THE POLITICAL IMAGINARY - A KEY ELEMENT IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF POLITICAL IDENTITIES[1]

Abstract: *The concepts of imaginary in general and of political imaginary in particular are very difficult to circumscribe to a certain domain. They pertain to a multidisciplinary range of sciences, hence the difficulty to offer a single definition for them or at least a comprehensive one. It is nevertheless undeniable, as the present paper attempts to demonstrate that there is a tight and indestructible connection between the political identity of a community and the political imaginary it is haunted by. Starting from these premises, the paper discusses the issue of a common European identity, against the background of a continent torn by an unprecedented economic and political crisis whose role seems to be to remind the European elites that the answer is to be found in the cultural field.*

Key words: *political imaginary, political archetypes, national identity, European identity*

Introduction

The concepts of "imaginary", in general and of "political imaginary", in particular, are very difficult to circumscribe to a certain domain. They pertain to a multidisciplinary range of sciences, hence the difficulty to offer a single definition for them or at least a comprehensive one. It is nevertheless undeniable, as the present paper attempt to demonstrate that there is a tight and indestructible connection between the political identity of a community and the political imaginary it is haunted by.

Concepts and definitions

Due to its very nature, the concept of imaginary is an ambiguous one; it can be discussed in a literary, religious, ideological, anthropological key. Nevertheless,, what matters more than the field it is closest to, is the fact that many explanations of the tensed, conflictive, even tragic relations among different communities in the world can be found if the political imaginary of the respective communities is taken into consideration.

The rich field of study and the diversity of the disciplines, each with its own way of interpreting the imaginary make the task of defining it a very difficult one. Even the choice of some common descriptive criteria that should apply to the study of the imaginary in different historical epochs is difficult. [2]

We have chosen to use the definition offered by Evelyne Patlagean (1978:249), due to its high degree of generality on the one hand and to its capacity to apply to the field of the political imaginary on the other hand: the domain of the imaginary consists of a set of representations that go beyond the limit established by the results of experience and deductive reasoning that it is based on (Patlagean, 1978:249). We may enrich this definition by attaching it certain archetypal structures. As Lucian Boia (2000: 38) puts it, the history of the imaginary can be read as a history of archetypes,

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[2] A detailed description of the research in the field of social imaginary and the concepts attached to it can be found in Nicoară, S., Nicoară, T., *Mentalităţi colective şi imaginar social. Istoria şi noile paradigme ale cunoaşterii* (*Collective Mentalities and Social Imaginary*), Presa Universitară Clujeană (Cluj University Press), Cluj-Napoca, 1996.

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which are core, basic tendencies of the human spirit, organization and interpretation schemes for the social and historical reality whose truth value transcend historical epochs.

Understanding the way the political imaginary influences and participates in the construction of collective identities is related to a number of archetypes, more or less resembling in different cultures.

Such a strong archetype that the political imaginary is built on is the belief in the existence of another, different reality, imagined as an invisible, sacred, supernatural world, deeply present in the archaic society and less and less visible, but nevertheless not absent, in the modern world. This belief is tightly connected to another one, which can be read only in the framework of the above mentioned one: the belief in the dual nature of the human being: a material part, the body itself and an immaterial, invisible part, whose existence is independent of the material one, the soul or spirit. This belief is present in all societies, regardless of their degree of development and has generated rich mental constructions about initiating trips or whole geographies of Heaven and Hell.

Two dual archetypes that animate human communities are related to otherness and unity. On the one hand, otherness defines and establishes the relationship between the Self and the Others, being more or less present in any human relationship and narration. On the other hand, the concept of unity refers to a unique principle which is supposed to govern the world, that is the self and the other included, no matter how different they might be. This principle of unity reflects the human being's aspiration towards coherence and perfection.

The past and the present are the two historical poles that communities in search of their (political) identity strive to define. Searching for discovering one's own origins has generated founding myths which characterize any human community and whose role is to create a strong connection between the past and the future, a sense of belonging, of identity and an explanation for a community's role and place in the world.

At the other end, there lies the human inborn desire to know the future, and we do not refer to the individual future only, but to the collective one, usually accessible to a limited, special category of members of a community (possessing an undeniable political power due to this gift they are invested with).

The last but not the least important archetype that we have identified is the one related to the permanent human desire to go beyond history and the human condition, to transcend historical time and have access to a superior level. This level is usually identified and localized by human communities at one of the two historical poles: the golden age of the origins, which generates a feeling of nostalgia, or the distant future, characterized by perfection (and usually resembling the Golden Age) and which the community strives to reach.

