the lack of national and civic-demo-

cratic solidarity and of a country project? Is history still useful nowadays? And, on a larger scale, are social sciences and the humanities still useful? A possible answer could be found in the plea of one of the most competent (and controversial) contemporary historians, the Israeli professor Yuval Noah Harari (tenured professor in the History Department of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem). It is not a coincidence that I mentioned this relatively young historian (born in 1976), who chose to study synchronically and diachronically comparisons at a global level. Harari wrote his PhD thesis between 1998 and 2002, at Jesus College, Oxford University, under the guidance of the reputed comparatist Steven Gunn. In his thesis he compared the memoirs of warriors from the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries with those of soldiers from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although, at a first glance, such a vision and evaluation might lack perspective, connecting different moments in history, comparing past phenomena with present ones could help understand our world more accurately. The Israeli historian was saying, however, that

*In a world deluged by irrelevant information, clarity is power. In theory, anybody can join the debate about the future of humanity, but it is so hard to maintain a clear vision. As a historian, I cannot give people food or clothes—but I can try and offer some clarity, thereby helping to level the global playing field. If this empowers even a handful of additional people to join the debate about the future of our species, I have done my job<sup>5</sup>.*

Even though some say that social sciences and the humanities do not produce something measurable and useful to the progress of human society, their purpose today is, without any doubt, thankless. And this is because they have to find other instruments and ways to legitimize their existence and especially their resource “drain” on the public budget. Fortunately, comprehension and positive evaluations about the purpose of the humanities still exist even amongst the specialists from the field of exact sciences: “Social sciences do not lead directly to economic progress. But it is known that a real engineer or scientist cannot exist without a complete humanistic education, as they are creators of material and spiritual values. Therefore, the United Kingdom’s Council for Science and Technology (advisory body to the Prime Minister) has recommended the Government to tighten the links between arts, social sciences and humanities, science and technology... to boost and improve creativity and performance”<sup>6</sup>. An engineer’s plea for reconsidering the status of social sciences and humanities is another reconfirmation of the present interest towards inter- and trans-disciplinarity, acknowledging the major role still played by humanists in today’s society. Of course, the specialists in the domains associated with the humanities must be connected to the progress of fundamental sciences or those of the technologies that can help them discover new sources, process information quickly, issue new hypotheses, etc. In other words, they must permanently have in their workshops high-tech knowledge instruments, in a continuous methodological dialogue.<sup>7</sup>

In the European culture the longstanding tradition of integrating specialists from social sciences and the humanities and including the academic expertise coming from the humanities in the decision-making process that impacts politics, economy and social fields does not exist. Perhaps not accidentally, at the end of 2000s, the European Commission

no longer financed research projects in the humanities. However, this initiative was blocked by the protests held by tens of thousands of researchers from the European Union. It is highly probable that the unfortunate experiences of the right-wing or left-wing dictatorships of the 20<sup>th</sup> century compromised the image of specialists in social sciences and the humanities (as Julien Benda, Alain Besançon or Stéphane Courtois proved with irrefutable arguments). Thus, during the last century, specialists in these fields were not appreciated and valued as such and their research did not become of public utility. Bolshevism compromised psychology, sociology and history, the latter being used in their strategy of mass mobilization and manipulation or in the creation of new identities and solidarities.<sup>8</sup> Nazism encouraged historical and genealogical research, and sometimes it even ordered the analysis of civil status records kept by parishes or those from other sources. These actions were taken in order to put together comprehensive filing cabinets and to reconstitute the family tree of millions of Germans who wanted to know their origins or who had to prove they were Aryans in order to be able to have a career in the Wehrmacht, the SS, or in the state bureaucracy. The historians, who were in charge of genealogy, were supported by the state, as racial identity could not be proven without scientific methods.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the instrumentation by the Nazi regime, the expansion of genealogy had undeniable beneficial effects for the field of historiography. With few exceptions, after the end of World War II, Western European nations avoided resorting to historians and other professionals from the humanistic field, in order to induce, mostly indirectly, a sense of the overall progress of society. This does not mean that history, alongside other social sciences and the humanities, was not used by totalitarian regimes in Central and South-Eastern Europe. The only difference is that they resorted to these areas of expertise in a way that was both ideologized and instrumentalized, so that the communist political elite could benefit by controlling and manipulating the whole society.<sup>10</sup>

