

BABEȘ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY

DOCTORAL THESIS

– abstract –

BOOKS, LIBRARY, AND READING
IN THE PUBLIC DEBATE OF ROMANIAN CULTURAL
MEDIA IN INTERWAR TRANSYLVANIA

Scientific advisor:
Prof. Univ. Dr.Doru Radosav

PhD Student
Man (Székely) Adriana

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

Chapter I – Historiography of the subject of books, reading, and library in the interwar period

Chapter II – Educational policy and “the politics of culture” – Policies in cultural writings and spirit

II. 1. The “cultural offensive” of Constantin Angelescu

II. 2. The “politics of culture” and the “cultural state” according to Dimitrie Gusti

II. 3. Adult education

II. 4. Legislation on libraries

Chapter III – Interwar cultural programmes for books and libraries

III. 1. Cultural organization forms in interwar Romania

III. 2. Cultural programmes of the ASTRA

III. 3. The Royal Cultural Foundations: programmes and achievements

III. 3.1. The programme of the Prince Carol Cultural Foundation for books and reading

III. 3.2. The “culture of the mind” through the Cultural Establishments

III. 3.3. Guidelines of the Foundation for village libraries

Chapter IV – Interwar cultural patterns and the dynamics of the press

IV. 1. Trends and patterns in Romanian culture

IV. 2. The dynamics of Romanian literary journalism under the influence of cultural trends

Chapter V – Condition of books in interwar Romania

V. 1. Books as commercial objects

V.1.1. Editor-booksellers and publishers

V.1.2. Interwar typographies

V.1.3. Legal Deposit or the Law of the Legal Copy

- V.1.4. The crisis of books and paper
- V.2. The book as a means of cultural propaganda
 - V.2.1. Book promotion by exhibitions
 - V.2.2. “The Feast of the Book,” a controversial cultural event

Chapter VI – The library – an institution for reading

- VI. 1. Romanian libraries in Transylvania before 1918
- VI. 2. Various typologies of Romanian libraries
- VI. 3. On libraries and librarians in the interwar period
- VI. 4. Some statistical data regarding interwar Romanian libraries
- VI. 5. Bibliological studies in the Romanian cultural environment

Chapter VII – Reading in the interwar period – investigations, attitudes, and aspects

- VII. 1. The concept of “public reading”
- VII. 2. Landmarks of sociological investigations in interwar Romanian libraries
- VII. 3. Attitudes towards reading – a subject of debate
- VII. 4. Schools and public reading. Private reading
- VII. 5. Reading practices in rural environment
- VII. 6. Aspects of reading in fine arts

Conclusions

Bibliography

Attachments

Keywords: history of books, history of reading, history of libraries, cultural policies and programmes, cultural trends and patterns, book production and dissemination (publishers, typographies, bookshops), library and public reading, sociology of reading practices.

The choice of the research subject from among a plethora of other possibilities presented itself as a challenge. Starting from the premise that the subject has been approached from various perspectives, and also in order to apply the criterion of multidisciplinary, I chose the book–reading–library triad as it was debated in the Romanian cultural environment as a novel cultural phenomenon. In my approach of the subject matter, I made use of the analytical-synthetic method, according to the following argumentative pattern. First, by the analytical method, I sought to identify the main actors in the chain of Romanian book production, then, using the synthetic method, I tried to grasp the dynamics of debates on problems connected to the life of books.

In establishing the relationship between these actors, I had in mind the processing pattern of book production, including the creation, production, dissemination, organization, and reception of the cultural product, the book, by reading. The general objective of this research is to demonstrate that the debate over books, reading, and libraries represented a permanent concern of Romanian society in the interwar period. I have tried to identify the major subjects of debate, and therefore it was necessary to establish the most important cultural media where these were discussed, especially on institutional levels (schools, associations, foundations, cultural societies, universities, ministries, etc.).

I have conducted bibliographic research on the basis of the traditional and online catalogues of the major Romanian libraries and also certain foreign libraries, including those of the National Library of France; reference works regarding the history of books, reading, and libraries from the collections of Romanian libraries; works of cultural and social history, pedagogy, sociology and practice of reading, etc; collections of interwar newspapers and periodicals from the collections of the Lucian Blaga Central University Library Cluj, both in printed and electronic format; electronic resources (databases, web resources), etc. I have paid extra attention to articles in interwar newspapers and magazines discussing the problem of the Romanian books circulating in the period under scrutiny. I have also been concerned with the issue of books as cultural propaganda, identifying the concrete forms of how this propaganda was made.

