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Communist and Non-Communist Historiography about the Seventeenth Century: Discourse, Chronology, Labels

Liviu Marius Ilie*

Abstract

The 17th century was both complex and complicated. Consequently, the historiographical opinions regarding this period were diverse and the labels that were put on these hundred years took different shapes and colours. The European historiography used many concepts for defining this century, such as diversity, crisis, absolutism, modern state etc. For the Romanian historiography, the main issue regarding the 17th century was the transition from the Middle Ages to the Modern Era. Different historians – from the 19th to the 21st century – expressed different ideas, their vision being presented as a result of the main research themes.

Keywords: seventeenth century, historiography, diversity, crisis, absolutism

* Lecturer, PhD, University of Craiova, Faculty of Law and Social Sciences, History Specialization, Phone: 0040769690691, Email: lvmilie@yahoo.com

Introduction

For describing a century, a historian has two main options: to present it from a chronological point of view, beginning with the year 1 and finishing with the year 100 or to depict it as a result of an event or events that characterized that century. For example, the 18th century in the Romanian history lasts from 1701 to 1800; if it is analysed as the phanariote century, it starts in 1711/1715 (the phanariote regime began in 1711, in Moldavia, respectively in 1715, in Wallachia) and ends in 1821 (Cernovodeanu, Edroiu, Bălan, 2002: 975, 978).

How was the 17th century seen by the modern historiography, in general, and by the Romanian modern historiography, in particular? This is the main question of the present Article. A very interesting opinion was offered by Joseph Bergin, the editor of the volume dedicated to *Seventeenth Century* from *The Short Oxford History of Europe*: “The sixteenth century is instinctively yoked to the Protestant Reformation, the eighteenth to the Enlightenment, since both phenomena loom large in most explanations of how the modern world took the shape it did. But what, one may ask, about the century in between, separating or connecting – depending on one’s point of view – these two great «peaks» of early modern history? [...] Relatively few historical surveys of the century have succeeded in finding a title that encapsulates a widely-shared view of the century’s essence” (Bergin, 2001:1). This opinion creates the background of an opened research for analysing the diversity of views regarding the seventeenth century.

The diversity

As it was very well underlined, “the outstanding characteristic of the European political system in 1600 was diversity” (Bergin, 2001: 80). One must possess a very large vocabulary to describe the most important events that defined the seventeenth century; it is enough to remind words as “crisis”, “absolutism”, “early modern period”, “religious wars”, “revolution” etc. in order to have a wide picture of this century.

What is the image of Europe during the period taking into account? A possible answer can be found at Eric John Hobsbawm: “It is perfectly clear that there was a good deal of retrogression in the 17th century. For the first time in history the Mediterranean ceased to be a major centre of economic and political, and eventually of cultural influence and became an impoverished backwater. The Iberian powers, Italy, Turkey were plainly on the downgrade: Venice was on the way of becoming a tourist centre. [...] The Baltic States Poland, Denmark and the Hanse were on the way down. Though the power and influence of Habsburg Austria increased (perhaps largely because others declined so dramatically), her resources remained poor, her military and political structure rickety even at the period of her greatest glory in the early 18th century. On the other hand in the Maritime Powers and their dependencies – England, the United Provinces, Sweden, and Russia and some minor areas like Switzerland, the impression is one of advance rather than stagnation; in England, of decisive advance. France occupied an intermediate position, though even here political triumph was not balanced by great economic advance until the end of the century, and then only intermittently” (Hobsbawm, 1954: 33-34).

From a methodological point of view, this diversity increases the research choices, the hundred years that is taking into account being investigated from different perspectives. The abundance of sources give the historian various means of interpretation: “few centuries offer such rich possibilities for comparative history as the seventeenth – richly documented in many areas, displaying important elements of political, commercial and cultural interchange among all high civilizations, while lacking the tremendous

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obstacles to comparison raised by the revolutionary changes in Europe from the eighteenth century on” (Gately, Lloyd Moote and Wills, 1971: 63).