Contrarily, the American cultural model has successfully exploited the results of the scientific research in various social sciences and the humanities, over the past century or so, for the benefit of the Government and the American society. Some of the most representative examples are given by two US presidents, the first from the World War I period and the second from the modern era. First, on 8 January 1918, Woodrow Wilson, during a session of the US Congress, presented his famous 14 points which were created to underpin the political and geographical reorganization of the world at the end of the Great War. The document was the result of a really great team effort. It answered some of the expectations that the European peoples had and also reflected the range of expectations of millions of citizens that were hoping for a different and much better world after the Great War. Inspired by the catchphrase “*breaking the heart of the world*”, all the peoples, including the Romanians, felt like living some unique moments during those years that had a major impact on their personal fate and also on the rest of the people living in Central Europe.<sup>11</sup>

At the beginning of 1918, Col. Edward M. House, President Wilson’s main advisor in matters of foreign policy, set up the famous committee of specialists called *The Inquiry*. The 150 members were experts coming from several American universities and from a variety of fields. This body of experts that specialized mostly in social sciences and the humanities (historians, lawyers, economists, sociologists, ethnographers, etc.)

developed the strategy that the US was going to adopt at the end of World War I. They created a “coercive diplomacy” that would lead to the organization of the Peace Conference. “The decision was justified by the events in Eastern Europe, The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, the victory of the Bolsheviks and the first proposals of peace coming from the Central Powers. They developed the 14 points along with *The New Diplomacy* project.<sup>12</sup> Today, nobody is questioning the fact that the principle of national self-determination, together with the goal of implementing the democratization process in each society, both concepts associated with Woodrow Wilson’s views, revolutionized not only the European borders after the disintegration of the multinational empires, but also the way in which the political elite dealt with the people. In this regard, there were many cases of states where the universal suffrage was introduced, along with major land and economic reforms.<sup>13</sup> The Romanian leaders also understood quickly the role of the 14 points. And we can’t overlook the fact that the starting point of the fight for self-determination of the Romanian people is closely associated with Oradea, the city situated on the banks of the Crișul Repede river. On 12 October 1918, inside the home of lawyer Aurel Lazăr, *The Oradea Declaration* was drafted. This was a fundamental document of the Executive Committee of the Romanian National Party, which was read a few days later by Alexandru Vaida Voevod. It expressed the unequivocal desire of the Romanians in Transylvania to separate themselves from Dual Hungary. Therefore, here in Oradea started all the political, administrative and military actions that led to the preparation and the proceedings of the National Assembly of Alba Iulia on 1 December 1918, the event that concluded the consolidation process of Greater Romania.<sup>14</sup>

In addition, the position of the Orthodox vicar Roman Ciorogariu, considered one of the oldest and the steadiest fighters for the rights of the Romanians in Transylvania, was in alignment with the concepts put forward by US president Woodrow Wilson. Ciorogariu described Wilson as a messianic figure, considering him to be “the most enlightened man in the whole world and a helping friend of oppressed peoples.” In a letter dated 23 October/5 November 1918, addressed to the priests and the teachers in the vicariate, Ciorogariu mentioned the fact that the armistice has been signed and it would be followed by a series of negotiations based on the principles of “equal justification of all nations listed by the great Apostle of people’s freedom, Wilson.”<sup>15</sup>