I have structured my research according to the following objectives: highlighting the main topics of debate around books engaged by Romanian interwar cultural policies

and programmes; identifying the ideological, social, and economic aspects of book production (publishers, bookshops, typographies); and focusing on the attitudes and approaches to books and reading in the Romanian cultural space.

Starting out from these objectives, I have divided the thesis in chapters and subchapters, as follows: introduction, seven chapters, conclusions, bibliography, and attachments.

In the first chapter I presented the historiography of the research of books, reading, and libraries on the basis of keywords relevant to this study and the perspectives involved (historical, pedagogical, bibliological, sociological).

The second chapter contains the presentation of the characteristics of education and cultural policies in the context of the changes that the interwar Romanian society had to face in the process of alphabetization and culturalization of the Romanian population. In the next chapter – the third – I show the forms of cultural organization specific for the interwar period, the cultural programmes of the ASTRA and the Royal Cultural Foundations, and I emphasize their role in promoting Romanian books and libraries, especially in a rural environment.

In chapter IV I write about the major cultural trends and patterns available in interwar Romania, and their influence on the dynamics of Romanian literary journalism.

The fifth chapter outlines the condition of Romanian books from two points of view: the book as a commercial object, and the book as a means of cultural propaganda. In order to emphasize the first aspect, I have referred to the approach that the major Romanian publishers, typographies, and bookshops had towards books, pointing out also the consequences that the legislation (the law of legal deposit) and the economic crisis of the interwar period had over this approach. The second aspect treated certain modalities of book promotion, such as exhibitions and “feasts of the book”.

The sixth chapter presents some typologies of Romanian libraries as institutions of reading as they appear in the specialized literature, as well as the bibliological concerns of certain interwar personalities who promoted books and reading in the public space.

The last chapter treats certain landmarks of sociological research on reading, pinpointing the attitude of Romanian society towards the act of reading as well as the

debate over the forms in which reading in the interwar period manifested itself. One of the original aspects of our concern was that of the appearance of reading in the fine arts, a subchapter which presents certain selected examples of the works of representatives of the interwar Romanian School of Painting, with the purpose of demonstrating how they contributed to the promotion of the act of reading.

Following this structure of the thesis, I have identified a set of problems that caught the attention of Romanian cultural media in Transylvania, and the way these were discussed in the public space. Subjects such as those connected to cultural policy and condition, the impact of events like “the feast of the book” on editorial policies and productions, and the influence of the crisis of books and paper on the entire book production chain, were illustrated by various examples from the press of the time, mainly from Transylvania.

The interwar period generated new concepts such as “the politics of culture”, “the cultural state”, “the science of the nation”, “adult education”, as well as new institutions, “cultural establishments”, “peasant schools”, “university extensions”, etc. It represented the initial period of sociological research for knowing the realities of Romanian society in full process of political, economical, and cultural reorganization.

The analysis of publications in the domain of pedagogy has contributed to familiarization with the ideologies and sensibilities of the main actors of books and reading, as well as the transformation of the reading practices, the development of public reading, and the network of specialized libraries both in urban and rural environments.

In the interwar period the modernization of the library system entered a dynamic process of institutional and reading reorganization. The mobility of the interest towards public reading and the support of access to culture by means of the book which serves the interests of the public regardless of age, professional training, or environment (urban or rural, etc.) represented the application of available cultural policies in various geographical areas.

The discourse and representation of reading was also grasped in art. The selection of works which depict various appearances of reading and the book had the purpose of illustrating the fact that the act and reading and its object, the book, can be promoted by painting or graphic art.

The thesis entitled *Books, Library, and Reading in the Public Debate Of Romanian Cultural Media in Interwar Transylvania* attempts to prove that in the interwar period there was a permanent concern for books, reading, and libraries, and the subjects connected to books represented essential landmarks for Romanian cultural policies and programmes. The approach of the topic from multiple perspectives (historical, pedagogical, sociological, bibliological) contributed to the identification of a set of problems engaged by Romanian cultural media in Transylvania, and to the ways these were debated in the public space. Subjects such as those connected to cultural policy and condition, the impact of events like “the feast of the book” on editorial policies and production, and the influence of the crisis of books and paper on the entire book production chain, were illustrated by various examples from the press of the time or reference works of the field of research.