

MIRCEA VULCĂNESCU. LIFE AND WORK – FACTS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

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Abstract

Mircea Vulcănescu was a vivacious spirit, unbound by the narrow confines of a strict specialisation. His specialist culture, whether philosophical, economic, sociological, political or general – as premise and basis for a fruitful inter-human communication at national and international level – is among the exquisite defining features of his personality. It was thanks to these special and universally acknowledged qualities that Mircea Vulcănescu became, at only 24 years of age in 1928, a tenured lecturer at the chair headed by Dimitri Gusti. Subsequently, he was, in turn, Director-General for Customs and Director of the Public Debt Office in the Romanian Finance Ministry, Director of the Autonomous Fund for Financing and Amortisation, President of the Autonomous Fund of National Defence and undersecretary of state in the Ministry of Finance. Such events did not and cannot go unnoticed; they became milestones of his era and his posterity. At various levels and in different proportions, Mircea Vulcănescu generated and inspired new searches and aspirations and decisively became part of the gallery of the great Romanian scholars and patriots, concerned with the past, present and future of Romania.

Keywords: sociology, Romanian philosophy, economic crisis, Romania's development

Résumé

Mircea Vulcănescu était un esprit vivace, délié par les limites étroites d'une spécialisation stricte. Sa culture spécialisée, qu'elle soit philosophique, économique, sociologique, politique ou générale – comme prémisses et bases pour une communication inter-humaine fructueuse au niveau national et international – est l'une des caractéristiques exquises de sa personnalité. C'est grâce à ces qualités spéciales et universellement reconnues que Mircea Vulcănescu est devenu, à seulement 24 ans en 1928, un conférencier titulaire à la présidence dirigée par Dimitri Gusti. Il a ensuite été directeur général des douanes et directeur du Bureau de la dette publique du ministère roumain des Finances, directeur du Fonds autonome pour le financement et l'amortissement, président du Fonds autonome de la défense nationale et sous-secrétaire d'État au Ministère des finances. De tels événements n'ont pas et ne peuvent pas passer inaperçus; Ils sont devenus des jalons de son époque et de sa postérité. À différents niveaux et dans des proportions différentes, Mircea Vulcănescu a généré et inspiré de nouvelles recherches et aspirations et a fait partie de la galerie des grands érudits et patriotes roumains, préoccupés par le passé, le présent et l'avenir de la Roumanie.

Mots-clés: Sociologie, philosophie roumaine, crise économique, développement de la Roumanie

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Rezumat

Mircea Vulcănescu a fost un spirit viu și necantonat în marginile strâmte ale strictei specialități. Cultura de specialitate, filosofică, economică, sociologică, politică și generală premisă și suport ale unei fructuoase comunicări interumane la scară națională și internațională – reprezintă una dintre cele mai alese trăsături definitorii ale personalității sale. Datorită acestor calități deosebite, unanim recunoscute, Mircea Vulcănescu a devenit, la numai 24 de ani, în anul 1928, titular în catedra condusă de Dimitri Gusti, iar apoi, rând pe rând, director general al Vănilor, director al Datoriei Publice în Ministerul Finanțelor, director al Casei Autonome de Finanțare și Amortizare, președinte al Casei Autonome a Fondului Apărării Naționale și subsecretar de stat în cadrul Ministerului de Finanțe; evenimentele n-au trecut și nu pot trece neobservate; s-au înscris în epocă și în posteritate, ca un momente de referință. În proporții și orizonturi diferite, Mircea Vulcănescu, a generat și inspirat căutări și aspirații noi și a intrat definitiv în galeria marilor cărturari și patrioți români, preocupați de trecutul, prezentul și viitorul României.

Cuvinte cheie: sociologie, filosofie românească, criza economică, dezvoltarea României

1. Biographical milestones

Mircea Aurel Vulcănescu was born on the 3rd of March 1904, in Bucharest, in the family of an public servant, Mihail Vulcănescu, who during a 41-years career was an employee of the Ministry of Finance, a financial controller at the public office overseeing state monopolies and one of the founders of the general association of civil servants. (Vulcănescu 2009, p. 380) His mother, Maria was the descendant of a family of landowners from the Olt area.