The age of crisis and transformation

In a well-known study, the historian H.R. Trevor-Roper wrote about the discontinuity of the 17th century, underlining that “it is broken in the middle, irreparably broken and at the end of it, after the revolutions, men can hardly recognise the beginning. Intellectually, politically, morally, we are in a new age, a new climate” (Trevor-Roper, 1959: 33-34). It can be said that the British historian observes the 17th century from a triangular evolution, following the model crisis–break–transformation. The general crisis that dominated this century determined a break in its middle part, the breach causing a transformation at its end.

What kind of crisis dominated the 17th century? “If the crisis of the seventeenth century, then, though general in Western Europe, is not a merely constitutional crisis, nor a crisis of economic production, what kind of a crisis was it?” (Trevor-Roper, 1959: 38). As Trevor-Roper suggested, “it was something both wider and vaguer than this: in fact, it was a crisis in the relations between society and the state [...] We must look, here too, at the whole *ancien régime* which preceded the crisis: the whole form of state and society which we have seen continually expanding, absorbing all shocks, growing more self-assured throughout the sixteenth century, and which, in the mid-seventeenth century, comes to an end: what for convenience we may call the state and society of the European Renaissance” (Trevor-Roper, 1959: 38).

Referring to the same hundred years, Eric John Hobsbawm also wrote about “the general crisis”, his Article being dedicated to a narrow research – the evolution of economy. “The European economy – Hobsbawm wrote – passed through a «general crisis» during the 17th century, the last phase of the general transition from a feudal to a capitalist economy” (Hobsbawm, 1954: 33). From the Marxist perspective of constructing the text, it can be said that Hobsbawm saw the 17th century as a final transition from Middle Ages to Modern Era.

An excellent synthesis of the political events from the middle of the 17th century can be found in a recent Article written by Geoffrey Parker; the author uses the superlative in his description for underlining the fact that the scourge of crisis touched many of the important countries of the world. The whole passage of the text will be quoted, the expressivity of the discourse replacing other comments: “The mid-seventeenth century saw more cases of simultaneous state breakdown around the globe than any previous or subsequent age: something historians have called «The General Crisis». In the 1640s, Ming China, the most populous state in the world, collapsed; the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the largest state in Europe, disintegrated; much of the Spanish monarchy, the first global empire in history, seceded; and the entire Stuart monarchy rebelled—Scotland, Ireland, England, and its American colonies. In addition, just in the year 1648, a tide of urban rebellions began in Russia (the largest state in the world), and the Fronde Revolt paralyzed France (the most populous state in Europe); meanwhile, in Istanbul (Europe’s largest city), irate subjects strangled Sultan Ibrahim, and in London, King Charles I went on trial for war crimes (the first head of state to do so). In the 1650s, Sweden and Denmark came close to revolution; Scotland and Ireland disappeared as autonomous states; the Dutch Republic radically changed its form of government; and the Mughal Empire, then the richest state in the world, experienced two years of civil war following the arrest, deposition, and imprisonment of its ruler” (Parker, 2008: 1053).

This unstable climate defines the “far lands”, such as Russia or China. The end of 16th century and the first decades of the 17th century were characterised by dynastic problems in both of these countries. “The death of Tsar Theodore in 1598 and the extinction of the Kalita line provoked an extraordinary dynastic crisis in Russia; successive and rival claimants to be the «true Tsar» saw their legitimacy as persons «blessed by Heaven» repeatedly questioned.” On the other hand, „in China, the transfer of legitimation from one dynasty to another was sanctioned by the ancient idea of the Mandate of Heaven, which implicitly encouraged rebellion or acquiescence in revolt when the old dynasty seemed to be losing its grip, as the Ming was after about 1627” (Gately, Lloyd Moote, Wills, Jr., 1971: 67). Wallachia also passed through dynastic changes. The old dynasty (the family of Basarab I, the founder of the state in the 14th century) was gradually replaced by a new dynasty, represented by a noble family from Wallachia (Craiovescu); during the 17th century and at the beginning of the 18th century, one can count six Wallachian princes from Craiovescu family – Radu Șerban, Matei Basarab, Constantin Șerban, Șerban Cantacuzino, Constantin Brâncoveanu and Ștefan Cantacuzino (Ilie, 2013: 76).

