

GLORIOUS DISCOURSES AND COMPLETE IGNORANCE: STUDENT PERCEPTION ON CANTEMIR'S WORK

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Abstract

Although the works of Dimitrie Cantemir and his son Antiloh are considered among the most important in the fields of history and literature, nowadays it is hard to find a research initiative or a research program specialized in the study of Dimitrie Cantemir's work. It is the indisputable merit of a Romanian born historian like Stefan Lemny to offer a very complex and profound account on the life and work of Dimitrie and Antioh Cantemir. But, like other remarkable efforts, this is an individual research. It is my intention to focus on the recent works regarding the life and work of Dimitrie Cantemir in order to prove that beside the moments of celebration there is little or no interest in the work of this remarkable Romanian intellectual. I parallel this situation with the information students have on Dimitrie Cantemir. In the first section of my article I shall focus on how much information on Cantemir do our students rely have. Thus I shall make an empirical research questioning the students of the first year on the most common facts about Cantemir's work and life. In the second section of my article, I shall try to answer questions like how many volumes having as main subject matter the works of Cantemir have been published recently. In what branches of science the works of Cantemir have been mostly analyzed? What is the ratio between the works concerning his personality and those concerning specific topics in specific works of Dimitrie Cantemir.

Keywords: *Dimitrie Cantemir, Antiloh Cantemir, recent works on Cantemir, information on Cantemir*

Introduction

This year we are celebrating 340 years since the birth of one of the most famous Romanian intellectuals, Dimitrie Cantemir. Usually, on such occasions it is accustomed to make positive remarks on the distinguished personality and work of that personality. In the Romanian academic tradition those are moments where researchers gather together in the joined effort to remember important things about important persons. It is not my intention to take a separate path by trying to diminish in some way this effort of celebration. Still I must discuss a very provocative event taking place recently. What I am taking about is the “countermovement” in the critical reception of important Romanian cultural personalities. The most important one was the 265th number of the Romanian journal *Dilema* where a set of literary critics tried to “temper” or to “de-mistify” the personality of our national poet *Mihai Eminescu* by trying to liberate him from the “mortifying eulogies”. This started a vivid and sometimes passionate debate in the cultural Romanian media but the results were not those anticipated by the initiators of this debate. Suddenly two camps appeared in the cultural Romanian arena: those trying to defend the *Dilema*'s literary critics¹ and those trying to defend our national poet and myth. There is no need to say that this soon fueled vicious personal attacks and it all mounted to a trivial fight that took the otherwise truly remarkable

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¹ <http://dilemaveche.ro/sectiune/tema-saptamanii/articol/ilustra-victima-comploturi-impotriva-lui-eminescu>, *online* document accessed at 08.11.2013.

personality as a pretext for expressing their anger and frustration. Antisemitism, ultra-nationalism, and delusional affirmations were addressed to those signing the (in)famous 265 number of Dilema. This is the main reason that I must clearly state that it is not my intention to transfer this kind of debate from the case of Eminescu to the case of Cantemir. Still, I cannot ignore the fact that there is always a temptation to write exaggerated apologetic discourses in such occasions. It is not the main objective of this article to further analyze the case of the so-called attacks on Eminescu but I believe that this offered a more clear view on the way Romanian nationalism is transforming important cultural personalities in simple means to an ideological end that can be easily summarized like that: our nation is great since we have such important personalities. In the attempt of gaining the independence from URSS, Nicolae Ceaușescu, turn on the nationalist “protochronist”² discourses in a total contrast with the ideals of the socialist revolution³.

I do not agree with some of the “strategies” used to “de-mistify” the personality of Eminescu. If so many articles are written only to praise the poet’s personality as if it was the Holy Grail the countermovement should not base its strategy on the defamation of the personality. This type of discourse could only be fought by writing well documented critical perspectives on specific topics in the author’s work. The key is not to criticize the personality but the people using the indisputable merits of that personality to match their ideological agenda. And this is a very important objective since I believe it is exactly this type of transforming a remarkable personality into a political myth that creates a gap between the works of the cultural personality, Dimitrie Cantemir, in our case, and the students. Although many would feel it is a shameful thing to admit that our students know little or nothing on Cantemir it consider it is now the time to truly acknowledge just how ignorant our students rely are when it comes to Cantemir’s work and personality. This is exactly why in the first part of my paper I present the results of an empirical research regarding the level of information on Cantemir our students have. Than in the second part of my article I shall make an analysis of the works on the famous Romanian intellectual that can be found in one of the biggest academic libraries opened to students: The Central University Library. As one can already anticipate there is little of no interest in bringing the personality of Dimitrie Cantemir closer to the students. It is not my intention to prove that the “festivist discourses” are the only reason for the ignorance of our students. This is only one of the many factors contributing to the lack of interest and information in Cantemir’s work and personality. Yet I consider it is very important to oppose the grandiose festive discourses on one hand with our student’s almost complete lack of information on Dimitrie Cantemir.

