ACADEMICIAN IOAN-AUREL POP: THE HUMANIST SCHOLAR



The time in which I am writing these lines is marked by multiple disturbances and upheavals, some successive, others overlapping, with increasing intensity and extending over almost the entire surface of our planet. Socio-economic, political, and cultural crises are a daily presence in our lives and have a speed and complexity of manifestation that has never been seen before. Changes at the local, regional, and global levels are happening so quickly and sometimes so thoroughly that humanity seems to be in a transformative process – one whose characteristics hardly register in the awareness of individuals and communities. The vast majority of analysts and historians tend to explain this "ongoing revolution" through extraordinary scientific and technological advances. And the myth of Frankenstein reappears from time to time, as it did with the spread of the industrial revolution across Europe in the early 19th century, accompanied by unpredictability, mistrust, and fear for the fate of man and the future of humanity.

More than a decade ago, Yuval Noah Harari, a historian very much in vogue today, published a history of the journey through the ages by *Homo Sapiens* (*Sapiens. A Brief History of Humankind*, 2011). The aforementioned author claims that for nearly two million years, the ancestors of *Homo sapiens* exhibited characteristics that distinguished them from the rest of the animal kingdom. Specifically, they would have had larger brains, walked on two legs, been capable of learning certain skills, and even had the advantage of circumscribing themselves within more complex social structures (Harari, 11). However, the real leap from Neanderthal to *Homo sapiens* would have occurred only with the first "Cognitive Revolution," when the Tree of Knowledge sprouted. And the emergence of the Tree of Knowledge was aided by mutations that developed thinking and communication skills across different forms of language. The language was initially determined by the need to communicate the reality of the surrounding world, but over time it evolved towards communicating information about an imaginary world. That's how myths, legends, beliefs, gods, and religions were the first effects of that Cognitive Revolution. These were accompanied by an intensification of cooperation and social stratification, etc. What we want to emphasize by referring to theories of human

evolution, as seen by Harari, is that cultures were born through language and the communication of an imagined reality, which meant that humans and humanity were no longer just biology, they entered History (Harari, 41). Or, like the great scholar Vasile Pârvan would have us believe, humans became less animalistic and more human.

Therefore, the main feature of human history is the cultural and spiritual substance of human evolution. The material can often be included in the structure of nature, its change and shaping. For the history of natural phenomena is also part of the environment in which human beings develop, alongside the social environment defined by culture. And speaking of communication and the system of thought and representation of the contemporary imagination, we see specificities of language depending not only on the sensibilities of the times, but also on the tools and technologies available to humans. For example, algorithms are now part of our direct and indirect communication language, just as vocal articulations and signs were used to produce words, sentences, and meanings in the early days of human history. *Homo sapiens* has created numerous tools and technologies that improve our lives, and today we have turned them into sources of transformative power that can either propel humanity forward or destroy us. *The 21st century seems to mark a transition into something that cannot be clearly defined today.* An author who attempted to decipher the meanings of human evolution in this age (James Martin, *The Meaning of the 21st Century*, 2007, 4) believes that science and technology can bring revolutionary changes, even radical ones, but the hope is that humanity will harness its capacity for thought to create a socio-cultural environment that fulfills man's destiny in history–towards humanity, not towards calamity. Of course, the relationship between spirituality and materiality is particularly complex in human existence, but it is increasingly evident that materiality can be a self-destructive end and means if the entire cultural-spiritual ensemble does not intervene to integrate the values of humanity into the various stages of human history (Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History*, 1992, 51).

Academician Ioan-Aurel Pop is a Romanian historian deeply concerned with the problems of humanity outlined above. For him, the societal changes foreshadowed by local, regional, and global events at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century were a reason to emphasize and draw attention to the role of spirituality and culture in the transformative processes that took place in the past, are unfolding in the present, and are expected in the future. Although he has proclaimed himself a historian of the Middle Ages, the Cluj academic seems more influenced by the humanist spirit of the Renaissance, which he often portrays in aspects of European history, but especially through interactions with Romanian medieval and pre-modern history. This perspective also reveals his tendency to repeatedly highlight the achievements of the Transylvanian School and, on numerous occasions, to signal that he identified his mission with that of the Apostolate of Teachers, who were committed to spreading the Enlightenment throughout Romanian culture and society. Erudite and methodical, he devoted himself to historical research and, at the same time, to training new generations dedicated to the historical profession, to the didactic and scientific communication of the results of local and European historiography, as well as the presentation of historical topics in the mass media and through dialogues with various socio-professional groups.

