

Lucian Boia - ***România, țară de frontieră a Europei***. București: Editura Humanitas, 2002. pp.296

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‘What is Romania ?’ This is the main question that the author proposed himself to answer through this book. Based on the opinion that “everything in this world must be explained in the first instance by history” (p. 269), the answer of the historian Lucian Boia delimitates the cadres and the transformations of the historical collective memory of “Romania”. For a reader concerned to understand the political attitudes and mentalities of the nowadays Romanians, this book offers an interdisciplinary explanation of these attitudes and mentalities by considering them cultural constructions which varied deeply, linked with the historical contexts.

This book was written especially for the foreign readers concerned to find out “what is Romania?”. As the author warns in his preface to the Romanian edition, there is the original text, which was translated for the English version and has appeared earlier at Reaktion Books, London, in 2001, with the title *Romania. Borderland of Europe*. Well known through his *History and Myth in the Romanian Consciousness* (Bucharest: Editura Humanitas, 1997; Budapest: Central European University Press, 2001), a critical approach on the traditional knowledge of the Romanian history and historiography, Lucian Boia offers, through the book discussed here, his own discursive construction on the Romanian past. Using many important ideas and methodological approaches from *History and Myth...*, the author proves the same rigour by stressing on the subjectivity of every author in selecting the information and organising his discourse and paying attention to the realms of memory, which are presented in their historical transformations.

The organisation of the book illustrates the author’s vision upon his object of study. A first chapter presents the geographical Romania, and then the next two chapters introduce the important distinctions between people and country and between nation and state (distinctions which are not very visible for the casual Romanians). After establishing this long-period historical background, two chapters are dedicated to the recent past: the communist period and the after 1989 period, shaping this way the limits of

nowadays Romania. This first part of the book emphasizes the transformations in Romanian culture, politics, economics, demographics etc. which conducted to the present situation. The second part of the book, represented by the last three chapters, is dedicated to special problems that refine and nuance the presentation of the Romanian cultural patterns: the relationships with the foreigners as a part of the process of constructing the Romanian national identity during the last two centuries; the Romanian Pantheon with the most important personalities, human models for most of the Romanians; and Bucharest (*București*), the 'heart' of Romania and a real symbol of the diversity of the 'past', 'present' and 'future' in the Romanian consciousness.

A country which cannot entirely be included in Eastern Europe, Balkans or Central Europe (the conclusion of the first chapter, p. 11-23), "Romania", as presented by Lucian Boia, is a state constructed by its elites during the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries, like the other European states. As the author shows in the second chapter (p. 24-52), the basic myth which motivated (and still motivates) the attitudes and mentalities of the Romanians is their *Latin origins*. The general European phenomenon of standardization of 'national' languages in the Nineteenth century had a peculiar case on the Romanian language, the rules of which had been established by the Academy using the model of the Latin language. Also, as it may be noticed in the third chapter (p. 53-98), the Latin origins functioned as a strong argument in obtaining the support of the great power and culture, which was France in the Nineteenth century, for the emancipation of the Romanian state. Actually, the adoption of the name of "Romania" was part of the Westernisation process of old Romanian provinces (Moldavia, Wallachia and Transylvania), while the characteristics of a modern/western state were adopted: political institutions, law, administration, school, army, etc. The French culture had a great role in this process of Westernisation, and maintained this impact until late Twentieth century. The French impact on the Romanian thinking became subject of change in the middle of the Twentieth century, when Romania became a periphery of the Soviet Union. The internal politics of Romania during the second half of the Twentieth century are analysed in two chapters (for the periods before and after 1989), stressing on the role of the communist mythology in shaping the nowadays collective identity. The chapter dedicated to the period of communism is the

most extended one, revealing the author's opinion on the role of recent history in influencing the contemporary political attitudes (p. 98-135).

In the sixth chapter, as Lucian Boia appreciates, the relationships with the 'foreigners' are an important part in the process of self identification of every social group, including 'Romanians'. The author analyzes from a critical and equilibrated point of view the images of the Frenchmen, Germans, Anglo-Saxons, Russians, Jews, Gypsies and others, stressing also on differences among Romanians, themselves (p. 175-207). Also, the author presents the Romanian Pantheon composed, in his view, of Dracula/Vlad Țepeș, the medieval princes (Mircea cel Bătrân, Ștefan cel Mare, Mihai Viteazul), the modern political leaders (Mihail Kogălniceanu, the Brătianu family), the Kings and Queen Mary, the most important representatives of the Romanian culture (Eminescu, Caragiale, Hasdeu, Mircea Eliade etc.) and other heroes which fascinated the imaginary of the Romanians (scientists, sportsmen etc.). A last chapter is dedicated to Bucharest, the capital of Romania, with its history and the most important cultural and architectural sites. Here there are discussed the influences of the Neo-classical, Neo-Romanian and Modern architectural styles as a part of an acculturation process, the destruction of churches during the communist regime etc.

Romania. Borderland of Europe offers an introduction to the nowadays Romanian culture, from a historical point of view, equilibrated and documented. In his style, partially ironical, Lucian Boia presents the myths which made and are making 'Romania', analyzing them in relation to the most important realms of the Romanian historical collective memory. The book combines narratives with structural analysis, offering an easy to read introduction in the problems of the Romanian culture. The critical kind of approach seems to be more effectively describing the pattern of a culture compared to other books based exclusively on 'political history', 'literature' etc. Therefore it is recommendable not only for foreign readers but also for Romanian ones. As a final conclusion, it may be said that this book brings up, for the foreign and Romanian readers alike, a fresh new perspective on the cadres of the historical collective memory of nowadays Romania, useful also for those who want to understand the political attitudes and mentalities of the Romanians. It is a fascinating and complex answer to such, apparently, a simple question like "what is Romania?".