His childhood and early education were accomplished, in a fortunate and cultured way, in the parental home, under the direct supervision and guidance of his parents, as he was home-schooled for the first three years of primary school. (Vulcănescu 2009, p. 18) He completed the fourth grade at Lucaci school (he was home-schooled during the first two terms and only attended the third term).

By 1916, he was working at the central post headquarters as news analyst and also became a scout. In the winter of 1921 he sat the Baccalaureate examination at Mihai Viteazul high school in Bucharest. He pursued undergraduate studies in philosophy and law in Bucharest (degrees completed in 1925) and then went to Paris for further studies. There, he intended to pursue doctoral research in law, specialising in economics, and in sociology.

In November 1928, he earned the doctoral degree in economics and political science at the Faculty of Law in Paris (a prerequisite to defending the doctoral thesis).

The same year, he was employed as assistant lecturer in Sociology and Ethics within the department led by Professor Dimitrie Gusti. This we consider as the first official recognition of his qualities as a solidly trained intellectual and of his prospects of becoming a preeminent figure, capable to contribute effectively and fully to the development of the Romanian people.

His thorough economic, legal and sociological training, his speaking skills and not least the esteem of his contemporaries were decisive in his appointment in central government.

Thus, he was hired as advisor in the research office of the Ministry of Finance (1929-1935), as Director of Customs and of Public Debt (June 1935 to September 1937), and as one of the leaders of the Scientific Association in charge of developing the Romanian Encyclopaedia. During the Second World War he was involved in managing Romania's finances.

In his capacity as former undersecretary of state in the Ministry of Finance (January 1941-August 1944) in Ion Antonescu's government, he faced trial in 1946 and sentenced to eight years of harsh incarceration. He died in the Aiud prison on Thursday 28th of October 1952.

2. Bibliographic aspects

In the years before, during and immediately after the interwar period, it had become almost a rule – a beneficial one for the education, development and affirmation of Romania – that the most prominent Romanian scholars and patriots would establish or participate as editors and contributors in publishing newspapers and magazines of a more or less national interest; these included daily, weekly or monthly publications, local or central and specialised or on the contrary heterogeneous in terms of their themes. Most aimed to inform, raise awareness and mobilise public opinion towards fulfilling the ideals of unity, sovereignty and social, cultural and economic progress.

Mircea Vulcănescu also followed this path. Shortly after enrolling in the Faculty of Philosophy and Law, he debuted in publishing in the first issue of *Buletinul Asociației Studenților Creștini din România* [Bulletin of the Christian Students' Association of Romania] (1923), for which he authored *Cuvinte pentru drum*.

Diaconu (2003, pp. 9-22) identifies three main stages in the publishing activity of Mircea Vulcănescu:

1) From 1923 to the summer of 1928

The first stage is marked by searches, as he was involved in preparing undergraduate studies and completing his doctorate in Paris. By the summer of 1925, Vulcănescu had only published three articles, all in *Buletinul Asociației Studenților Creștini din România*, on topics related to the association's profile. The bulletin marked only a beginning, a debut, a necessary and revealing experience. In 1925, after participating in the Congress of the International University Federation, he published an extensive report in *Viața Universitară*. Arriving in France, he started publishing a cycle titled *Scrisori din Paris* [Letters from Paris], of which only two were published in Romania in *Gândirea* magazine. The other letters would be printed posthumously either by the media in the 1990s or in books. Other

articles were published in the December 1928 issue of *Gândirea* and the *Arhiva pentru știința și reforma socială* [Archive for social science and reform] (1928).

2) From the autumn of 1928 to 1935

This stage starts with brief report of a conference held by Radulescu-Motru at the Romanian Society of Philosophy, published in *Cuvântul*. During this period he would also engage in the campaign against the Synod on controversy over the correct date for Easter, by publishing on this occasion: *Infailibilitatea Bisericii și failibilitatea sinodală* [Infallibility and Fallibility of the Synod]; *Între catolicism și erezie sau urmările dogmatice ale rătăcirii sinodale* [Between Catholicism and heresy or the dogmatic aftermath of Synod's errors]; *Netemeinicia Scrisorii Sinodale* [The lack of grounds of the Synodal Letter] etc.