Coming to the University of Cluj-Napoca from the schools of Brașov, Ioan-Aurel Pop demonstrated from his early years as a student at the Faculty of History and

Philosophy a solid humanistic culture and an endless thirst for historiographical, literary, and cultural-artistic knowledge. I was in my final year, also studying history, when the young student Ioan-Aurel Pop began his university studies. As I was busy finishing my thesis, I conducted my research and wrote my paper at the University Library and/or the History Institute Library. Especially at the latter, seats were limited and most were occupied by other colleagues in their final years. Almost every time, however, a first-year student (Ioan-Aurel Pop) occupied the seat in the front row, next to the window, right at the start. At his lunch break, he would leave the books he was studying in the same place, a sign that he would return to his studies. He only took breaks "for cigarettes and coffee," during which times he conversed confidently with his older colleagues and, notably, did not ask them about how one teacher or another was, but rather which books recommended by teachers they found most useful and beneficial. This was because Pop, a history student, went beyond the specific bibliography for his year of study, satisfying his historiographical curiosity and, above all, exploring methods of historical research. This is how he came to broaden his knowledge of foreign languages, which are absolutely necessary for studying international historiography, by learning Latin, Hungarian, German, Slavonic, and other languages from paleography while still a student. This is because his constant thirst for knowledge prompted him to seek out primary sources, most of which are found in local archives or in neighboring countries. Such methodological exercises probably led him definitively towards the field of medieval history, encouraged, of course, by our professors, who stimulated his interest in reading the basic texts for the reconstruction of that period. The same inclinations, I believe, led him to the history of the early medieval institutions in Transylvania, especially those of the Romanian communities. And in order to get here, he became interested in the origins of the Romanian people and language. Such a topic required not only historiographical and linguistic knowledge, but also anthropology, ethnography, theology, arts, etc. Looking at the list of works entrusted to print, especially the hundreds of articles and studies published in specialized journals and cultural magazines, it is immediately apparent that this was Ioan-Aurel Pop's preferred field for scientific investigation and communication. He developed a real passion for the history of the Romanian language, as he considers language to be both a historical source in itself and a nuanced presentation of the evolution of the social environment throughout various eras. That is why he connects linguistic constructions with sentences and phrases that define concepts and attitudes towards life, amply demonstrating the role of culture and spirituality in defining the basic characteristics of humans in the stages of evolution from the Neanderthals to the present day.

Born and raised in Transylvania, educated in Cluj-Napoca, trained at the Historical School of the Babeș-Bolyai University, in a place where European historiographical concepts, modern research methods, and access to the most advanced bibliographic sources came together harmoniously, the young historian Ioan-Aurel Pop threw himself into investigating the rich archives of Cluj-Napoca, Sibiu, Bistrița, Brașov, etc., in order to continue the work of the illustrious historians and magisterial figures Ioan Lupaș, Alexandru Lapedatu, and Ștefan Pascu, dedicated to the medieval and modern history of Transylvania. His approach was not limited to regional history, as he covered both local and regional history in Romania and, at the same time, in Central and Southeastern Europe. According to this concept,

he emphasized the importance of our historians' interest in other provinces, especially Bessarabia and Bukovina. An intensification of this trend can be observed after 1990 when, with the creation of more favorable conditions for the movement of people and ideas in these regions, Cluj professor Ioan-Aurel Pop directed his efforts toward training young historians from Bessarabia and Bukovina enrolled in courses at the University of Cluj-Napoca. These energies were amplified during the years when the distinguished historian was Rector of the University, which held the great historian Vasile Pârvan in high spiritual esteem, as he had delivered the first lecture in Romanian here after the end of the First World War. As President of the Romanian Academy, he developed strong and rich relations with the Academy of Sciences in Chișinău, going as far as working in joint research teams, some of which were part of projects funded by the European Union, or organizing events of high symbolic significance for the Romanian cultural and historical space, such as Romanian Language Day. And since we have mentioned Romanian cultural and historical heritage, we must mention the work of historian Ioan-Aurel Pop in compiling and publishing important works of synthesis (often in collaboration with distinguished groups of historians from the main national academic centers) in which the history of all Romanians has been reconstructed. Many such syntheses of Romanian history have been published in almost every corner of the world.

Historian Ioan-Aurel Pop was a MAN OF THE CATHEDRA, from the moment he graduated from university, passing through high school teaching positions and then settling at the Department/Institute of History at Babeș-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca. After 1990, our colleague held several positions in cultural diplomacy, at the Romanian Cultural Center in New York, the Romanian Institute of Culture and Humanistic Research in Venice, and the Accademia di Romania in Rome. Here he had the opportunity for extensive dissemination of the Romanian language and culture, but remained deeply committed to teaching Romanian and European history and culture at universities in the US and Italy. It should be noted that his years spent in cultural diplomacy did not mean leaving the University of Cluj; he was precisely the messenger of this University in cultural, scientific, and academic dialogue with American and European university circles. Besides, his frequent presence at different international scientific/historiographical and cultural events, as a professor at the University of Cluj-Napoca and as a member of the Romanian Academy, brought him a good reputation not only in Europe and North America, but also in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. From his positions as President of the Romanian Academy and Rector of Babeș-Bolyai University, he intervened in a positive manner to support modern directions in scientific research in Romania, frequently taking a public stance in favor of teaching Romanian history, language, and literature in all categories of Romanian schools. And he often raised his voice in support of the development of the Romanian language and culture in areas outside Romania with Romanian communities. But above all, he was an activist for bringing the so-called humanities, and classical languages (Latin and Greek) in particular, out of marginalization. Even if the results of these initiatives were not always as expected, the attitude of academician Ioan-Aurel Pop as a defender of humanistic culture, in a context of mechanization and even barbarization of contemporary human thought, appeared as a salvific beacon for the ship of humanity, caught in a stormy and unpredictable ocean.

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