

CONSTANTIN STERE. A REVOLUTIONARY IDEOLOGIST AND A PUBLICIST

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Abstract

This text unravels the life and personality of C. Stere. Born in Bessarabia but exiled in Romania, he remained a revolutionary and a militant of justice and truth until the end of his life. C. Stere remains an emblematic figure of Romanian politic and literature. He is associated with *Sterism* and *Poporanism*, for which he pleaded his whole life, and with the impressive literary work that he left to posterity. Though he was an endowed writer, he managed to actually write and publish his cherished works toward the end of his life. This was due to his troubled life and to his active involvement in political life. He hoped his entire life for a new Revolution capable of promoting and implementing social justice. C. Stere also built a university career: for a few years, he was a Professor and then the Rector of the University in Iași. C. Stere's image has remained vivid over time because of his illustrious literary work and of his depiction as a genuine revolutionary.

Keywords: C. Stere, Poporanism, Sterism, Revolution

Résumé

Le présent texte vise à présenter la vie et la personnalité de C. Stere. Né en Bessarabie, et exilé en Roumanie, il reste la justice et de la vérité révolutionnaire et militant jusqu'à la fin de la vie. Stere reste une figure emblématique de la politique et de la littérature roumaine. Il est associé à sterismul et le populisme défendu toute sa vie et a légué le géant littéraire. Bien que doté de talent d'écrivain ne parvient pas à mettre fin à la vie que de mettre sur papier et publier son âme œuvres. Cela est dû à sa vie tumultueuse et sa participation active à la vie politique. Espoirs vie entière dans une nouvelle révolution qui est en mesure de promouvoir et de mettre en œuvre la justice sociale. En dehors de la politique et de la littérature, C.Stere flirter avec la carrière universitaire. Il est professeur et doyen depuis plusieurs années à l'Université de Iași. C.Stere reste présent au fil du temps l'image Grand littéraire et révolutionnaire innée.

Mots-clés: C.Stere, populisme, sterism, révolution

Rezumat

Textul de față se dorește a prezenta viața și personalitatea lui C. Stere. Născut în Basarabia, și exilat în România, acesta rămâne revoluționar și militant al dreptății și adevărului până la sfârșitul vieții. C. Stere rămâne o figura emblematică a politicii și literaturii românești. Este asociat cu sterismul și poporanismul pentru care pledează toata viața dar și cu uriașa operă literară lasată moștenire. Deși înzestrat cu talent de scriitor, nu reușește decât spre sfârșitul vieții să pună pe hârtie și să publice lucrările sale de suflet. Aceasta se datorează vieții sale zbuciumate și implicării sale active în viața politică. Speră

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toată viața într-o Revoluție nouă care e capabilă să promoveze și să implementeze justiția socială. În afară de politică și literatură, C.Stere cochetează cu cariera universitară. Este profesor și rector pentru câțiva ani la Universitatea din Iași. C.Stere rămâne prezent peste timp prin grandioasa opera literară și cu imaginea unui revoluționar innăscut.

Cuvinte cheie: C.Stere, poporanism, sterism, revoluție

1. Introduction

Constantin Stere – renowned representative of Romanian history and politics, defender of the people and militant for social welfare – was born in Bessarabia and lived in Romania along with his family. He dedicated his entire life to both political activities and literary writing. Besides his best-known novel, he published systematically in the journals of his time on topics related to political ideologies; he also published social studies.

2. Life and personality

Constantin Stere was born in 1865 at Horodiștea, Cerepcăul Sorociei, (Bessarabia) to a family of landowners. He lived with the trauma and rejection of his mother and he grew up with the “stigma of being an outlaw, of not being wanted, of being an oppressed of fate ...which ended up marking his entire life.” (Ornea 1989, p. 29)¹

Even in his memoirs, *În preajma revoluției [Around the Revolution]*, C. Stere provides a whole array of details referring to his relationships with his mother and his family. He justifies his attitude of *social upholder of the law* as being due to rejection and to isolation from his family and to his upbringing in his nanny’s family. The author remembers the beautiful moments of his childhood, (swimming in the river, walking through the forest, catching little birds, spending time in the field of melons) along the children of villagers; he also remembers his close relationship with his teacher. Since he was a child, C. Stere was very energetic, spontaneous, and his excessive imagination made the others feel uncomfortable. The author strongly believes that all these events in his life shaped his personality. Furthermore, his upbringing among the children of villagers – getting to know their habits and work, eating and having fun with them – helped him formulate his beliefs and made him become their lifelong defender.” (Ornea 1989, p. 32)

