Comments on the documentary “Decoding Dacia’

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*Dennis Deletant, Visiting ‘Ion Rațiu’ Professor of Romanian Studies, Georgetown University*

Nations fret about their origins and the Romanians are no exception in that regard. Their identity is based on a symbiosis between Dacians and Romans. But the exact weight of each part in that symbiosis has been a matter of dispute for Romanian and foreign historians down the centuries.

The very name Romania indicates a Roman origin. At the same time it suggests a European identity and orientation. For that reason the debate over the origins has often been manipulated for political ends.

In 18th century Rome the Greek-Catholic priests, inspired by the monuments of the Roman Empire, were awakened to their own Latin ancestry and on their return to Transylvania they propagated amongst their countrymen the idea of the Roman origin of the Romanians and the Latin character of their language. The writings of such Uniate priests as Samuel Clain, Gheorghe Şincai and Petru Maior on the origins of the Romanians were major contributions to the awakening of the Romanian national spirit. The Romanians could claim to be the direct descendants of those Romans who had settled in Dacia following the Emperor Trajan's conquest of the province at the beginning of the second century AD and as such to be the inheritors of a great imperial civilization.

Other members of the Transylvanian School placed less emphasis on the purity of the Romanians' Roman descent, pointing out that the Romans colonized their new province with settlers from all parts of the Empire, who intermarried with the local Dacian population and Romanized it, thus producing a Daco-Roman people who were the forebears of the Romanians. After the withdrawal of the Roman legions in 271-75, the province became a gateway to the south for successive invaders, with the Daco-Romans seeking refuge in the mountainous regions, thus preserving their Latin language and culture. This explanation of the Romanian presence in Transylvania is known as the theory of Daco-Roman continuity.

Dimitrie Cantemir (1673-1723), who ruled as Prince of Moldavia between 1710 and 1711, anticipated one of the principal ideas of the Transylvanian School by maintaining that the Dacians were completely obliterated as a result of Trajan's conquest of their land. As a consequence, the complete colonization of the province with Romans was necessary. Not only were these colonists solely from Italy, they were exclusively from Rome, including in their number many nobles. The aim of this presentation was twofold: to show that the Romanians of Transylvania, Moldavia and Wallachia were descended from pure, noble stock; and to demonstrate the uninterrupted persistence of the Roman element in Dacia.

After the imposition of Communist rule in Romania there was a Soviet-inspired campaign to obfuscate the history of the Romanians, in particular, their association with the West. As a result, in the 1950s, the presentation of Romanian history was made to conform to a new blueprint whose features were the predominance of a positive Russian influence.

Scores of studies now appeared highlighting the felicitous contiguity of the Russian people for the fortunes of the Romanians. The most notorious sycophant of the Soviet Union and practitioner of the glorification of Russia was Mihai Roller, a former head of the Agitprop department of the Central Committee. As vice-president of the Romanian Academy from 1949 to 1954, head of the department of history at the Military Academy from 1948 to 1955, and deputy director of the Party Institute of Historical and Socio-Political Studies between 1955 and 1958, he directed the idolatry of Russia in historical publications. For more than a decade examples of alleged beneficial Russian influence punctuated with monotonous regularity historical papers and monographs, recurring almost like a refrain.

It should come as no surprise that in the welter of Russophilia, recognition of the contribution of the Romans to the ethnogenesis of the Romanians was played down or even ignored.

While the formative influence of the Slavs was emphasized, the major thrust of specialist historical works is dictated by Marxist ideology and thus presents the early history of the Romanians in terms of the class struggle. According to the Istoria RPR, Dacian society moved from a primitive stage to a slave state distinguished by two classes, rulers and slaves. Roman influence in Dacia, therefore, was no longer seen as a positive force, representative of a 'superior' ethnic origin and more advanced culture, but was characteristic of class oppression. The struggle for freedom of the Dacians who fell under the yoke of the Roman Empire becomes intertwined with the class struggle of the slaves and the impoverished freemen against the exploiters.

In the application of these ideological considerations it was not only the fundamental pillar of Romanian national history, the Daco-Roman symbiosis, that was discarded, but also the 'continuity theory', i.e. the claim of unbroken proto-Romanian and Romanian settlement of the territory of contemporary Romania. Both were passed over in silence in the Istoria RPR. Coupled with the Slavophil approach, this Soviet inspired reinterpretation of Romanian history constituted a denial of the Romanians' ethnic origins and a distortion of their national identity.

However, once again political events dictated a change in the official presentation of the Romanians’ origins. As Romania embarked upon an autonomous course from the Soviet Union in the early 1960s, so a reaction against the Soviet-inspired view of the Romanian past set in. In 1960, the Romanian Academy's four-volume Istoria României (History of Romania) appeared under the editorship of a committee headed by Constantin Daicoviciu. Whilst faithfully reflecting the Marxist view of the dialectal progression of the class struggle in a Romanian context, this 800-page tome included a complete chapter on 'The formation of the Romanian language and people'.

