

*Histories of the University of Iași:
historiographical reflections*

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Every intellectual institution has resorted regularly to some forms of retrospective reflection, meant to justify its position in society. The University of Iași was reserved, shortly after its inauguration, the privilege of illustrating, eloquently, the institutional modernization path that the Romanian society took in the mid nineteenth century. This perspective was and remained deeply attached to all attempts of historiographical recovering imposed by various anniversary moments. On all these occasions, the past had to be conceived so as to illustrate an aspiration and a necessity, despite that the relationship between these two perspectives did not raise, except for some specific approaches, a critical analysis of the founding act 153 years ago.

After the festive events dedicated to the celebration of 150 years of existence of the University of Iași, followed by the opening, two years ago, of the University Museum, we consider it necessary to initiate a series of periodical reflections on how the university elite relates to its own history.

Even from the beginning, the desire to reconstruct the history of the university faced a paradoxical situation that although the domain of reference suggested the possibility of a precise delimitation, professional historians inevitably faced various ambiguities in circumscribing the perimeter of research. The first difficulties are caused by the objective constraints of selecting the topics that should be investigated, and by a series of dilemmas of settling a hierarchy of themes. Beyond trends and patterns that have marked the reconstruction of the past, these challenges are rooted in the status of academic history studies in relation to other various historiographical genres. We should mention here domains as intellectual history, biographies of personalities and reconstructions of local history, as they all interfere inevitably with academic history research. From this point of view, specialized studies have shown a significant deficit of identity, reflected in the juxtaposition of modalities of approach. At the same time, one can speak of an acute uncertainty in the selection of sources. These are of great diversity, mostly official documents issued by the University for

internal administrative use, or addressed to the line ministry and various other entities. The internal documents are now kept at the State Archives of Iași, in the Rector Fund and funds of various faculties. The documents sent by the University to the line ministry can be found at the State Archives of Bucharest, in the Fund of Ministry of Religious Affairs and Education, and copies of them may also be found in Iași. Documents for internal use only and those sent by various fora to the University of Iași after 1948 are stored in the University Archive, located in the main building of the institution. Some other essential sources are products of memory, namely memoirs, diaries, biographies and individual reports. Given this diversity, a constant adjustment of methodologies and the adoption of an appropriate terminology are required. In fact, until two decades ago, our historiography showed a major lack of interest for aligning with the model provided by reconstructions made by Western states, preoccupied since the nineteenth century to define the limits of this field of reflection.

Starting from these general findings, one should note that the first attempts to reconstitute the history of the University of Iași did not claim an autonomous field of reflection, but rather sought to integrate the institutional past in the issue of the general dynamics of the Romanian society. Starting with the first Annual of the University, published for 1895-1896, researchers aimed to recover the past as part of an effort of legitimation, which justified a retrospective analysis of higher education in Iași, which pointed strongly at the idea of continuity. Thus, the founding of the University equaled the regulation “in a definitive form” of some preexisting structures whose origins were lost in premodernity. The first coherent restitution effort was occasioned by the University jubilee in 1911, an event celebrated with a delay whose motivations indicated how the first higher education institution in the country sought to establish a symbolic position in society. On this occasion, historian A. D. Xenopol carried out a *History of the University*, within the “Jubilee Annual”, which he organized based on an interrogation emblematic for the entire approach: „How the University of Iași understood its role in the life of the Romanian people?”. Besides the information used, which, although most of it was not supported by references, is still essential in reconstructing the historical past of the University, the historian sought especially to identify explanations for certain institutional failures and to argue the viability of an intellectual project to which he felt deeply attached and for the future of which he considered himself directly responsible. Thus, the review occasioned by the 50th anniversary offered A. D. Xenopol the opportunity to identify the main cause of the disinterest for academic education in that recruitment for key public positions was made by personal loyalties and not by professional attestation. In the same volume, representatives of major disciplines, whether exact sciences of life and earth,

or humanities, adopted the perspective of institutional reconstruction pointing at the development of departments and classes, using as main reference the individual memory and, quite exceptionally, documentary sources, which, however, were not available in a systematic form.

The annuals in the interwar period revealed, with few exceptions, current information on administrative issues, this quantitative aspect being mentioned only by the reconstitution of some entities within the University, such as seminars, specialized libraries and the Museum of Antiquities. These annuals represented firsthand statistical sources for the reconstruction of the the history of the University of Iași, among which the greatest in terms of information and more complex in terms of interpretation was the one for the period 1930-1935.