From 1932 to 1933, Mircea Vulcănescu alongside Constantin Noica, Petru Comarnescu, Emil Cioran, Mircea Eliade, Dan Botta, gained a high profile among experts and the Romanian cultural public through publishing and the intense activity of the *Criterion* association.

In January 1934, Al. Tzigara-Samurcas, of Director of *Convorbiri literare* literary magazine, invited Mircea Vulcanescu to be part of the editorial board. Along with Mircea Eliade, H. H. Stahl, Constantin Noica etc. they would revitalise the magazine, until June, when they resigned. During this period, Mircea Vulcănescu managed to print two chronicles in the magazine: a philosophical one (*Congresul profesorilor de filosofie – On the Congress of Philosophy Teachers*, February 1934) and an economic one (*Între Londra și Washington – Between London and Washington*, January 1934) and a response to Alexandru Dima (*Tradiționalism fără tradiție sau bonjourism gen 1934 – Traditionalism without Tradition or bonjourism as in 1934*) (February 1934).

In our quest for Vulcănescu the publicist, the magazine *Criterion* proves most helpful compared to the previously publications; mostly because he was among its founders, along with Petru Comarnescu, Ion Cantacuzino, Constantin Noica, Mircea Eliade, Henri H. Stahl, Alexandru-Christian Tell; also because only seven issues were published, some of which reprinted, from 15 October 1934 to February 1935; and finally because it had a different structure and thematic orientation, as Mircea Vulcănescu published essays, studies (*Spiritualitate – Spirituality*, *Generație – Generation*, etc.) and some “points of view”.

The second phase of Mircea Vulcanescu's publishing activity ended with his chronicles published under the *Cronica externă* section in *Prezentul* magazine, from 2 February to June 21 1935. In over a hundred chronicles the author examined current international events by drawing on the vision, requirements and principles of sociological methodology. The chronicles were collected in the volume *Conjuncturi internaționale* [International contexts].

3) Between 1936 and 1944

Simultaneously with other administrative, teaching and research engagements, Mircea Vulcănescu pursued an acclaimed journalistic activity. He published

Conjunctura economiei românești, a quarterly newsletter of the Association for the Study of the economic situation of Romania. Mircea Vulcănescu was member of the board of the Association (presided over by Virgil Madgearu), yet his work as a journalist was not confined to this role; he was, at the same time, a faithful contributor. He published various texts on scientific, economic, sociological and political topics.

As a publicist, he presented his views on events, facts and national policy options in *Prezentul* (issue no. 301), where he published "Eminența și servitutea presei economice" [Eminence and servitude of economic press]; in *Excelsior* (issue no. 97), the article "Economia mondială în 1936" [The world economy in 1936]; in *Industria și comerț* (issue no. 273) published "Insemnări pentru industrializarea României" [Notes on the industrialisation of Romania], etc. The subjects that he dwelt on were truly stringent, topical and of great interest for his contemporary era and the future of Romania.

His activity included: papers on the socio-economic situation of other countries, which had direct or indirect links with Romania, daily information on Romanian internal and foreign policy; conferences (*Omul românesc – Man Romanian*, *Colbert, Două tipuri de filosofie medievală – Two Types of Medieval Philosophy*, *Dimensiunea românească a existenței – The Romanian Dimension of Existence*, *Gospodăria țărănească și problemele pe care le pune statisticienilor – Peasant Households and the Challenges They Pose to Statisticians*); inaugural lectures on the opening of the course of theoretical and applied political economy at Higher School of Social Assistance; polemical disputes; commentaries on industrialisation. In addition to all this, the publicist Mircea Vulcănescu granted particular attention and space to certain topical theoretical and practical problems, which attracted a wide audience and caused great interest. Chief among these: internal debt financing of the Romanian government and the trade balance of Romania; the prospects of Romania's industrialisation and the excessive agricultural population of Romania; Romania's place in the global economy; the war economy, etc.