The modern society is no less animated by such archetypes than old societies were. The unprecedented development of science and technology has not cancelled the collective need to believe in myths such as the myth of the savior, the myth of the conspiracy, of the unity or of the primordial Golden Age (Girardet, 1997).

The permanent presence of such archetypal structures, their dynamism and the complex relationship they have with the reality (Boia, 2000:25) demonstrate that the political imaginary needs to be regarded as more than a counterpart of reality. The two concepts of reality and respectively imaginary do not exclude each other but are rather con-substantial, acting together as a special force that explains political preferences and choices. A comprehensive analysis of people's political decisions and options, both at an individual and collective level, should start from the assumption that such decisions

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and options are not only the result of logical, mathematical reasoning but they are also tributary to symbols and myths . An explanation might be the fact that abstract entities, concept are difficult to understand by the masses. Abstractions such as the state, the people, the law need to be personified, and turned into concrete manifestations in order to be assimilated by the public and to generate strong convictions. As Jean –Jacques Wunenburger (1991:7) notices, politics does not mean only abstract, universal ideas. If politician's political analysts and researchers in the field of politics want to be realistic, they need to take into account the imaginary factor, which has more or less weight, depending on the social-political context.

The concept most often associated with the imaginary is the myth. From the point of view of philosophy and cultural anthropology it can be defined as a story, a representation or an idea generated in an attempt to understand the essence of different phenomena (social, natural, cosmic), by a community, according to its intrinsic values and in order to strengthen the internal cohesion of the respective community (Boia, 2000:40). Myths do not offer scientific explanations but narrate sacred stories, explain how certain realities came into being. They offer a common identity to a community, an identity which is assumed by each and every member of that community.

Part of this common identity is the political identity, whose consistence and features are certainly influenced by the degree of political maturity of the respective community. The political identity is to a great extent the product of quantifiable data but the political mythology of a people should not be ignored.

The political identity as a result of rational and irrational factors

History and political choices cannot be entirely explained if only rational factors are taken into account. Of course, they prevail and no researcher in the field of social sciences can leave them out but, at the same time, no researcher can, in the light of the rich data that have been obtain in the domain of political and social imaginary, ignore that the political and social reality characterizing a community is a network of rational and irrational elements.

Political choices, decisions are dictated not only by logical, scientific reasoning but also by symbols, archetypes, by collective images and representations of certain elements animating the political stage.

Therefore, the political culture of a community will be shaped by two twin forces, each acting on a different level of the human consciousness: first of all it is what we might call the civic, rational culture in the field of politics which plays a major part especially in the political behavior and choices of the more educated strata of a population.

The civic culture represents the rational aspect of the political culture, which is based on and built starting from the information in the field, from the knowledge regarding ideologies, political structures and forces. It is important to mention that this category rel maturity offers to non-specialists, to ordinary, , citizens who are more informed and have a certain degree of political culture, usually built during the formation years and shaped, influenced in time by the media. We do not have in mind the researcher in the field of politics, who will obviously act as a representative of this category, but is not illustrative of the purpose of our research.

The political imaginary covers and aims at explaining the affective, irrational side of our political choices and actions, the emotional way people relate themselves to certain political realities, objects, actors. It generally manifests itself more visibly in the

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individuals and communities in search of a political identity and will be massively based on religious and symbolic factors.

The political imaginary involves feelings, beliefs, values that act as filters through which the political reality is mirrored and which trigger a certain understanding of the political life of a community as a whole and of its components: actors, main ideologies, objects, etc. All these choices and beliefs are integrant parts of an individual's social identity and belong to a certain social community (constituted on the basis of ethnic, professional, political criteria), formally or informally structured.

The role of the political imaginary in the formation of the national identity

From the political point of view, the national identity is deeply tributary to the symbolical level of representation a community has about itself. Nations are a relatively new collective mental construct, usually generated by the elites of a group, determined to establish new cohesion factors that should replace the old ones, dislocated by modernization.

The researcher Anne Marie Thiesse (2000: 6-7) manages, in our opinion, to summarize the theses describing the modernist trends[1] referring to the process of nations' coming into being. She rightly insists that the making of a nation is a rather symbolical process volitionally and consciously conditioned by its members.

According to Thiesse, the true moment of birth of a nation takes place, when a group of individuals declare its existence and it becomes their purpose to demonstrate it. To put it differently, the birth of modern nations requires the invention of a tradition with which it should be associated.

In his turn, the Romanian historian Lucian Boia (1999: 23) suggests a rather close definition of the nation: "*Putem defini naţiunea drept o comunitate complexă dar simplificată şi omogenizată în imaginar, investită cu un înalt grad de coerenţă şi cu un destin specific care o delimitează şi o deosebesc de celelalte comunităţi similare*." (We can define the nation, at the level of the imaginary, as a complex but simplified and homogenized community, invested with a high degree of coherence and with a specific destiny that delimits and differentiates it from the other similar communities.)