1. Student perception on Dimitrie Cantemir’s work and personality

This year I conducted an empirical research having as subjects the first year students enrolled in an academic program in the field of social studies⁴. It was a quantitative research having as main objective to offer a clear perspective on the level of information our students have on the personality and intellectual contributions of Dimitrie Cantemir.

The research was based on a four questions questionnaire that students were invited to answer. The questions were the following:

² In 1974 the literary critic Edgar Papu published in the mainstream cultural journal *Secolul XX* the article *The Romanian Protocronism* arguing that Romanians had priority on some European achievements. This became the line encouraged by the former Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu.

³ As we all know the proletarian revolution was closely related to a quite obvious idea: proletarians do not belong to any particular nation. Their solidarity was formed on the basis of class struggle not on national ideals. The nationalist path Ceaușescu took was somehow strange in this context.

⁴ I shall not reveal the name of the institution the students of my study where enrolled in due to the fact that image damages can result from that.

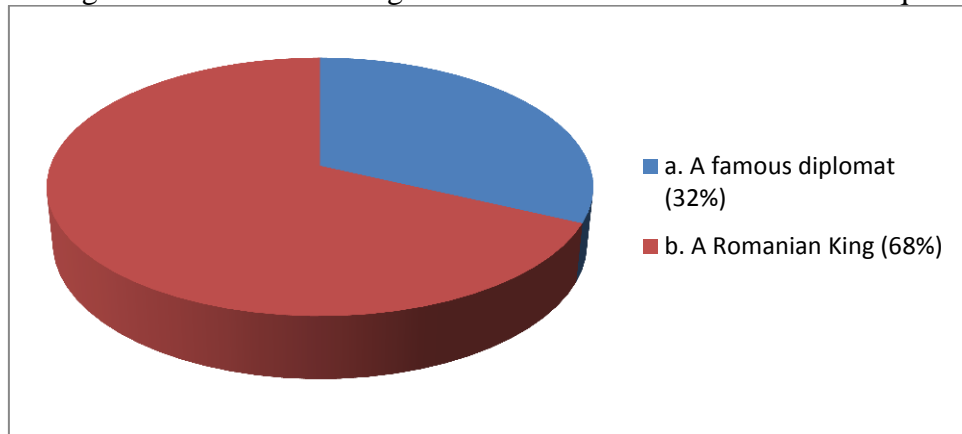
1. Dimitrie Cantemir was:
 - a. a famous diplomat
 - b. a Romanian king

2. Dimitrie Cantemir ruled:
 - a. in Tara Românească
 - b. in Moldova
 - c. in Transilvania⁵

3. Dimitrie Cantemir was born:
 - a. In the XVth century
 - b. In the XVIth century
 - c. In the XVIIth century

4. State the name of one of the works of Dimitrie Cantemir

The image below is summarizing the results for the answers to the first question:



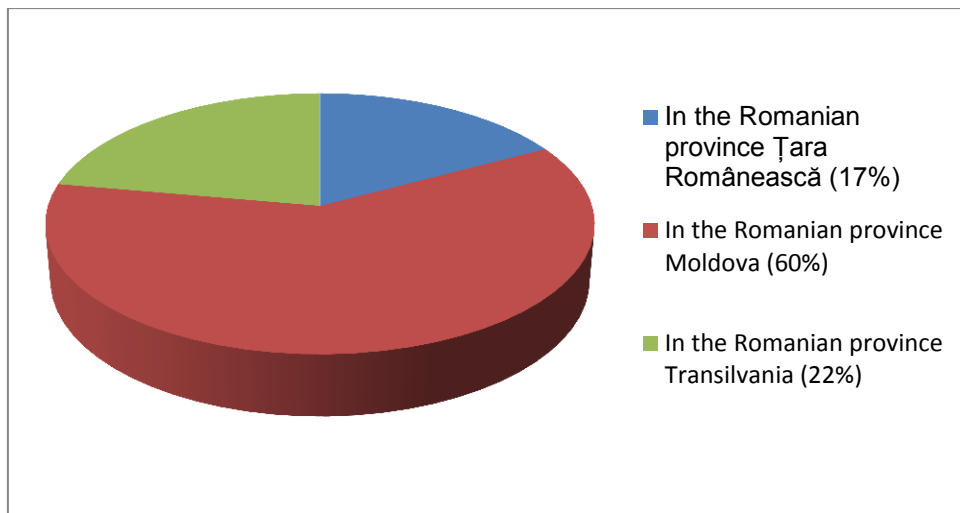
The results of this research were the following. From the 58 students 19 responded that Dimitrie Cantemir was a famous diplomat and 39 that he was a Romanian king. None of the students recognized the fact that Dimitrie Cantemir was both a famous diplomat⁶ and also a Romanian king although they were instructed that it is possible to have to strait answers to a question.