As an economist, he authored countless reports, reviews, studies, in journals such as *Bulletin d'Information de l'Office des Etudes financieres*, *Analele Băncilor*, *Cronica financiară*, *Analele statistice și economice*, *Tribuna financiară*, *Dimineața*, *Excelsior*, *Revista vânilor* etc.

As a sociologist, Mircea Vulcanescu contributed articles to *Arhiva pentru știință și reformă socială* and attitude papers and statements of position to *Cuvântul*, *Dreapta*, *Axa* etc.

3. Sociological concept

His appointment to the position of assistant lecturer in Sociology and Ethics, gave him the opportunity to assert himself and gain prominence as one of the important contributors to the development of monographist theory and method. (Butoi, 2013, p. 1)

According to Herseni (1996, p. 133), “at times, Dimitrie Gusti’s system of sociology, ethics and politics, as interpreted and presented by Mircea Vulcănescu, earned such vividness, that the original author (...) had never been able to achieve.”

Between 1924-1932, he took part in several monographic research campaigns: Goicea Mare, Fundu Moldovei, Runcu, Cornova and Drăguș. He thus made an important contribution to “the perpetuation of Gusti’s school of thought” (Dumitrașcu 2009, p. 70) and intervened promptly to “defend, correct or argue for the soundness of the ideas of the monographic school”. He contended that Gusti’s work served as a method to achieve knowledge of a philosophy and ideology that dominated the era: Marxism. (Schifirneț 2009, p. 188)

A man of action and not only of theory, Vulcănescu put his pen and deeds in the service of Gusti’s great ideas, being persuaded that in doing so he could prove that he belonged to a nation that had done its duty. The author was convinced that in a period of organisation of the Romanian society, “sociological actions must be thoroughly documented”, while superficiality was viewed as a “crime against the nation”. (Larionescu 2009, p. 677)

In the school of Dimitrie Gusti, Vulcănescu identified a method of analysing the socio-economic reality, which Nae Ionescu could not provide, as the latter, although a logician, did not care for scientific research methodology. This explains “Vulcănescu’s adherence to Gusti’s outlook”. (Schifirneț 2009, p. 188)

As he was more interested in the economic foundation of social life, Mircea Vulcănescu’s intention was to lay the necessary bases for collecting and interpreting field data (Butoi 2013, p. 2), highlighting two key moments of the sociological method: understanding the phenomenological level and explaining (the etiologic level) the examined social fact.

In his articles “Teoria și sociologia vieții economice. Prolegomene la studiul morfologiei economice a unui sat” [Theory and sociology of economic life. Prolegomena to the study of the economic morphology of a village] published in 1932 in *Arhiva pentru Știința și Reforma Socială* and “Spre un nou medievalism economic” [Towards a new economic medievalism], Mircea Vulcănescu argued repeatedly that there is no single cause of a social phenomenon and of an economic crisis, but rather a series of “circumstances” that condition their existence.

On 18 February 1932 he delivered the lecture “Spre un nou medievalism economic” in the auditorium of the Carol I University Foundation in Bucharest (nowadays the Central University Library), as part of the conference cycle *Explicația timpului nostru* [Explaining our time], organised by Gruparea Intelectuală Forum, led by Ionel Jianu. In this lecture, Vulcănescu attempted to explain the social and economic crisis “along the line of confluence between movements of the context cycle and specific, accidental circumstances”. (Vulcănescu 2009, p. 54) The author appears to adhere to Marxist or Keynesian economic interventionism formulae. (Toma 2009, p. 12) In fact, however, he sought to capture the path to equilibrium of the process by harmonising the “short series”, seasonal and short-

term, with the century-long “long series”. Key in the establishment and evolution of the author’s economic concepts were domestic conditions, the social, economic, national, political and spiritual climate.