The arranged marriage with Maria Grosu – who venerated him – took place early on, while he served time in the prison of Odessa. This marriage remained formal for several years: his wife was a solid partner in all his revolutionary

¹ Z. Ornea guides the reader through the exulted life of this character, both a politician and a writer. It provides precious and detailed information, meticulously collected from the huge work and bibliography concerning Constantin Stere. (Ornea 1989)

endeavours. Maria willingly dedicated her life to her husband's ideals, thus sacrificing everything to support him. (Petrov 2004, pp. 20-21)²

3. Constantin Stere's youth and beliefs

He left home when he was eight in order to study; he had to chance to learn foreign languages, which would later help him read renowned authors of his time. These skills, along with all his readings, helped him develop the “unusual gift of telling stories”; thus, he began outlining his first social-political and philosophical beliefs. He studied in Chișinău, where he experienced social justice for the first time: he confronted an anti-Romanian and anti-Semite teacher using his skills and intelligence. Thus, he gained the acknowledgment and admiration of his colleagues and of the entire high school.

The “studious and friendly atmosphere of the boarding school” induced his passion for study and reading. (Ornea 1989, p. 34) The teaching methods focusing on intensive reading enabled him to learn foreign languages and thus to become familiarized with the vast European literature. Due to his readings, to the events of his time and to his rebel nature, he began feeling less of a child and more of an adult. Influenced by the *Historical Letters* by P. Lavrov, (an initiate and an adept of Populism) he began underground militating actions for improving the social and cultural standards of the population. Such actions involved the recruiting and initiating of new members, a task that Stere accomplished easily, through meetings and discussions about various readings.

At the age of 15, given that he had become an adult too soon because of his mother's permanent rejection, he participated in the revolutions of the time and he tried to understand the “national problem.” (Petrov 2004, p. 22)

The subsequent period was dominated by the struggles of *pure ideology* for the conscience of the people; such struggles involved young people within all social categories, who became adepts of the common ideal.

Levrov wrote his work following the reform of liberating the Russian peasants, during the reign of Alexander II, at the initiative and pressure of liberal intellectuals of the time. As an ideological foundation of these groups, Levrov's work encouraged the study and aspirations of young people, animated by the reforming liberal ideas. Profoundly concerned with the national problem, Stere decided to read Romanian literature. He used illegal means to obtain a Romanian grammar book and other belletristic writings, which he struggled to hide because they were considered “subversive literature.” (Ornea 1989, p. 44)

² Tamara Petrov joined the group of authors interested in the work and life of C. Stere and passionately guided us through the far-reaching bibliographical works concerning the author and his critics. (Petrov 2004)

This text comprises several data on the life and work of C. Stere; the two aforementioned volumes represent the main bibliographic source concerning the author.

Constantin Stere became a revolutionary because he was older and because he had changed his mentality starting at the age of 14. Until the age of 17, he got increasingly closer to his idealist-socialist values; he even attracted adepts of this thought and movement and he took on revolutionary responsibilities. He was only 17 when he was given the mission of transporting revolutionary literature.

Before 19, we got close to the status of “revolutionary martyr,” as he was arrested and jailed in the Prison castle of Chişinău. Devoted to the revolutionary movement, he made no effort to get out of jail: he was prosecuted and transferred to the prison of Odessa. The tough conditions of this prison forced him to live in complete isolation for a long period, following the principle of total abandonment of convicts. The only interest of inmate Stere was to win the war of nerves. He began talking to his prison mates using the Morse code. In this period, he read the Bible and understood it from a new perspective, by focusing on the *moral dimension of man* and mostly on his capacity to overcome anything. (Ornea 1989, p. 65)

To a certain extent, the idea of faith became a belief, to which he had already adhered.