Another relevant example of how the US executive skillfully exploits the academic expertise of humanists is linked to the events that happened in the fall of 2012, when mankind avoided the possibility of a regional crisis that could escalate into World War III. What happened back then? Amid some older rivalries and animosities between the US, China, and Japan related to the territorial disputes left unsolved since 1945 (concerning the islands known by the Chinese under the name of Diaoyu and by the Japanese under the name of Senkaku), and also in the context of economic competition, some Chinese aircraft and warships flew over the territories administered by the other states. That generated belligerent statements and attitudes coming both from Beijing and Tokyo. Considering the danger as a local incident, as it was the assassination of the Crown Prince Franz Ferdinand in the summer of 1914, which triggered a bilateral conflict that led to the creation of a system of alliances that involved major powers and organizations/political military alliances (for example NATO), the US President sent to the two capitals a

team of four negotiators. Their role was to bring to the negotiating table the Chinese and the Japanese leaders in order to defuse the potential conflict. The chosen members of the committee were interesting from two perspectives: Stephen Hadley, Chief of the National Security Council during the Republican administration of president George W. Bush; James Steinberg, second in command in the State Department led by Hillary Clinton and two historians, experts in international relations: professors Joseph Nye and Graham Allison from Harvard University. The presence of these two historians/specialists in international relations (representing half of the committee) was intentional, in order to give to the tripartite talks a historical perspective on some of the past conflicts that started from isolated incidents and escalated into local and regional conflicts.<sup>16</sup>

This is how the academic expertise from the field of history helped resolve some conflicts that threatened the delicate balance of the geopolitical space in the Asia-Pacific region. The fact that the American president trusted two historians, along with the other two politicians (one of them being a Republican, the other one a Democrat!!!—how far Romania is from this model of cohesion for the national interest, that goes beyond big egos, ideological barriers and party goals!!!), proves the importance of history and historians in the biggest and most powerful democracy in the world.

The modern world faces a series of major problems and the way we deal with these problems influences our future on this planet: the gradual depletion of conventional energy resources and the need for their replacement with renewable ones; the lack of drinking water; the increase of economic and social imbalances; the “demographic bomb”; radicalization, etc. The demographic bomb that we are facing now and all that it entails (the declining birth rate in developed countries, an aging population, the increase in legal and illegal immigrations, etc.) represents a phenomenon to which the historians, alongside other specialists in social sciences can contribute not only in order to understand it but also in order to properly fundament the decisions taken by the state authorities and many others.<sup>17</sup> It is no coincidence that the contemporary analysts of the globalization process search and identify roots and similarities between the phenomenon of contemporary globalism and the evolution, from a demographic and economic perspective, of the European, American and Asian societies in the years following the Great War. Carl Strikwerda, a famous economist and demographer stated, in a study published in the 1990s (the idea has been resumed and amplified in a series of books that he published by himself or co-authored) that the recent tendency of globalization is not as unusual as we tend to believe.<sup>18</sup> Carl Strikwerda says that, in many ways, globalization evolved quicker before 1914 than it evolves today, despite all prejudices and perceptions. He estimated that the recent wave of globalization is a phenomenon that developed as a result of industrialization in the last 150 years, and that, between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the movement of the workforce was less restricted, while the dimensions of the transoceanic migrations were slightly different from the contemporary ones! The chronological and spatial distribution of European immigration (and partly Asian) in the Modern Era is hard to understand without the need to postulate the existence of a flexible mechanism of transmission between several factors. Carl Strikwerda divided said mechanism in two determining factors for international migration: 1) economics and 2) state. Among the elements in the first category, which is comprised of the economic forces having influenced emigration, the author includes



demographics (the European population had increased from 187 million in 1800 to over 400 million at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which led to overpopulation, a phenomenon that was also identified during that same period in China and Japan, but on a different scale), natural resources and technical developments, wages and income, the standard of living, transports and communications, etc. All these elements contributed, either separately or collectively, to encouraging transoceanic movement. The state, according to Carl Strikwerda, represented the synergy, the junction of the social and political forces of a country which defined, encouraged, diminished and regulated the movement of people across borders.<sup>19</sup>

For a review of all the opinions expressed by historians, economists or demographers, we must take into account emigration as a factor of international economic development. Especially after the 1850s, industrialization in Europe led to the creation of more interdependences between Europe and some countries/regions on the other side of the ocean. In a global economy, then and now, emigration patterns were established by the existence of the possibility to employ the means of production, and in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe there was generally an abundance of workforce to be employed. European investments in other countries across the ocean proved to be more profitable, which led to a redistribution of the European population: in 1800, 4% of ethnic Europeans were living outside Europe, but in 1914 their number increased to 21%!!!