What did the same century mean for the Ottoman Empire? A possible answer can be found in a book coordinated by Robert Mantran: “As compared to the glorious epoch of the 16th century, the one that includes the 17th century offers a less shining aspect, in spite of some personalities that were decided to maintain the authority and the reputation of the state” (Mantran, 2001: 194). For the Ottoman state, the 17th century represented an age of regression, an era that was far from what Soliman the Magnificent did a hundred years ago. The wars against Persia or the siege of Vienna are maybe the best examples that describe the situation of the Turks during that period; the decline of the sultans’ power and the increase of the Grand Viziers’ prerogatives completes the historical background of the Ottoman Empire.

Trevor-Roper emphasizes another transformation of the 17th century, a transformation which he describes as “the general mood of puritanism”. “In the 1620’s puritanism – this general mood of puritanism – triumphs in Europe. Those years, we may say, mark the end of the Renaissance. The playtime is over. The sense of social responsibility, which had held its place within the Renaissance courts of the sixteenth century – we think of the paternalism of the Tudors, the «collectivism» of Philip II – had been driven out in the early seventeenth century, and now it had returned, and with a vengeance. War and depression had made the change emphatic, even startling. We look at the world in one year, and there we see Lerma and Buckingham and Marie des Medicis. We look again, and they have all gone. Lerma has fallen and saved himself by becoming a Roman cardinal; Buckingham is assassinated; Marie des Medicis has fled abroad. In their stead we find grimmer, greater, more resolute figures: the Count Duke of Olivares, whose swollen, glowering face almost bursts from Velazquez’s canvases; Strafford and Laud, that relentless pair, the prophets of Thorough in Church and State; cardinal Richelieu, the iron-willed invalid who ruled and re-made France” (Trevor-Roper, 1959: 49-50).

At the end of all these historiographical considerations, it is obvious that the best characterization of the 17th century crisis can be made by using the concept “general”. The crisis was so wide-spread and influenced so many domains that when historians tried to define it narrowly, they described it in general terms, such as the relationship between society and state (Trevor-Roper). The crisis was completed by various transformations, such as dynastic problems or religious and political changes as puritanism.

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The absolutism and the parliamentarianism

The absolutism represented a remarkable component of the French 17th century. In a work dedicated to French monarchy from Renaissance to Revolution, Joël Cornette saw this century as a period chronologically limited by religious wars and Enlightenment, an era that created the favourable atmosphere for the birth of the absolute monarchy. “The political history of the 17th century can be inscribed in a very simple scheme: bordered upstream by the violence of the religious wars and downstream by the less bloody but unstable debates of the Enlightenment, The Great Century, from Henry IV to Louis XIV, is, first of all, marked by the affirmation of what it will be later called absolutism” (Cornette, 2000: 137). More than extending the 17th century beyond the limit of one hundred years, in a longer period (1589-1715), one can observe the author’s wish to systemize a very important part of the French history, trying to put it in “a very simple scheme”.

Suzanne Pillorget began the description of the 17th century with the notion of absolutism; the concept was reinterpreted from a historical evolution, that began in the 17th century and ended in the 20th century. The view of absolutism was modified after the First World War; beginning with that moment, “our contemporaries had and still have under their eyes the show of the single party dictatorships”. “In the eyes of the Occidental historians before 1914, who were most of them liberals, the 17th and 18th centuries represented the age of absolutism. [...] The events that happened after 1914 modified the perspectives” (Riché et al., 2009: 571).

For the same 17th century, some historians tried to depict an English parliamentarianism opposed to the European absolutism: “During the age of Stuarts – G.M. Travelyan wrote – the Englishmen developed for themselves and without a foreign participation or example, a system of parliamentary government, local administration and freedom of expression, in an obvious contradiction with the predominant trends on the European continent, which led very fast to the monarchic absolutism, the centralized bureaucracy and the individual’s enslavement by the state” (Travelyan, 1975: 432). Written in a nationalist manner, the text seems to describe a common place of the British world – the English insular destiny vs. the European continentalism.