Contributions such as “Dimitrie Gusti, profesorul” [Dimitrie Gusti, Professor] (1936) and “Publications de l’école roumaine de sociologie” (1938), are “unavoidable in the literature on the Bucharest Sociology School, as they constitute syntheses of a scientific system and production”. (Butoi 2013, p. 4)

4. National / international prestige

In the three conferences broadcast on the radio, in the spring of 1930, Mircea Vulcănescu wondered “to what extent one can speak of a Romanian philosophy”, giving a positive answer and defining “the characters and the environment of Romanian philosophy, that range from the maxims of folk philosophy to contemporary authors”. (Ianoși 1996, p. 322)

An analytical spirit, Mircea Vulcănescu identified for the first time three types of philosopher: the social pedagogue or coach; the teacher; and the philosopher proper. He established three conditions for the existence of a Romanian philosophy: the existence of a genuine and original philosophical activity among Romanians, arising from Romanian causes; the existence of an environment that disseminates philosophical ideas in the Romanian language; and the existence of typically Romanian philosophical topics and systems. The author emphasises in his writings that for each type of philosophy there is a special environment: “an active and dynamic medium of political philosophy” (Schifirneț 2009, p. 179), an environment of didactic philosophy and an environment for philosophy pure and simple.

Mircea Vulcănescu was particularly open to the systematic metaphysical foundations and to the history of the relationship, dialogue and tension between metaphysics and religion. Raised in a Christian family and impressed by Nae Ionescu’s lectures – Mircea Vulcănescu “opened up for life towards the religious experience of the world and towards the philosophy of religion” (Vulcănescu 2004, p. 15). His well-known contributions on this topic include *Logos și Eros în metafizica creștină* [Logos and Eros in Christian Metaphysics], *Două tipuri de filosofie medievală* [Two types of Medieval Philosophy] or the conference cycles *Paradoxele vieții spirituale* [The Paradoxes of Spiritual Life], *Posibilitățile filosofiei creștine* [The Possibilities of Christian Philosophy], *Creștinul în lumea modernă* [The Christian in the Modern World].

In 1929, shortly after the first disruptions in the US economy, the economic crisis was felt in other countries, including Romania. The development process of the domestic economy, which had unfolded favourably in Romania, was interrupted by the economic crisis of 1929-1933, which hit the industry and agriculture, led to deteriorating living conditions and to a tense social and political climate.

The drop of about 60% in the prices of key exports during the crisis had an impact on the entire domestic economy: production and consumption declined, national income decreased, budget revenues fell and the trade balance deficit increased. (Văcărel 1995 p. 13)

Amid the economic crisis and the uncertain future, a general climate of apprehension took hold, reflected in the massive withdrawals of deposits from banks. The capital withdrawal fever in Romania also drew in certain foreign investors. As withdrawals of foreign capital did not stop and as the balance of payments deficit deteriorated, exchange controls were introduced in May 1932.

During the 1934-1938 period, the Romanian economy recorded a sustained pace of development, which caused an increase in the country's financial and asset potential, modified its economic structure, increased the share of industrial sectors, improved their structure and increase the number of businesses using modern techniques. The international position of the country "forced it to establish a defence industry which in turn would boost the development of the metalworking and the machine building industries". (Ciublea 2010, p. 390)

At the same time as the development of private ownership, state interventionism intensified seeking to boost and diversify production by means of protectionist customs and taxation measures, lending and direct investment. The complicated issues of customs tariffs, which he had to face as a state employee, prompted Mircea Vulcănescu to examine them in depth. Consequently, he discovered Adam Smith's theory of international trade and the customs policy promoted by Western Europe over the centuries.

On 6 April 1935 at the Academy of Advanced Commercial and Industrial Research in Bucharest, Mircea Vulcănescu gave a series of conferences organised by the general association of economists. On this occasion he presented his paper *Economia de război* (The War Economy). The author highlighted one by one, the characteristics of this type of economy (Vulcănescu 2009, p. 358): the existence of a consumer economy, to meet the requirements of war; compliance of economy to strategic principles, rationalisation and planning; the subordination of private enterprise through pressure and collective coercion etc.