Therefore, we may suggest that the creation of a nation is a process taking place at the level of conscience and ideas; what matters is the political imaginary about itself of a certain community which will become a nation the moment it starts considering itself a nation. We will not be mistaken then if we assert that any national construction has a high degree of artificiality.

The feeling of belonging to a certain nation greatly resembles the adhesion to a religious faith in the sense that both of them have a high affective load.

The European nation – success or failure?

We dedicate the final part of our paper to a sensitive topic, of high actuality, the building of a European nation. In a Europe torn apart by an unprecedented economic and political crisis, is it (still) appropriate to discuss the relationship between the national and the European identity, in an ever globalized world? Have the Europeans

[1] The research in the field of how nations are shaped can be divided into two main trends: the perennial one and the modern one. For the former, the nation is a preponderantly cultural community, deeply rooted in its past and usually nowadays identified with the pre-modern ethnic communities. The latter defines the nation as a political community based on mutually accepted principles and interests.

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discovered that point in the political imaginary of the continent that should make them feel as being a great nation? Such a discussion is definitely not simply a philosophical exercise, it should go deep to the core of the European construction, as the effort of creating a single European nation is in fact what legitimates the whole European political construction.

We believe the the only possible approach for creating a genuine and functional European identity is the cultural one. Tight political and economic collaboration among the nations of Europe should definitely lead to a higher degree of prosperity for all the members of the European Union but it does not seem to guarantee in any way the emanation of a European spirit.

The construction of a functional European identity should be based on the identification of commonly accepted symbols that should belong to the political imaginary of each nation in the Union. The members of the European Union have been enjoying for a long time the existence of a European flag, anthem, currency and celebration day, but they do not seem able to rise to the height of the founding myths of the European imaginary. The example of the typical American saying that he/she is spending his/ her holidays in Europe is too simple or even simplified. The vision of the other does not seem to contribute to the building of a solid imaginary about the self. On the one hand the complexity and the diversity of Europe is what makes it unique, but on the other hand these characteristics act as centrifugal forces that will never allow the formation of a European identity conceived similarly as the Romanian or the British or the French one.

At a certain point, Christianism might have seemed to be a possible sollution as a mutually shared value on the European continent, but it is no longer the case, as there are candidate countries that do not share this religion and more than that, the modern political construction of Europe is a deeply secular one, which does not intermingle religion in the political paradigm.

Another solution that we suggest is related to the idea of cultural solidarity. Romania is European mainly and firstly due to its culture and only secondly because it has managed to accomplish all the requirements in the Community Acquis (Chirimbu, Murariu, Dorînga, Barbu 20011:76).

A new focus might be place on the small and very small communities, on their language, common imaginary and identitary stereotypes. It is here that resemblances are born and are to be looked for and multiculturalism might be declared dead only in its old form tributary to the concept of nation. Becoming conscious of the archetypes and imaginary elements animating smaller communities might be a key to creating a larger nation.

What the Charter of fundamental rights and the project of an European constitution have lacked is the expression of an ideal, metaphysical dimension of the European identity, which should be looked for in the realm of culture.

Just like any nation was born in the past few centuries, Europe is a project built from an up to down direction, from the intellectual, political, economic elites downwards. It is precisely these elites that should contribute to the creation of a European identity at a deeper level, a level that might be reached by linking the European identity with the idea of cosmopolitanism characterizing the European cultural and political modernity. It is important to underline that the kind of identity we are talking about is not merely a collective identity in the conventional sense of the term, that is we do not have in mind the collective identity of a particular group of Europeans or the official legitimating identity for the European Union, but of an

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emerging cultural model that should respond to the Europeans' quest for identity and which would definitely exist even in the absence of the European Union. Of course, this does not mean that the European Union does not play an important role in the forging of a European identity.

Conclusion

It is difficult to assert the existence of a strong European identity in the same way as there is a national identity. The process of globalization and the increasing interaction among cultures have contributed to the creation of a diffuse collective identity which in general can be related to the cultural and political identity of the European Union.

What the Europeans need to understand and internalize, at the level of the collective political imaginary, is that the European identity does not compete with their national identity nor does it aim at replacing but on the contrary, at enriching it, from a cosmopolitan perspective (Chirimbu 2010:45). The European identity should be looked for in the cosmopolitan currents of the European societies in which new forms of self-understanding are born as well as new facets of the political imaginary, which no longer sends back to the archaic collective identity reminding of the 19th century nation states.

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