An important milestone in the evolution of studies on the University of Iași was represented by the papers occasioned by the anniversary in 1960. In the first attempt of evaluating the recent historiography of the European university, historian Florea Ioncioaia, specialist in university history, briefly surprised how the aggressive contingency of politics had imposed the centenary recovery of academic history. It must be said that the volumes published on this occasion contained important quantitative restitutions and interpretations that nowadays are still viable, such as the study by Professor D. Berlescu, highly quoted from then until today. We should also add that the volume's historiographical structure was strictly calibrated according to the manner in which the communist regime conceived the anniversary moment. Besides the symbolic stake, whose purpose was to convey the idea of reconciliation with academia, which had the docility already secured after the purges in the 50s, the authorities aimed at accomplishing a synthesis that reproduced the entire institutional past of the University of Iași. From this perspective, the amount of restitution was overshadowed by the profound ideological content of the volume that, besides the usefulness of references, sought to render a perspective officially approved. From a theoretical perspective, the historiographical effort was meant to impose the idea of an upward institutional path, which peaked during the year of popular democracy. Thus, the papers occasioned by the anniversary of 1960 retained the attributes specific to quantitative restitutions, but acquired, from a contemporary perspective, a unique testimonial value regarding the effort of historiographical control undertaken by the communist regime.

Two other volumes, coordinated by professors Gheorghe Platon and Vasile Cristian, were published in 1985 at *Junimea* publishing house. Given the period, these papers dedicated to the reconstruction of the university history and development of science obtained maximum of scientific gain in an era of absolute ideological control. The volumes still retain their currency, although quantitative contributions and studies that interpreted

data were not spectacular. It should be stressed, however, that although most papers follow the natural descent of the canon required by the 100 year's anniversary, the ideological impression has been substantially concealed.

The 150 year's anniversary of the University of Iași claimed a prosecution of the research on the history of the oldest institution of modern higher education in Romania. The anniversary effort was prefaced by numerous individual contributions and collective volumes, culminating with the massive volume coordinated by professors Gheorghe Iacob and Alexandru-Florin Platon, whose purpose was to mark, in a solemn manner, the anniversary of 150 years of official history of the University of Iași. The new approach differed from the previous ones, as it aroused the interest in the field of university history and it got off the old vision according to which the academic milieu took an upward path, marked inevitably by successive qualitative accumulations. This linear view was not totally abandoned, but the authors tried to reconstruct both times of crisis and times of break from the founding traditions. The great editorial effort was conducted in the context of exoneration from the constraints of the communist period, which allowed the removal of the ideological ballast that similar previous papers had been forced to accept. Furthermore, over the last two decades the research of academic life in Iași experienced an increasing trend, with a remarkable thematic diversification, doubled by a continuous enrichment of documentary support, along with the lining up with the major trends of the Western historiography. Accomplished by all scientific standards, the studies included in the volume avoided the temptation of anniversary formalism which had perturbed most previous contributions. Moreover, it must be said that the volume is the first one in the sequence of mentioned contributions that aims to reconstruct, *sine ira et studio*, the most problematic temporal segment in the history of the institution, namely the period 1945/1948-1989, when the University was under the domination of communist dictatorship. The new *History of the University of Iași* is a complex work, which could not have had a facile structure, especially since publishers have taken huge risks to propose an approach that breaks up with the previous historiographical legacy. The success of the volume is unquestionable, and, paradoxically, this is not given by the coherence of the whole work from the perspective of historical knowledge, but by the value of some certain contributions, whether separate chapters or certain aspects developed within some researches. It should be noted here the lack of the volume's unity in terms of concept, work methodology and the manner of selecting sources. The only link is the organization of chapters, which creates the impression of a single pattern, though, beyond common titles, the approaches differ substantially. However, the work gathers many elements

of progress in terms of understanding the history of the University of Iași and opens many perspectives for future research.

Starting from this “retrospective glance”, we can say that the history of the University of Iași continues to be written in a manner free from the “summary encyclopaedism” which altered so tenaciously the historiographical project. From this point of view, any critical perspective must take into account that the preference for the past of the University of Iași was aroused especially in times of anniversary moments, which resulted in privileging synthesis in the damage of in-depth analyses. Such histories followed the same chronological and thematic pattern, the scheme being sporadically augmented with new information and interpretations. Only the last volume, published in 2010, alienates in many of its parts from this totalizing perspective and prefers the case study, the tool without which no future synthesis could be conceived.