The economic development of interwar Romania depended largely on the inflow of foreign capital in the form of loans and investment in businesses. This resulted in a "haemorrhage of national income, halting internal accumulation and a state of dependence on the developed capitalist countries". (Ciublea 2010, p. 390)

Foreign capital held important positions only in those branches that offered it the opportunity to exercise influence over economic activities. It gravitated in particular to "commodity-producing sectors and particularly the oil industry". (Todosia 1967, p. 59)

Due to the asymmetry in the structure of the domestic economy, Romania was disadvantaged in international trade. With no other source of foreign currency besides the exports of primary products, there was a chronic deficit in the balance

of payments. This situation was compounded by “the increasing external debt, directly as public debt and indirectly as a result of takeover of companies by foreign capitalists”. (Moldovan 1977, p. 269). The lack of foreign currency required to meet the foreign payment needs cause great disruptions in the functioning of country’s economic mechanism.

Understanding the role of industry in configuring the modern national construct, Mircea Vulcănescu unreservedly advocated the need for an industrialisation policy, developed and supported financially by the state. Referring to this aspect, Mircea Vulcănescu argued in *Evoluția și tendințele economiei românești* (Evolution and Trends in the Romanian Economy), that “Romania will have to industrialise; and this industrialisation will no longer be the result of bourgeois liberalism, but of a concerted state policy”. (Vulcănescu 2009, p. 129)

A first direction of development that the industrialisation process needed to be directed to was to establish a strong heavy industry, with steel industry and mechanical engineering as its main drivers. The second direction viewed essential for the whole process of industrialisation was the energy industry. (Tătar 2007, p. 74)

Mircea Vulcănescu sought “to explain the times in which he lived” (Vulcănescu 2009, p. 48), opting for a return to “the old forms of life”, of the Middle Ages and suggesting they be renewed. According to the author, “out of the entire system of cosmic, biological, emotional and historical conditions that determine social life, only the latter are irreversible: the influence of previous forms of life”.

Mircea Vulcănescu’s research output in the field of economics was not focused on the short-term and neither limited to the period in which he lived. The solutions that he proposed for Romania’s situation then are exemplary (Toma 2009, p. 12) and retain and prove their timeliness.

5. Conclusions

Mircea Vulcănescu’s multidimensional personality, the complex theoretical and practical themes that he explored, key information and arguments, the diffusion and retrieval of his ideas, all these call for some conclusions.

Mircea Vulcănescu was undoubtedly a prominent intellectual: a genuine scholar; a Romanian educated and cultivated at the highest schools in the country and abroad, completing philosophy and law degrees in 1927 and earning doctoral university degree in economics and political science from the faculty of Law in Paris; a tireless reader and a seeker of truth.

He understood that he had not been born to lead a quiet life, but rather to be engaged in political turmoil, in organising, leadership and government decision-making.

Mircea Vulcănescu was in his element in the field of administration: he had proven qualities as an official: competence, dedication, patriotism, courage, etc; he

left his mark everywhere he went; regardless which institution he managed and no matter how long, he set as his major goals to modernise the structures and discipline staff. One testimony to this is his speech *Cuvinte de “bun găsit”* [A Word of Welcome], delivered on 19 June 1935 on his appointment as Director-General in the customs office of the Ministry of Finance. (Vulcănescu 2009, p. 258)

His sound knowledge of European and Romanian realities, administrative experience, tact and speaking skills were among the reasons why he joined the diplomatic corps: he negotiated in finest detail contracts with the Germans under Romania’s “alliance” with Germany which were totally unfavourable economically – and yet “managed to obtain such favourable conditions for Romania that the delegations of the victorious powers viewed the Romanian case – on the economic side – as unique” (in *Atitudini*, issue no. 35).

The most general conclusion that one may draw is that Mircea Vulcănescu, at various levels and in different proportions, generated and inspired new aspirations and searches and decidedly became part of the gallery of the great Romanian scholars and patriots, concerned with the past, present and future of Romania.

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