Just as important in order to grasp the distinctiveness of human migration between the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the 21<sup>st</sup> century is understanding the fluency of transports and communications. The last two centuries have been marked by a revolution of transports. Steam power, iron and steel ships, the increasing number of flights and the affordability of cars have all reduced the cost of transport for both goods and people. The first English transoceanic navigation companies appeared around 1840, and, less than a century later, transoceanic flights made shorter trips possible for hundreds of thousands of people. If in the 1900s groups of workers would schedule their migrations depending on changes in wages and unemployment in Europe and America, nowadays entire occupational categories schedule seasonal work even just for weekends, due to the popularity of low-cost flights, available for many European destinations and not only. Because of this fluency of transports and information, we even have an influx of Asian workers who have joined the Europeans in creating a very close approximation of a global labor market, on a scale never seen before in history.

As we have noted, some experts emphasize elements such as the economic and demographic causes of the great migrations occurred during the Modern and Contemporary Ages. Emigration represented the unavoidable transfer of the population surplus from densely populated areas to sparsely populated areas, or from underdeveloped areas/countries with low wages to rich countries which had a better capacity of employing the workforce. People usually emigrate due to unemployment, poverty, lack of economic growth and the desire to have a better life. However, wars, revolutions and major natural disasters have also contributed, throughout history, to the movement of many people.<sup>20</sup> Migration was part of the human experience. Voluntary and involuntary migrations have shaped global demography, whilst creating a lingering culture of movement. However, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the nature of migration and the public policies regarding it have become more controversial.

The immigration debate has been sparked again following the attempts to amend immigration in the West and the anti-immigration rhetoric which concerns especially immigrants from the South and the East. Even from this standpoint, a comparative perspective shows that displays of violence (verbal and physical) towards immigrants occurred even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, both in Europe and America. Authorities can learn from the past, in order to manage intercultural shock more efficiently, especially seeing that, according to Italian demographer Eugenio Sonino, in 2050, about a third of the European population will have been born outside of the Old Continent. Since the time of the Roman Empire, Europe has not met with such a mix of civilizations. Since those times, there has not been such a movement of populations and there has not been an immigration trend that could radically change the ethnic and religious map of our continent. As we have duly noted, “the defining trait of European culture is diversity and multiculturalism, which manifest themselves locally, regionally or nationally. As such, the European cultural space has a very strong identity both at the particular level, as well as at the general level... Europe can be regarded on the whole... as a cosmopolitan space, a space for media and culture in which cultural security can be transformed into an element of conservation of the common identity of Europeans.”<sup>21</sup>

Above all, however, historical analysis, a form of diachronic and synchronic comparativism with regards to the migration phenomenon, is undoubtedly useful. This analysis takes into account the migration phenomenon in the past as well as in the present, to and from Europe, Asia, Africa, and America. This analysis would not be useful only to reveal numbers such as the percentage of emigrants then and now, but also to reveal the behaviors of these emigrants in their host countries and the way in which their families, their communities, the church, the civil society, the state, and others perceived them.<sup>22</sup> Many conclusions reached by means of rigorous comparativism reveal painful truths. Now, as well as 150 years ago, the money earned by emigrants through unspeakable amounts of work and sacrifices does not always lead to scientific and technological advances in their countries of origin, Romania included. Undoubtedly, the remittance inflows that have come into Romania in recent years represent a significant monetary contribution to the state budget. To an uneven degree, they have also helped improve the living standards of those left at home.<sup>23</sup> The experts have proven that the economic impact of remittances has varied in the past and, at present, it is mostly dependent on how these significant amounts of money sent by emigrants are used in the countries of destination: for investments, consumption, education, healthcare, etc. In Romania, especially in Transylvania in the past, some people who wanted to become wealthier would use the slogan “a thousand dollars and back.” Thus, they would buy land, which was seen as an indicator of social and professional status. Emigrants returning from the USA invested less in agricultural machinery and in the innovations they could have encountered in American agriculture and which could have been used in order to increase production, to better protect the crops, etc. Nowadays, Romanian emigrants invest mostly towards building super-sized homes, with many rooms and facilities, but which remain uninhabited. They also invest in luxury cars, which are parked in the front yard so they can be seen. They also financially support their relatives back home, etc. In consequence, without denying the significant role played by the huge amount of remittances sent by the approximately 5 mil-



