

Romanian Cultural Identity: Landmarks and Turning Points

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Romanian cultural identity emerged as a public issue only in the wake of the 1848 bourgeois and nationalist revolutions. The so-called “*revolutions a la francaise*” kick-started the split between Romania and the Ottoman world, in all possible respects. Over the last 150 years or so, the Romanian nation as a socio-symbolic construct has constantly been reworked.

For the Romanian identity project, born at the Eastern “peripheries” of the continent, the historical starting point was Europe and inevitably the non-European other. The collective imaginary related to national identity was the stage of an intense transit of cultural paradigms, responsible for tensions, deviations and ruptures, a catalyst of collective attitudes and a rich source of stereotypes. The polar drive of all these identity models is due to the common attachment of almost all peripheral cultures to strong, even authoritarian explanatory criteria, able to tightly organize the confusing and unquiet plurality of their semantic areas.

Promoted by intellectual and political elites and resulting in an “*over-determined*” imaginary construct, such as the type of nationhood advocated by Benedict Anderson, the paradigm of modern Romanian identity implied a *top-down* dynamics. Although hundred per cent elitist, this project has been successfully sold to the mass-nation, which in Romania cherished its own brand of “popular proto-nationalism”, in the widely accepted terms of Erich Hobsbawn. In a way similar to different European areas, this project, propelled by the political and intellectual elite, was meant to keep together previously disperse territories, as it was the case of Italy and Germany as well.

In Romania, cultural producers have axiomatically been assigned an oversized role in defining the nation to her and to the world. Before as well as after the Iron Curtain, literature undertook a leading role in the invention of the nation. Theoretically evaluated as a “secondary” social force, literature emerged as the source and as the privileged vehicle of several models of action with a tremendous axiological impact.

The following articles point to a series of key-categories accounting for the Romanian cultural identity : landmarks (such as francophilia, the picturesque) or historical turning points (Ceausescu’s national communism and the post-communist age). They are authored by academics based in Romania as well as by members of the Romanian Diaspora teaching in American universities and enjoying the privilege of an outlying point of view on the topic under debate.