He used reading, (mostly Kant and Riehl Alois) writing and the philosophical approach to ideology and to his beliefs in order to overcome the difficult moments of his exile to Siberia. His infinite desire to find knowledge and truth directed him toward philosophy, while his correspondence with Isaev – “an original philosopher” recommended by Tolstoy himself – marked his first philosophical writings. (Petrov 2004, p. 27)

4. Poporanism and the political life of C. Stere

An adept of small-scale agriculture and community economy, but an adversary of industry and industrialization, C. Stere condemned foreign capital and the capitalist approach, which he deemed inadequate for Romanians. These ideas represented the foundation for his study titled *Poporanismul sau social-democratismul*. Though he was a liberal, he criticized vehemently all type of approach to industrialization, as he was cautious concerning their chances to succeed. The main argument was represented by the rather agrarian interests of the population, not by the idea of modernization. At the same time, he expressed concerns regarding the loss of agricultural capital, the abandonment of agriculture in favour of other labours. He argued his disapproval of foreign capital by stating that it had divided the world into “lending capitalist peoples and enslaved-proletarian peoples.” (Ornea 1989, pp. 296-297) His full explanations are outlined in “Discurs la adresa de răspuns la mesajul regal. 28-29 decembrie 1901,” in *C. Stere. Publicistica*, volume I of 2010, which comprises the speeches given by C. Stere in the period 1893-1905; Victor Durnea edited the volume. (Durnea 2010, p. 335)

C. Stere defines *Poporanism* as mostly a “general feeling, an intellectual and emotional atmosphere [...] comprising the following constitutive elements: loving

the people, [...] defending its interests, striving to obtain for it the status of conscious and solid social and cultural factor,” as featured in *Evenimentul literar*, issues 15, 16 and 25, signed using the pseudonym C. Șarcăleanu. (Durnea 2010, pp. 132, 450)

Emerged as a response to the fundamental reforms applied during the reign of Alexander II, (1855-1881), *Poporanism* was contemporary with *Junimism*, socialism and *Semănătorism*, and it attempted to include as many people as possible, especially among villagers.

In 1892, C. Stere sought refuge in Romania, along with his wife and child. An adept of the socialist setting, he was discovered by I.C. Brătianu, who initiated him in the political life. Impressed by the primitive Romanian rural world, he identified with it and he resumed his fight as a defender and fighter for the rights of people, of peasants and of the working class using *Poporanism*. This movement was based on the Marxist socialist principles.

Unfortunately, *Poporanism* as a socialist idea was anything but adequate for the socialists of the time, (Gherea, Nădejde, etc) because it was believed to slow down “the progress of the working movement on one hand” and because the general opinion was that the Russian model was inadequate for Romanians at that point in time. (Petrov 2004, p. 33)

As a current, *Poporanism* was nothing more than a literary ideology. C. Stere supported the anticapitalist agrarian doctrines and he constructed, alongside Spiru Haret, *the idea of cooperative economy*.

Stere has always been associated with the image of a permanent revolutionary, a defender of the people’s good. For Constantin Stere, the purposes of a revolution were righteousness and social justice, for the wellbeing of the population. His constant attention and vigilance concerning the social-political and economic transformations determined by the ideologies of the governing parties engaged him directly in the political commitments and actions of the time. He always sought to clarify – including through a critical, opposing stance – the ideas of the main political actors. This image of upholder of the law made him well known in the political world. Furthermore, concerning revolution as a change, Stere chose the idea of benign, violence-free revolutions issue by Eduard Bernstein (1854-1938). His concern regarding the idea of revolution is obvious, and it started from what he had read while free and then while incarcerated, as well as from the Great Russian Revolution. He was both surprised and annoyed by the attitude and the firm resistance of the Romanian elite – a partisan of evolutionism – clarified the concept of *revolution* by highlighting the mechanistic determinism of a natural fact of society as an effect of the adjustment to change. (Petrov 2004, p. 101)

As he became almost obsessed with the idea of change and of novelty, which the true revolution would bring, C. Stere launched new ideas and concepts derived from revolutionary ideologies. He developed the model *New Man – Fighting Man*, comprising three hypostases: *Superior man* (capable of fighting for something new), *Common man* and *Perfect man*, (harmonious; who works, feels, thinks); thus,

he idealized the image of the genuine peasant. Starting from these ideas, Stere became interested in the radical transformations of the entire humankind, (civilizations) which would focus on idyllic and just inter-human relationships.

His most cherished novel – *În preajma revoluției* – confers upon C. Stere the image of a permanent revolutionary. Starting with the Marxist ideologies but being a pacifist, he sought to associate revolution with a major change, with novelty. While arguing revolutionary concepts and models theoretically, he failed to demonstrate models of pacifist revolutions. He merely associated progress and novelty through reforms.

It is important to highlight the sustained effort and the dominant character of the human perspective in all his views. The idea of social health associated with reform represents the basic equation in the doctrines of C. Stere.