The authors of the History declared themselves from the outset supporters of the continuity theory and then proceed to show

*with scholarly and objective arguments, those ethnic elements, Romance or Romanized, which stood at the basis of the formation and development of the Romanian people north of the lower Danube.*

Behind the reappraisal of Romanian history and the reaction to the Slavicizing drive lay a change in Romania's perception of its relation-ship with the Soviet Union. Just as the denial of Western historical and cultural influences had been a concomitant of political servitude to the Soviet Union, so the rebellion against it in the early 1960s was a signal of the Romanian Communist Party's decision to assert its autonomy. Gheorghiu-Dej distanced himself from his overlord by reversing the trend of Russianization in Romanian culture and education. Romanian culture was restored to its position of honour. In the summer of 1963 the Russian institute in Bucharest was closed and throughout the country Russified street names reverted to their original Romanian ones.

This rediscovered national pride in the people's Roman ancestry and the Latinity of the Romanian language was embodied in the successful public relations exercise directed at the English-speaking world and the United Nations advocating the spellings Romania and Romanian in preference to the traditional ‘Rumania’ and ‘Rumanian’ which of course dictated the almost universal English pronunciation with /ou/.

In the 1970s, however, politically inspired manipulation of Romanian culture and the language revived the memory of the Stalinist period, the important difference being that the new brand was generated internally. Once again it was the ill-starred Romans who were the sacrificial victims.

In the mid-1970s the regime launched itself upon a cultural offensive that trumpeted what Gabriel Liiceanu called 'eastern and native' values while rejecting European ones. Put more explicitly, a group of cultural intellectuals collaborated for a decade to promote a nationalist view of the Romanian past and its culture which, by denying external influences. A casualty of this trend was, as in the 1950s, the Romans.

The demotion of the Romans in the ethnogenesis of the Romanian people was a result of the primacy now accorded to the Dacians. During the era of Nicolae Ceaușescu the Dacian primacy was used as a political tool designed to give historical legitimacy to the policies of his leadership; the so-called 'independent centralized Dacian state' which, it was argued, was created under the Dacian king Burebista circa 80 BC was the archetype of the so-called 'independent' policies pursued by Burebista's 1980s counterpart. By extension Ceaușescu was presented in official literature as the latest in a line of Romanian heroes who were seen as defenders of Romanian national identity and unity. These include Stephen the Great, Prince of Moldavia (1457-1504), who for a while fought off Turkish and Polish attempts to subjugate his people, and Michael the Brave, who succeeded briefly in bringing the principalities of Moldavia, Wallachia and Transylvania together under his rule at the beginning of the seventeenth century.

Lieutenant-General Dr Ilie Ceausescu, a brother of the former President and Deputy-Minister of the Armed Forces, was the historian with the highest political profile in Romania. Features of the works bearing his name were the suggestion of the Dacians' primacy in the ethnogenesis of the Romanians, and a negative view of the Roman conquest of Dacia.

Interwoven within the concept of the 'centralized independent Dacian state' was the suggestion that the Dacian 'state' (in fact, if anything it was akin to a kingdom) anticipated the creation in 1918 of the modern Romanian state. The insistence upon 'independent' and 'centralized' was, on the one hand, an affirmation of the country's autonomy from the Soviet Union, and on the other, an attempt to produce a historical precedent and justification for Ceaușescu's respective external and internal policies. Furthermore, such an assertion sought to devalue the positive view of the Roman conquest of Dacia which brought with it what have traditionally been regarded by Romanians as the material and cultural benefits of a superior civilization. By translating this claim and its corollary to the wider context of Romanian affairs it represented a denial of any progressive or beneficial foreign influence, and in this respect it brings us to a further feature of the Ceaușescu regime's political and cultural postures: *protochronism***.**

Advocates of *protochronism* argued that Romanian literature had often anticipated Western literature but that such innovations had not been recognized because Romanian literature was little known abroad. Some extended the literary primacy of the Romanians to a similar one in the realms of history and politics. Students of Soviet history will recognize a more extreme form of *protochronism* in Stalinist claims that the major Western discoveries in science were first made in Russia and that eminent cultural figures such as Shakespeare had Russian blood. They may similarly identify echoes of Stalin in Mrs Ceausescu's alleged description of Latin as a 'bourgeois language' to Academician Alexandru Graur when he unsuccessfully petitioned her in her capacity as cultural *suprema* to reinstate Latin as a full degree subject in Romanian universities in the summer of 1986.

On a political level Ceaușescu used *protochronism* to resist pressures for change and innovation. Thus the Romanian leader could pretend to be in step with the economic reforms advocated in the Soviet Union by Mikhail Gorbachev by arguing that he had already applied similar reforms in Romania. In a similar protochronist vein the Romanian Party daily Scânteia, in its report of the 19th Soviet Party Conference, restricted its coverage of Gorbachev's speech to those measures which had already been adopted in Romania.

Generally speaking, since the fall of Ceausescu in 1989, a more measured appreciation of the Roman and Dacian contributions to Romanian ethnogenesis has appeared in school textbooks and in academic and popular literature.