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**PHILOSOPHY IN TOTALITARIANISM: CONSTANTIN NOICA AND THE  
“PĂLTINIȘ SCHOOL”**

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“I’ve turned my back on the world and now I stand”  
C. Noica, *Mathesis or Simple Pleasances*

“The philosopher is externally vulnerable to the world;  
The world is interiorly vulnerable to philosophy”  
Jan Patočka, *Liberté et sacrifice: Ecrits politiques*

Constantin Noica is now one of the most emblematic figures from the interwar period, his name being cited in precise contexts besides that of Cioran, Eliade, Țuțea and also besides the “Criterionists”. His biography is a complex one, which – in spite of all efforts to bracket it – constitutes an important source in his work’s later reception, both positively and negatively. This conference does not wish to judge Noica’s personality, nor does it wish to act in the name of a “conflict of interpretations” that appeared when different opinions on Noica have begun to be published. We rather wish to study the extent to which his pro-Iron Guard episode, his house arrest, his detention period and his attitude from after his release have echoed within his philosophy, with specific interest in the “exemplary story of a becoming within the space of the spirit”<sup>1</sup>, a.k.a. the “Păltiniș School”, as well as with specific interest in Noica’s reception in posterity.

It has been often said of Noica that posterity has amplified his reputation but emptied his works of substance and, consequently, there are now very few epistemic works on what Noica’s ontology truly was. Of course, with the publishing of the *Diary* and of the *Epistolary*, conditions for a thorough, applied and exact study of Noica’s works were met. In this respect, Mariana Șora writes to Liiceanu, in a letter dated 25<sup>th</sup> of February 1984, regarding the *Păltiniș Diary*: “since it allows us to witness the most spontaneous and authentic externalization of thoughts – in speech (actually in the monologue held before a receptive and participative audience) –, it arises certain expectations: maybe we are being offered the rare joy of seeing how ideas are induced, the joy of grasping them *in statu nascendi*”<sup>2</sup>.

As we all know, Noica was firstly marginalized and put in detention, as a supporter of the far-right, a fact that also reverberated within his texts. An important role in his relation with the right wing politics played Professor Nae Ionescu, the spiritual mentor of the Romanian far-right, which gathered around him numerous personalities of the future spiritualist generation, personalities which were to later enroll in the Iron Guard and even participate directly in its activities. Among these are Arșavir and Haig Acterian, Mircea Străinu, M. Polohroniade, Mircea Vulcănescu, Ernest Bernea, but most of all (bearing in mind the whole of their work) Mircea Eliade, Emil Cioran and Constantin Noica. How could have such great intellectuals supported such a controversial movement remains an open question. There are many papers that condemn the ideological perspective of the “Generation of ‘27”. Among these, we should mention the much-debated book of Alexandra Laignel-Lavastine, who writes about the “common passion” or the “fascination” of the young intellectuals towards Nae Ionescu, who became an unprecedented phenomenon of the Romanian interwar

scene.<sup>3</sup> Alexandru Dragomir comments on Nae Ionescu's influence over the Generation of '27: "Nae Ionescu was for the philosophical world in which we moved back then something like an intangible coryphaeus. It is impossible for me to make you understand how influential Nae Ionescu was in that time. He had a crushing and fascinating personality, with an almost hypnotic power to nerve the youth. His words were carried out from mouth to mouth, being commented for weeks after they had been spoken. He had a natural demonic intelligence whose persuasion resided in his affective suggestions and not in logical arguments"<sup>4</sup>.

As far as Noica's biography is concerned with the manner in which the philosopher had intersected with the evolution of the Legion<sup>5</sup>, we may mention his publishing activity, especially the one from *Axa*, *Dreapta*, *Universul Literar* and *Buna Vestire*, which was pertinently recorded in the work of Ion Dur, *Noica. Vămile Gazetăriei*. Dur's intention is to offer a "portrait of the young gazetteer", but he also refers to some of Noica's philosophical ideas. Accordingly, Dur ends up offering an in-depth view of Noica's life, based on the places (*vămi*) in which Noica has settled throughout his life: "Lecturing Noica's journalism, we can account for him through a topology which is coherent and in the same time paradoxical by means of the harmony that organizes it intrinsically on various levels that intertwine"<sup>6</sup>. This refers to four hypostases: 1) a "dandy" standpoint in which the elder and their values are looked upon critically – Tudor Arghezi, George Călinescu, Julien Brenda – or appreciatively – Blaga, Motru, Petrovici, Nae Ionescu, Ștefan Lupașcu –; 2) a recurring myth of the School which will become reality in the '70s at Păltiniș; 3) "the effigy of the Christian self" initially directly posed and afterwards "revealed to us in its serious frailty"<sup>7</sup>; 4) the isthmus of the ethical self that can be regarded as moral attitude's squint (when Noica publishes in *Buna Vestire*), as when you turn your head towards something but look towards something else ("louche" thought – P. Bourdieu). All these may show a certain type of personality specific to Noica, but they are not sound elements that can point towards an ideological vision, precisely why Dur writes about Noica's *service inutile*: "Reading Noica's texts from *Buna Vestire*, one inevitably notices the absence of a *vision* or of an ideological coherence... Noica was serving a *service inutile*. He does, however, in a temporary and superficial manner, adopt a *circumstantial* ethic, a *louche*, squint attitude that looks towards something but actually sees something else. This is truly Noica's duplicitous period, in which he paradoxically betrays the spiritual to the temporal..."<sup>8</sup>