The second question concerned the Romanian province where Dimitrie Cantemir was king for a short while⁷. The image below summarizes the results of this research:

⁵ Those were the Romanian provinces before the creation of the Romanian national state.

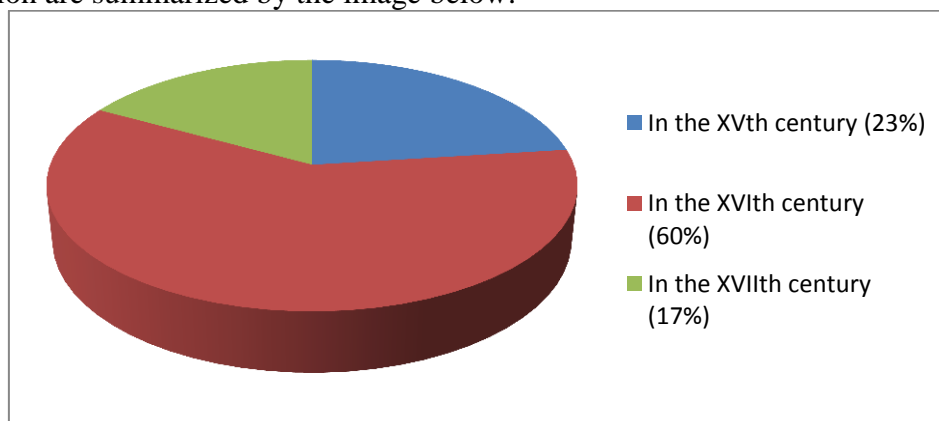
⁶ He served as personal adviser of the Russian king Peter the Great (1672-1725).

⁷ Dimitrie Cantemir was the king of Moldau for two short periods: March-April 1693; 1710-1711.



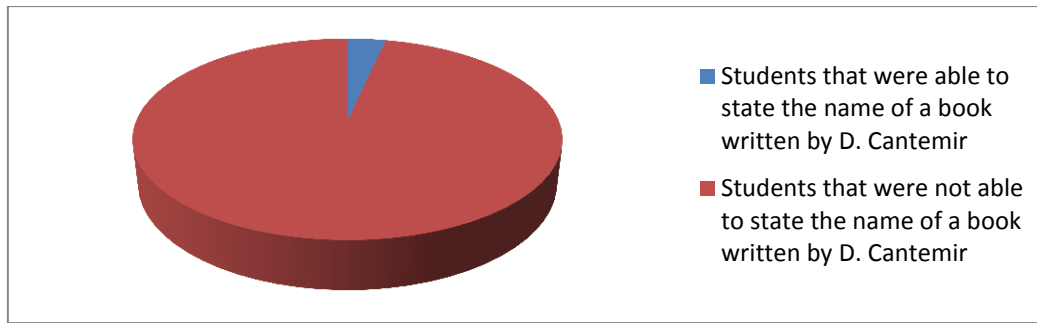
As the image shows 17% of the 58 students participating in the study responded that Dimitrie Cantemir lived in the Romanian province Țara Românească, 23% said that he lived in Transilvania and 60% said he lived in Moldova. This is in fact considered common sense knowledge. Yet, 40% of our students failed to answer correctly to this question.

The next question regarded the century Dimitrie Cantemir was born in. The students were asked to place its year of birth in the XVth, the XVIth, or XVIIth century. The results to this question are summarized by the image below:



As the image is showing only 17% of the students participating in this study answered correctly to the question. Indeed Dimitrie Cantemir was born in 1673. The vast majority, 60% of the students participating in the research, placed his birth in the XVIth century. There is a somehow bizarre explanation to this mistake. As I was observing the students I couldn't help to notice that some of them used their iPhones or other modern technological devices to rapidly search the information on the Internet. As they found out the birth date they assumed it was the XVIth century, since the date is one thousand *six hundred* seventy three (1673) This reveals that modern technology only got them so far: they have not acquired proper knowledge of the way the centuries are numbered.