The future global approach will have to break up with the cliché yet tenacious of linear development, that has been associated the idea of an inevitable progress, which was the result of a progressive accumulation in terms of skills, facilities and, eventually, of the university’s ability to deliver knowledge. In reality, the destiny of the academic institution in the Moldavian capital was marked rather by crises that caused syncope and periods of collapse, which put in question the fate of the University. Recent studies, including several papers in the last *History of the University*, highlight the reluctance of beginnings and the crisis that marked the early stage of the institution.

The causes of these major difficulties that marked the institution’s existence in the last half century require new historiographical approaches that evaluate some key issues. The first one concerns the *institutional model* on which it has been based the structure that claims its founding roots on October 26th, 1860, which involves an analysis on how the institutional project initiators have intended to create a theoretical platform for the edifice that they have created. Hence the *issue regarding the relationship with central authorities*, especially with the line ministry, which aroused fierce controversy on the content and limits of university autonomy, to which some of the researchers in Iași paid attention, but the subject is far from exhausted, both in terms of sources and their interpretation.

Another important research aspect, which has recently begun to develop in all its complexity, regards the *staff of the University at the beginning*. The analyses conducted so far have already imposed to the historiography the phrase “university without a body”, whose power of suggestion cannot be denied, but, as any definition, it is both expressive and restrictive. So as to give it a full comprehensive value, the research should aim at *reconstituting intellectual biographies* and especially *the concrete*

way in which the act of knowledge was conducted, as already revealed in the journal “*Historia Univesitatis Iassensis*”. Regarding the last of the above mentioned themes, it cannot be superfluous to note that without a detailed analysis of the subjects taught and of the relationship between professors and students we will not be able to make an honest evaluation of successes and failures of the University in its formative dimension. From this perspective, two examples must be mentioned: that regarding the Faculty of Theology, amply documented in the current issue of the University Museum’s journal, and that of the Faculty of Medicine, about whose beginnings there is an ample apologetic literature, while, in fact, the lack of qualified staff and the students’ lack of interest forced them to agonize before their inevitable failure.

The mention of these challenges brings to the fore the question regarding the *social adhesion of the university project*, as it is known that the institution proved less attractive to students, at least in the first part of its existence. This is also because the institutional structures of the state did not allow, for a long time, the practical application on the labor market of diplomas and certificates issued by the University of Iași. Regarding *the status of students*, in all meanings, from opportunities open to intellectual training, to multiple possibilities of social representation, there is already a great field of research, and many solid results were published. At the same level of interaction with the society there is also *the participation of academics in major debates that animated the Romanian society* in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the following one. It is known that the academic milieu was an active receptacle of all social and political tensions that had broken down, only to express them afterwards in a radical manner. From this perspective, *anti-Semitic* manifestations and the emergence of *extreme left-wing* ideas require the expansion of the research on public events raised by these schools of thought and especially how they transformed the entire academic life.

On *the place of the university in the new interwar Romania* there were papers written mostly from the point of view of marginality to which the University of Iași was pushed, and those who addressed this problem only took a rhetoric that dominated the relationship between the institution of Iași and those in the capital. It is proper that this sterile reproductive perspective is put aside and the discussions focus on the real reasons that led to the dispossession of the university in the Moldavian capital of many of its symbolic attributes to the benefit of other academic centers, according to the new strategy of the national state.

Not even the topic on the *political involvement of academics in the interwar period* emancipated at the historiographical level, although papers on political history and monographies dedicated to various academic

personalities also reached this subject to a greater or lesser extent. *The impact of the communist regime* on the University is a topic that is only in the preliminary state of the research, as proved again by some studies reunited in our journal. The research on *how the institution continued its existence under the communist regime* is, in fact, a key challenge, as an expression of the intellectual desire for discovering the past and as a form of reflection on our current identity.

In conclusion, one can affirm that studies on the history of the University of Iași knew a discontinuous evolution, with a massive historiographical production that celebrated anniversary moments. This reality determined that synthesis were preferred in the damage of detailed studies, thematic approaches and case studies. In recent years researches have become more applied, have referred to a solid methodological support and have used various sources, most of them, unpublished.