Europe, the state and the territory

An interesting image of the 17th century can be found at Pierre Chaunu, who included it in the classical Europe, a cultural paradigm that, in his opinion, lasted from 1620-1640 to 1750-1760 (Chaunu, 1989: 22-25). The French historian underlined the discontinuity of the concept he used: “The one hundred twenty – one hundred thirty years of the classical Europe do not begin and end everywhere at the same time” (Chaunu, 1989: 16).

It is useful to remember two notions from Chaunu’s work – “Europe” (as a political and geographical territory) and “the state” (as a political structure), both of them being described with reference to a third concept, “the Christendom” (as an old political and religious structure). During the 17th century, Europe “gradually conquers the current utilization” and replaces “the Christendom”, which had “on its side one thousand years of use, seven centuries of crusades, a rich affective heritage and the euphony”. (Chaunu, 1989: 18). The conceptual differences seem to have a chronological background: “The Christendom” comes from far away, from the Middle Ages and brings with it not only the millennial existence, but also the saint wars that almost transform it in what today we call a political doctrine. “Europe” is a new and modern concept, which imposes with the new

era and establishes a well-defined space: “Around 1620, «Europe» [...] is an exception. Around 1750, «the Christendom» is an archaism. Its sense was modified and it ceased to be equivalent with «Europe»” (Chaunu, 1989: 18).

The other concept analysed by the French historian is “the state”: “The state was not born in the 17th century, but at that moment it receives in the whole Europe its authentic height.[...] It does not accept anything else above him, either «the Christendom» or «the Empire»”; the modern state is the territorial state, “one of the great successes of classical Europe” (Chaunu, 1989: 30), a construction that dominated the next centuries.

During the last years, Marian Coman debated the relation between territorial state and social state in Wallachia, from the 14th to the 16th century (Coman, 2013: 17-32).

The Romanian 17th century

It is necessary to come back in the first part of the 19th century in order to begin the description of the 17th century in the Romanian historiography. As many Romanian historians did, the scholars who wrote during the first decades after 1800 included the discourse about this century in a larger research – the relation between medieval and modern or the transition from Middle Ages to Modern Era. Regarding the upper border of Romanian medievalism, it is very useful to analyse the opinions expressed by two Romanian intellectuals (Florian Aaron and Mihail Kogălniceanu) at the end of the 1830s and at the beginning of the 1840s.

In an attempt to write a synthesis of the Romanian history, Florian Aaron divided it in three periods – “the old history, the middle history and the new history”. Referring to the Middle Ages (“the middle history” in Aaron’s view), the author wrote that this period lasted “from Radu the Black to Stephen Cantacuzen [Cantacuzino], the last of the Romanian princes, or from the year 1290 to the year 1716” (Aaron, 1839: 39). Therefore, the end of the Middle Ages in Wallachia and the transition to a “new” epoch, as Aaron called it, or “modern” epoch, as it was named later, happened at the same time with the beginning of the phanariote period – “the coming of the foreign princes from Constantinople” (Aaron, 1839: 131).

A similar opinion was expressed by Mihail Kogălniceanu in the opening discourse, held at the beginning of “the course of national history”, within the “Academia Mihăileană”, on November, 24th, 1843 (Brătianu, 1944: 49-78). Kogălniceanu divided the history in the same three parts as Aaron did (“old, middle and new history”) and noticed that the end of the Middle Ages was linked to the beginning of the phanariote period. “The old history begins with the first historical period of Dacia and ends at the foundation of the states Wallachia (1290) and Moldavia (1350). [...] The middle history begins with the setting up of these principalities and ends with their total fall under the phanariote princes (1716).” (Brătianu, 1944: 70-71). It is obvious that, for Kogălniceanu, the Romanian middle epoch did not represent a dark age, but it was “the real history of the Romanians” (Brătianu, 1944: 71), in contrast with “the new history”, which began with “the most terrible century that ever pressed upon our countries” (Brătianu, 1944: 74). Kogălniceanu’s discourse is nationalist, characteristic for the 19th century, “the Romanian history” ending when the phanariote (Greek) history starts. Therefore, for both Florian Aaron and Mihail Kogălniceanu, the Romanian Middle Ages finishes with the long 17th century.