Having regained his freedom and being allowed to publish his volumes, Noica was somewhat pitied for the injustices he had undergone and in a certain way he achieved glory; his small but famous room from Păltiniș became a destination for the pilgrimage of young intellectuals and not only. However, a new suspicion begins to hover over Noica. We are still talking about a political suspicion, but the actual reverse of the first: was it not due to a pact with the political power that he enjoyed such success as a writer and as a personality? Was it not due to collaboration with the communist power that he regained his personal and publishing freedom?<sup>9</sup> The contradictory reception of Noica is also connected to these perspectives: some conduct a critique of his youth; others venerate it; finally, others are busy denouncing or denying his later

concessions. Despite the comments that insinuate a comfortable parallelism between Noica's philosophy and Ceaușescu's nationalism (e.g. Zigu Ornea), we should notice that there is no reference to Marx whatsoever in the work of Noica, who even approaches the delicate problem of alterity (the essence of man as the fact of being in another), which was looked upon by any totalitarian regime of the time with great suspicion. To these, we may add that Noica conducts a philosophy of the openness of being in a world of enclosures preserved by totalitarian systems. Regarding this debate, from a moral standpoint, Ion Ianoși states that, unfortunately, Noica's biography is not the only one being turned into such a cultural pressure point: "the judgmental perspective on recent culture marked the intellectual climate of the last years"<sup>10</sup>.

We believe that, all in all, the ideological vision should not affect our view on Noica's philosophy as, in spite of all his political naiveté or speculation, he remains one of the rare philosophers from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that claim the imperious need to return to the Greek sources of thinking and regain their vitality. Noica is also responsible for a revival of the phenomenological philosophy in Romania, especially by means of his interest in Heidegger's hermeneutics. A specific characteristic of Noica's philosophy relates to his ambition to ontologically account for the Romanian destiny, which would also account for the Romanian tradition and its contemporary challenges.

As it is known, the *Essay on Traditional Philosophy* and the *Treatise of Ontology*, the two volumes of *Becoming in-to Being (Devenirea întru ființă)* are central to Noica's philosophy and may be regarded as the source of all his other works, including the ones that had preceded it. The ontological perspective and the belief that philosophy has only one problem, namely the problem of being, are explicitly stated throughout the two volumes. The belief that ontology is characteristic of philosophy, that all meanings should be backed up ontologically, i.e. that meditation on being should constantly be renewed, has led Noica to (re)discover the meaning of being within traditional philosophy and, afterwards, to attempt to rebuild ontology. This perspective places Noica within Artistotelianism, as the statement according to which the eternal object of study for all past and future research is expressed by means of the question: *ti to on*, "what is being?"<sup>11</sup> belongs to Aristotle. Noica had no doubt that philosophy is of prime importance, given that it studies the primary principles and causes and it is also the first science known to man, as even within its pre-Socratic roots philosophy strived to study *to on he on*, that which is, being as being. Consequently, what all thinking should focus on is being. The result of this reasoning is ontology. The certainty that Noica found is also extensible to the future of philosophy, which also belongs to ontology. This is also the reason why he states, in his *Treatise of Ontology*, that he wishes to "rebuild the science of being, ontology".

About Noica's philosophy some have said that it rather passes as a peculiar wisdom than philosophy *per se*, as its reflections are unusually ample and they lack depth. This opinion is generally owed to the lack of systematic reading of the whole of Noica's works and to the fact that truncated readings are usually framed within various philosophical currents. To this argument we may add some difficulties pertaining to

Noica's writing, especially a certain vacuity owed to the use of metaphors and certain imprecise expressions and definitions, which aggravate the understanding of the content. In his intention to be as explicit as possible, Noica has put forward some concepts that are meant to render autonomous and evident his own perspectives. Within some of his distinctions, e.g. "to find meanings" and "to pose meanings" (*De Caelo*), "reason as sapience" and "reason as madness" (*Philosophical Journal*), the "logical field" and the "semantic field" of words (*The Romanian Philosophical Utterance*), "to be" and "to be-in" (*The Romanian Sense of Being*), "becoming in-to becoming" and "becoming in-to being" (*Becoming in-to Being*) – just to name a few – Noica has always offered some arguments in favor of his terminological choices. Moreover, after publishing his fundamental work, *Becoming in-to Being*, Noica talked about "my ontological model" that comprised the well-known triad individual-determinations-generality, which, along with the "operating-ideas" – "the self and the Self", "becoming in-to becoming" and "becoming in-to being", "to be in" and "to be-in", "the limit that limits", is meant to bring forward the intelligibility of the entire reality.