Les histoires de l'Université de Iași: réflexions historiographiques

(Résumé)

Mots-clés: *histoire, historiographie universitaire, anniversaires, Université de Iași*

L'Université de Iași est la première institution moderne qui a été fondée en Roumanie, le 26 Octobre 1860, un an après l'unification de la Moldavie et de la Valachie. Peu de temps après on a cherché à trouver les origines les plus anciennes de l'établissement académique, ce qui a déclenché une véritable polémique concernant le lien entre l'enseignement supérieur médiévale et moderne. Un autre sujet important de débat a concerné le rôle que devait jouer l'Université de Iași dans la modernisation de la société roumaine et si elle était capable de former une élite à même d'imposer des réformes d'inspiration occidentale. Ces dilemmes de l'identité ont fait qu'à chaque anniversaire de l'université dans la capitale de la Moldavie on lance une série de productions historiographiques ayant le rôle de tels bilans de parcours.

Depuis le premier annuaire de l'université, publié pour l'année 1895-1896, on a visé à récupérer le passé dans le cadre d'un effort pour légitimer ce qui justifie un regard rétrospectif sur l'enseignement supérieur à Iași. Le premier effort reconstituitif cohérent a été occasionné par le Jubilé de l'Université en 1911 dans le cadre du volume publié à cette occasion étant reconstituée l'histoire institutionnelle du dernier demi-siècle. Les annuaires de la période de l'entre-deux-guerres présentent, à quelques exceptions près, les informations à jour sur diverses questions purement administratives, le

côté quantitative étant ponctué seulement par la reconstitution des entités au sein de l'Université. Un repère important dans l'évolution des recherches sur l'Université de Iași représente les contributions circonscrites au moment anniversaire de 1960. Les volumes publiés à cette occasion contiennent des réévaluations quantitatives importantes, aussi bien que des déclarations interprétatives qui conservent toujours leur viabilité.

Cependant, l'architecture historiographique du volume a été strictement calibré conformément à la manière dont le régime communiste pensait le moment anniversaire. Ont suivi les deux volumes publiés en 1985 aux éditions Junimea, coordonnés par les professeurs Gheorghe Platon et Vasile Cristian. Dans le contexte de l'époque, ces contributions consacrées à la reconstruction de l'histoire et au développement de la science ont réussi à obtenir un rendement scientifique maximal à une époque de contrôle idéologique total.

La réalisation d'un siècle et demi d'existence de l'Université de Iași a imposé de reprendre la recherche de l'histoire de la plus ancienne institution d'enseignement supérieur de la Roumanie moderne. L'effort historiographique a culminé avec le massif tome anniversaire coordonné par les professeurs Gheorghe Iacob et Alexandru-Florin Gheorghe Platon. L'approche éditoriale approfondie a été déroulée dans le cadre de la délivrance de contraintes propres à la période communiste, qui a permis l'élimination du lest idéologique. Réalisées d'après toutes les normes scientifiques en vigueur, les études incluses dans le volume évitent la tentation du festivisme anniversaire qui a parasité la majorité des contributions précédente.

Les nouvelles approches historiographiques devront approfondir certains des problèmes essentiels du domaine comme: le modèle institutionnel adopté par l'Université, la question des rapports avec les autorités centrales, l'évolution du personnel académique, y compris la reconstitution des biographies intellectuelles et en particulier de la façon concrète dont l'acte de connaître se déroulait. D'autres questions clés concernent l'adhésion sociale du projet universitaire, le statut des étudiants et la participation des universitaires aux grands débats qui ont animé la société roumaine dans la seconde moitié du XIXe siècle et la première moitié du siècle suivant.

Il est connu que le monde académique n'a pas évolué distinctement de l'espace politique, ce qui impose une réévaluation de l'émergence des manifestations antisémites et des idées de l'extrême gauche. L'impact de la mise en place du régime communiste et l'évaluation de la façon dont l'institution a traversé la période communiste, constituent également des sujets qui ne sont que dans les étapes préliminaires de la recherche.

Les études sur l'histoire de l'Université de Iași ont parcouru un itinéraire syncopé, marqué par les productions historiographiques massives célébrées par les moments anniversaires. Cette réalité a fait que les tentatives de synthèse soient préférés aux reconstructions de détail, les approches thématiques et des études de cas. Au cours des dernières années, les recherches sont devenues plus appliquées, grâce à un appui méthodologique solide.