5. *Sterism* and C. Stere the writer

“Permanent and tireless seeker of the truth,” *Încercările filosofice* written during his Siberian exile reflect his worries and doubt regarding the truths of the human condition. Torn between *the feeling of guilt* caused by his origin (exploiters) and *the duty towards the people*, C. Stere built a conscience of duty and attachment towards the people, which would become his ideal.

Sterism as a current – appraised almost as a current of intellectuals of the time – identifies the experience of one’s own ideas on the pattern of a strong belief. C. Stere is viewed as a strong, dominant personality, with an irresistible moral strength. According to M. Cimpoi, *Sterism* is “the intellectual, ethical and social model of the complex type of militant writer.” For T. Arghezi, *Sterism* is “the tragedy of the intellectual isolated in his own horizon,” given that T.-C. Stere was from Bessarabia, exiled in Romania. (Petrov 2004, p. 126)

The author himself posited in 1933, in an interview for *Adevărul literar și artistic*³, “My connection to literature is older than it may appear.” Exhausted by the troubled political life, C. Stere decided, towards the end of his life, to put into practice what he had envisioned since he was young. Based on the vast experience of his life as an emigrant and as a very active political man in all his actions, we wished to write down all of his experiences and events. Hence, he wrote the saga *În preajma revoluției*, comprising an impressive number of pages. He began writing it in the late 1930s; the saga includes several volumes covering a great number of pages. As Mihai Ralea opined in 1932, C. Stere demonstrates an “enviable writing performance.”⁴ (*apud* Petrov, 2004, pp. 136-137)

³ L.S., interview “Dialogue with Mr. C. Stere,” published in *Adevărul literar și artistic*, year XII, issue 641, 1933, p. 1.

⁴ Mihai Ralea, “C. Stere romancier,” in *Dimineața*, year XXVIII, issue 9076, 1932, p. 2. This reference is also featured in the anthology *C. Stere. Victoria unui înfrânt*, edition and bibliography by Maria Teodorovici, Cartier, Chișinău, 1997.

The eight long volumes, initially meant to be eight, were written and published in only six years. This stands to show how much Stere wanted this project: he managed to write four volumes within one year, though he had a heart condition. His optimism and the wish to finalize his literary project gave his life a meaning and became almost its sole purpose. His writings were contemporary with those of the writers Hortensia Papadat Bengescu, Liviu Rebreanu, Camil Petrescu, Ibrăileanu, Gib Mihăescu, etc. For the volumes penned by C. Stere, he received literary counselling from Topârceanu, Philippide and G. Ibrăileanu; the volumes were also advertised in newspapers and journals or magazines.

The reviews to the extensive volumes published in record time were positive and encouraging on all levels: concerning the readers, the style, the author, as well as the future. One of the first persons who wrote chronicles about his volumes was G. Călinescu in 1932, in the publication *Adevărul literar și artistic*. He was impressed by the multitude of characters, pictures and events put together within a clear logic, “thus creating unexpectedly the most full of life novel ever to be written in Romanian literature after Ion by Rebreanu”, “...[such novel] would have challenged by its ramifications any writer, regardless of his experience...”, “...the writing of Mr. Stere is not an autobiography, but a novel...” (Petrov 2004, pp. 139, 252) Other critics of the time – such as Șerban Cioculescu and B. Brănișteanu with *Adevărul*, Pamfil Șeicaru with *Curentul* – showed their approval for the avalanche of mammoth volumes written by C. Stere, thus concluding that he was “known as a writer rather than a political man” and that it was “the most beautiful revenge of a defeated political man.” (Petrov 2004, p. 141)

In the summer of 1907-1908, he wrote the study *Poporanism sau Social-democratism* published in several issues of the journal *Viața Românească*. This rather far-reaching study determined him to neglect his political duties.

Later, literary reviews emerged in almost all journals and newspapers in the country. Subsequently, the literature written by Stere received quality reviews from Perpessicius, Alexandru Philippide, Isabela Sadoveanu, Eugen Lovinescu, I. Negoșescu, Al. Piru, Ion Rotaru, Dumitru Micu, Mihai Zamfir, Mihai Cimpoi. Each of them found or completed meanings and interpretations on the massive work penned by Stere. They were joined by Nicolae Manolescu, who warned about the fact that Stere was gradually forgotten: he was neglected both as a political figure present in the key moments of Romanian history and as a writer.

6. Stere and his university career

Besides his political career, C. Stere also had an academic career. For the first time, he was named holder of the Political Economy Department in Turinsk, for conferencing. The purpose of these conferences/meetings was to plan regenerating actions across Russia. This period was rather brief, because the group of inmates was dispersed, and Stere ended up in Berezov.