Another image of the 17th century was depicted by A.D. Xenopol, the author of the first large synthesis of Romanian history. When he presented that century, Xenopol was also concerned with the transition from Middle Ages to modernity; more specific, the

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period when Matei Basarab and Vasile Lupu reigned – 1632-1654 (the first one) and 1634-1653 (the last one) – was presented as the border between “the Slavonian epoch” and “the Greek influence”. The historian divided the history of the Romanians in four periods, two of them being very important for the image of the 17th century: “2nd. The middle history, lasted from the foundation of the states (descălecare) to Matei Basarab and Vasile Lupu, 1290-1633: the Slavonian epoch; 3rd. The modern history, lasted from Matei Basarab and Vasile Lupu to the Greek revolution, 1633-1821: the Greek influence” (Xenopol, 1985: 39).

A descriptive vision was adopted by Xenopol in another fragment of the same book, a larger text, where he developed the context of transition from medievalism to modernity: “With the years 1633-1634, we finish the medieval history of the Romanian people, characterised by the prevalence of Slavonism and, from that point on, we begin a new period when the domination of the Greek element in developing its life. The great epoch of independence fights is gone; the Romanian people, broken in its energy and inner virtue, lays at the feet of the foreign powers and, especially, the Turks” (Xenopol, 1988: 531). Thus, in Xenopol’s opinion, the 17th century, or more precisely, the 1630s represented the period when “the thinking of the Romanian people” gave up “the Slavonic form” and put on “the Greek mantle” (Xenopol, 1988: 394). Such a hypothesis, with all its background, is controversial at the beginning of the 21st century. One must take into account that A.D. Xenopol was one of the pioneers in writing large historical works about Romanians and, more important, that his books were first published at the end of the 19th century. As a matter of fact, Nicolae Stoicescu, one of the editors of Xenopol’s synthesis, underlined the reserves that some historians had regarding the periodization proposed, as well as the Slavonic and Greek influence for the history of the Romanians (Xenopol, 1993: 495-498).

Another image of the relation medieval–modern regarding the 17th century can be found in a history of the Romanians, published in the 1970s. The text presents the cleavage between the two epochs, not only in time, but also in space; the 17th century is seen as a transition from the Middle Ages to the Modern Era in the Western Europe and as a medieval century in the Eastern Europe. The profoundly Marxist structure of the fragment can be found in almost every construction of the historiographical discourse: “During this century the whole European society is a witness of some structural transformations. These are neither uniform, nor parallel. While in the countries of the Western and Central Europe the capitalist relations are opening a hard and unstoppable way, in the Eastern Europe the feudal domain, based on the enslaved work of the peasants, is still predominant. While in the Western part of the continent the development of the capitalist relations was made by the peasants’ expropriation of their land, in the East the peasant is in a state of serfdom and works for his lord. While in the Western Europe the process of centralization of the states and the emergence of the nations is generalized, in the East the characteristic phenomenon is the political division and anarchy. While in the West the national states appear, in the East the multinational empires are maintained” (Pascu, 1974: 164).

The text is full of direct and indirect references to the Marxist speech: feudalism vs. capitalism; feudal division vs. centralization of the states; productive forces vs. relations of production etc. It is obvious that the whole fragment that refers to the 17th century has an “antagonistic” construction: temporal – medievalism vs. modernity (feudalism vs. capitalism, in the text) and spatial – East vs. West (Eastern European vs. Western Europe, in the text).

Răzvan Theodorescu considered that the transition of the Romanians from medievalism to modernity corresponded to a vast period – a quarter of a millennium, “between the middle of the 16th century and the end of the 19th century” (Theodorescu, 1987: 6), this period including, obviously, the 17th century. In a recent book, Violeta Barbu contradicted this opinion, underlining that Theodorescu “brought many arguments that were not critically analysed” and put together Transylvanian elements of “certain Renaissance and Baroque origin” with “shy attempts” from Wallachia and Moldova, the last of them being previously considered as “«medieval» cultural facts” (Barbu, 2008:14).