lion Romanians outside the country, we can establish that, with some exceptions, the money coming into Romania does not generate added value, small and medium investments, which could create stable jobs. These would result in due profit from money which is hard earned in the West. Historians and economists can reveal these phenomena, they can provide comparisons to those who are interested, but the political and administrative authorities are those who can help to avoid the errors of the past, by raising awareness, by supporting and coordinating those who return home or send remittances regularly.

## Conclusions

**H**ISTORIANS, SOCIOLOGISTS, philosophers, theologians, men of letters, psychologists, economists, etc., now have the chance to prove their public usefulness (beyond the limited impact of those in *the ivory tower*), by contributing through their research to the proper understanding of the contemporary world, and especially to laying the proper groundwork for political and administrative decisions that could build a better world. Nicholas Kristof, the well-known journalist and political commentator who won 2 Pulitzer prizes, expressed this very clearly in his 2014 *New York Times* article: “We need humanists more than ever. Take into account the conflicts rooted in this country [the US] and throughout the whole world. In the absence of humanities, we would not truly benefit from multiple perspectives, the dialogue between and among cultures, and critical reasoning regarding our values and traditions. All humanists bring an essential contribution to this global debate. After all, we need humanists because we are human.”<sup>24</sup> For two thousand years, historians have struggled to offer meaning to the world and to transform it in order to provide contemporaries with more balance, a more complex understanding of everything that surrounded them, both materially and spiritually. History as wonder seems to have been the cure-all solution to this paradigm which has been expressed ever since Ancient times and which continues to be relevant to this day.<sup>25</sup>

Historians have been accused of providing nations with fuel for nationalism, sometimes even for xenophobia or anti-Semitism. Those accusations were found to be true enough times and so history has taken note of such negative examples. Scientists working in the fields of biology, agriculture or chemistry have provided humans with food that is genetically modified and full of pesticides and additives. At times, history has been used as an instrument that could give arguments to the leaders of the great powers, so as to escalate territorial claims and racial supremacy. Still, physicists, chemists, biologists, doctors, etc. have perfected weapons of mass destruction and have created Zyklon B, the nuclear bomb, etc. Ultimately, the responsibility for the progress of humanity, as well as for the dark side of history, is divided equally between the exact sciences and social sciences and the humanities. As such, it is only natural that their status in society be equal. Moreover, the mutual respect between fields of activity and areas of research, alongside a fair amount of support from the state, should become standard.



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### **Abstract**

#### History at the Crossroads?

#### A Plea for Reconsidering the Status of a Science and a Study Discipline

In the following pages, we want neither to advance unprecedented ideas, nor to overthrow values and hierarchies rooted in historiography and society, but to propose new examples and ways of approaching this topic of actuality and necessity of history as a science and as a study subject. Is history still useful nowadays? And, on a larger scale, are social sciences and the humanities still useful? Even though some say that social sciences and the humanities do not produce something measurable and useful to the progress of human society, their purpose today is, without any doubt, thankless. And this is because they have to find other instruments and ways to legitimize their existence and especially their resource "consumption" from the public budget. Historians, sociologists, philosophers, theologians, men of letters, psychologists, economists, etc., now have the chance to prove their public usefulness (beyond the limited impact of those in *the ivory tower*), by contributing through their research to the proper understanding of the contemporary world, and especially to laying the proper groundwork for political and administrative decisions that could build a better world. For two thousand years, historians have struggled to offer meaning to the world and to transform it in order to provide contemporaries with more balance, with a more complex understanding of everything that surrounded them, both materially and spiritually.

### **Keywords**

history, science, study discipline, humanities, usefulness