As such, both in his philosophy but also as a social human being, Noica strives to relate to the world of the spirit, i.e. to *everything* – matter, society, civilization, art, etc. In this respect, Noica writes in his *Journal of Ideas* that "the matter ends up being like the spirit: it dissipates without being scattered. Socialism wanted it for itself in its rethinking of society. Civilization has brought it. The energy that divided people (sources) becomes the light: its ubiquitous source. The nourishment that divided may also be omnipresent. Art means that matter takes over the condition of the spirit: the limitation that does not limit. (...) What is civilization? Man's effort to render matter a limitation that does not limit. And what is culture? Man's effort to rise up to the spirit as limitation that does not limit"<sup>12</sup>. One may say that the spiritual life is for Noica the criterion for judging all the things in the world. According to him, the spirit is always incorporated in concrete matter and otherwise has no meaning whatsoever. This is also the reason for which the Christian idea of embodying the divine *Logos* may stand as a key approach to Noica's philosophy. He explicitly states: "the embodiment is the center of our world. Philosophy is Christly. I do not know another divine being than Jesus Christ. He offers both the historical and the speculative truth"<sup>13</sup>.

Noica was not a man of resentment, as Max Scheler understood the term (the critique of resentment states that resentment does not truly desire what it says it desires; it does not conduct critique in order to destroy evil, but rather uses evil as an excuse for its insults), and revenge never counted as a resort for him. Noica's qualities, apart from his cosmopolite erudition, relate to the force, the intelligence and the intuition with which he discovered new talents, i.e. his disciples from Păltiniș, which he managed to guide towards the Greek source of our philosophical tradition. Regarding the years that Noica spent at Păltiniș, N. Steinhardt writes: "Giving up the current solicitations – politics, eros, ideological ferreting, brave acts, regrets, excessive hopes or concerns – he may, at last, aspire to his true eternal ideal: the professorship"<sup>14</sup>. Noica insisted upon a continuation of the philosophical tradition, meaning that criticizing and overcoming it are not possible without rethinking Greek philosophy (and not only),

which is in fact maieutics, i.e. a pedagogical process that only a few teachers have managed to appropriate. After his withdrawal at Păltiniș, Noica became what he had dreamt of becoming as a young intellectual: the founder of an original school of thought; in fact the most fertile school of thought from post-war Romania.

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<sup>1</sup> Gabriel Liiceanu, *Jurnalul de la Păltiniș: Un model paideic în cultura umanistă* (The Paltinis Diary: A Paideic Model in Humanist Culture) (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1996), 11. All English translations from Romanian are my own.

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Mariana Șora (dated 25<sup>th</sup> of February, 1984) to Gabriel Liiceanu, in Liiceanu, *Epistolar* (Epistolary) (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2008), 219.

<sup>3</sup> Alexandra Laignel-Lavastine, *Filozofie și naționalism. Paradoxul Noica* (Philosophy and Nationalism: The Noica Paradox) (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Alexandru Dragomir, "Despre Noica" ("On Noica"), in Andrei Pleșu et al., *Despre Noica. Noica inedit* (On Noica) (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2009), 53.

<sup>5</sup> In this conference "Legion" and "legionnaires" refer to the Romanian social, cultural and political movement *Legion of the Archangel Michael*.

<sup>6</sup> Ion Dur, *Noica. Vămile gazetăriei* (Noica: The Landmarks of Journalism) (Iași: Institutul European, 2009), 14.

<sup>7</sup> Dur, *Noica*, 15.

<sup>8</sup> Dur, *Noica*, 223.

<sup>9</sup> Stelian Tănase, *Anatomia mistificării: 1944-1989 (procesul Noica-Pillat)* (The Anatomy of Mystification: The Noica-Pillat Trial) (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> Ion Ianoși, *Constantin Noica* (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Române, 2006), 216.

<sup>11</sup> Aristotle writes that the primary stake of his work is to study what is being (*Metaphysics*, VII 2, 1028b).

<sup>12</sup> Constantin Noica, *Jurnal de idei* (Journal of Ideas) (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1990), 40-41.

<sup>13</sup> Noica, *Jurnal*, 223. Somewhere else, Noica writes: "For embodiment, as well as the uplift of the mundane to the essence, takes place on all levels. All our culture is a culture of revelation, of the Son, of embodiment" - *Narrations on man* (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 1980), 244.

<sup>14</sup> Liiceanu, *Epistolary*, 265.

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