It can also be added that Răzvan Theodorescu tried to conciliate two different positions regarding the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Modern Era. By quoting different Occidental historians, such as Henri Hauser, Pierre Chaunu, Robert Mandrou, Henry Kamen, José-Antonio Maravall (Theodorescu, 1987: 9), Theodorescu admitted their opinion that the medieval period ended at the beginning or at the middle of the 16th century. On the other hand, the communist Romanian historiography considered that the border between Middle Ages and Modern Era was “the revolution” led by Tudor Vladimirescu (Oțetea, 1970: 5), which took place in 1821, in other words, at the beginning of the 19th century. The “solution” proposed by Theodorescu was a long period of transition, which put together, without any contradiction, both the European and the Romanian hypotheses regarding the end of the Middle Ages.

For Florin Constantiniu, the 17th century was placed under the sign of “weakening of the Ottoman power” (Constantiniu, 1997: 143). Beyond the chapters that divide this century in well-known images, such as *Two Shining Reigns* (Matei Basarab and Vasile Lupu), *Under the Walls of Vienna and after...* or *Baroque Sensibility in Culture and Art*, an interesting part of the book is *The Proto-phanariote Experiment*. During the 8th and 9th decades in Moldavia and during the 9th decade in Wallachia, the Ottomans “created” a new political strategy, which will become a rule in the next century. By the reigns of Dumitrașco Cantacuzino, Antonie Ruset and Gheorghe Duca in Moldavia and the same Gheorghe Duca in Wallachia, the Turks brought the Greek princes on the throne of Romanian countries. What seems to be interesting is that the 8th and 9th decades of the 17th century are regarded as a preamble of the phanariote century; thus, this 17th century, or a part of it, is no longer defined by its characteristic events, but is seen as a century that precedes another century. Another Romanian historian, Vlad Georgescu, determined a relation of causality between the 17th and the 18th century: “The failure of the 17th century opened the way for the phanariote epoch” (Georgescu, 1992: 83). Pompiliu Teodor saw the same century as an extension of the one that preceded it, the 17th century “being under the sign of Michael the Brave’s heritage” (Bărbulescu, Deletant, Hitchins, Papacostea, Teodor, 2002: 194-195). It is obvious that in all these three cases (Constantiniu, Georgescu, Teodor) the tendency is to reduce the autonomy of the 17th century and to define it with reference to the century that precedes or succeeds it.

The authors of the fifth volume of the synthesis *The History of the Romanians*, published by the Romanian Academy during the last two decades, presented the 17th century from a double perspective – the European one (as the age of crisis) and the Romanian one (as a transition from the Middle Ages to the Modern Era). On the one hand, “the 17th century – Constantin Rezachevici wrote – was considered by the Occidental historiography as an era of different crises. [...] Although the Romanian countries were not mechanically included in this scheme [...], that does not mean the crisis phenomena did not exist on their territory, even if those did not appear in Western forms” (Cândea, Rezachevici and Edroiu, 2012: 3-4). On the other hand, “the 17th century [...] – Virgil

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Cândea underlined – was very differently appreciated in our historiography: as an end of the Middle Ages, as a prelude of the Modern Era or, more comfortable, as period of transition between these two epochs” (Cândea, Rezachevici and Edroiu, 2012: XV).

During the last years, Bogdan Murgescu brought to the Romanian historiography a concept that is used very often in the Occident – “the early modern age”, “a distinct epoch, in relation with the Middle Ages and the Modern Era”, a period that lasted from 1500 to 1800 (Murgescu, 2001: 13). Thus, the 17th century is a part of this new-born era.

Conclusions

The seventeenth century was characterized by diversity. Crisis and transformation, absolutism and parliamentarianism, Middle Ages and Modern Era are some elements that complete a general picture of a period that changed Europe and the world. The diversity of the events and phenomena was transmitted to the diversity of historiographical opinions and views, both in European and Romanian history. A short description of some of these historiographical hypotheses can be used as a beginning for more elaborated studies about the 17th century.

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