After penitence, Stere decided to seek refuge in Romania, in Iași, in 1892. An adept of socialism, with support from Ioan Nădejde, he adjusted rather rapidly to his new country. The intellectual atmosphere helped him resume his militant activities.

Z. Ornea depicted the academic life of C. Stere through the two volumes titled *Viața lui C. Stere*, published in 1989 and 1991. He shows that Stere Constantin was among the students of the Faculty of Law, University of Iași, in the period 1892-1893. There was always a great mystery surrounding the documents used to justify his admission to higher education. Initially, as a student, he failed to prove that he had passed his high school graduation examination. He was lucky enough that the academic rules of that period included exceptional situations. He did not spend much time worrying about activities or exams, as he was far too concerned by political militant actions. In 1893, he founded a student association with ideological interests in *Poporanism* and in the defence of student rights.

In the autumn of 1895, he managed to pass all his examinations, in order to be allowed to defend his graduation paper. He was not a stellar student, as he viewed exams as mere formalities. He proposed to elaborate a graduation paper that would comprise both his knowledge and his intellectual capabilities, with the purpose creating the opportunity of a university career. Though he had graduated from the Faculty of Law, he wrote a graduation paper in the field of Theoretical Sociology and Philosophical Anthropology. The only elements pertaining to the law were featured at the end of the thesis. The original thesis – titled *Evoluția individuală și noțiunea de persoană în drept* – unravelled him as a great intellectual and managed to stir admiration from professors such as Petre Missir. The last was not driven by his political beliefs, but by his culture and mature thought. Actually, he would later be part – alongside Prof. I. Tanoviceanu and C.A. Urechia – of the commission for the illustrious graduation paper defended in June 1897 by C. Stere.

Whereas the thesis received vehement criticism, A.D. Xenopol – for instance – underlined the originality and novelty that the author of the paper brought to legal science. Furthermore, he appraised the vast culture of C. Stere and the fact that he always used bibliographic references to support his own arguments.

C. Stere did not give up on his dream to pursue a scientific and academic career. He sought – just like his predecessors – support and political influence, as he did not meet the legal demands for acquiring the title of Doctor in Sciences. He did get such help from Spiru Haret, who was a minister in that period and who considered Stere a renowned intellectual; thus, in his opinion, he only had to compromise on formal rules, not on competence per se. In March 1901, Stere received the position of substitute Administrative and Constitutional Law teacher. Soon after receiving this substitute position, he was elected deputy and he chose to give up his salary as a teacher and to hold the course free of charge. This situation stirred (yet again) controversies related to the incompatibility and to his eligibility as a university teacher and a deputy. When things cleared up, C. Stere saw his dream come true: he was both a politician and a university teacher, as he had always wanted.

His oratorical skills and his vast culture helped him become one of the great professors of Iași University, alongside colleagues like Petre Missir and Matei B. Cantacuzino.

In 1903, with the support of M.B. Cantacuzino and of his published handbook titled “Introduction to Constitutional Law” – that proved his expertise precisely for the Department where there was a vacant position – he managed to become the holder of the position. This nomination was mentioned at page 54 of the Yearbook of Iași University. The second handbook was the one of “Constitutional Law,” lithographed at the Academy Library, comprising 1, 132 pages. C. Stere boldly approaches transdisciplinarity by studying the relationship between the social and the juridical–constitutional aspects.

In February 1913, he was elected rector of Iași University; during his brief mandate, he proved to be extremely devoted to the function. He obtained funds for constructions, for endowing laboratories and classrooms, and for reorganizing and enriching the book fund of the Library. In February 1916, he had to resign from his rector position, because of a scandal that had become political and that threatened to endanger both his image and the effective management of the institution. Alongside Z. Ornea who summarized the academic life of C. Stere, we add the explanations of Stere regarding this event, as penned by Victor Durnea in *C. Stere. Publicații*, in the third volume. (Durnea 2014, pp. 713-742)

7. Conclusions

Constantin Stere has remained, across time, a revolutionary ideologist and a renowned publicist in our history. His writings and deeds are less familiar to younger generations because he belongs to older generations of ideologists, critics and politicians. Eager to change things and attached to *Poporanism*, he remained a dreamer of the Great Revolution, (where human condition would triumph). He militated until the very last day of his life for social justice, better living standards for the people and, most of all, healthy politics.

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