The last question regarded the student's ability to identify and state the name of an important work of Dimitrie Cantemir. From the image bellow we can easily see that only a very small number of students (3.4%) were indeed able to offer a name of an work of Dimitrie Cantemir:

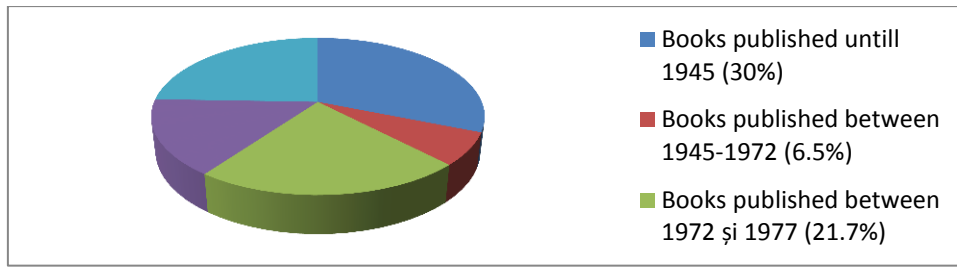


As this research proves there is very little interest and information at the level of first year students in our department. It is my intention to parallel this data with the kind of works to be found in the most prestigious academic library, Central University Library in Bucharest. To achieve this goal I conducted a research focusing on the type of works having as main subject the life and intellectual contributions of Dimitrie Cantemir. I tried to find out what is the ratio between “celebrating” works written on festive occasions and more applied researches focused on specific topics in Cantemir’s work. I also tried to reveal if there is a continuous sustained and systematic research effort (academic journals, research programs, post-doctoral research scholarships, etc.) or only individual researches. I shall present the results of this research in the following section of this article.

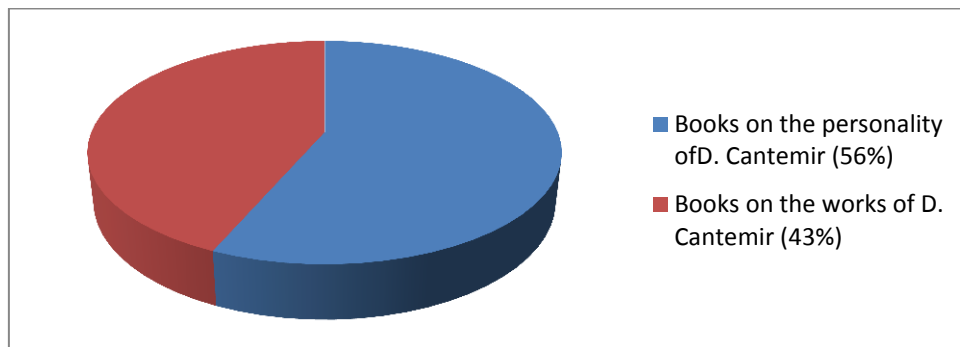
2. The academic reception of Cantemir’s work – published books and articles indexed in the Central University Library catalogue

This first issue that I tried to address in my research concerns a historical aspect. I tried to find if the works concerning the personality of Dimitrie Cantemir appeared regularly or if there was a sudden rise of interest in this field in historical occasions like the celebration of 300 years from his birth, for example. The image below shows us how many books and collected papers on Cantemir appeared in different historical periods.

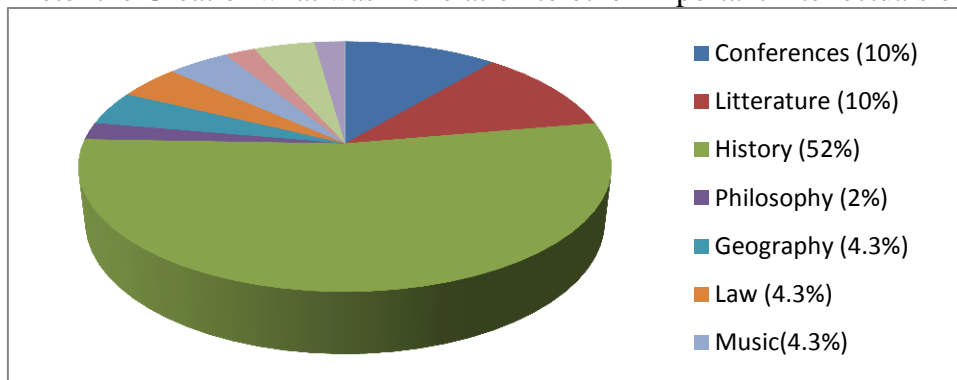
As the bellow image shows us there is no continuous effort in researching the various aspects of Cantemir’s work. As expected, the year 1973 was a fertile one in terms of published books in this field. The reason is a transparent one: the Romanian academics were celebrating 300 years from the birth of Dimitrie Cantemir. On this occasion the Romanian Academy hosted a conference in his honor. The fact that Dimitrie Cantemir was a declared Christian made the communist regime have a reserved reaction towards him especially in the post war period. The historical context became favorable to important Romanian cultural figures once Nicolae Ceausescu came into power. It was not for the expected reason: the Romanian dictator was not rely interested in Romanian culture, but, as it was his desire to gain some independence from the Soviet Union, he took the nationalist path. It was in this context that several important Romanian cultural personalities including our *national* poet Mihai Eminescu began being exploited ideologically. They were the most important elements used to building or national identity in the dominant ideological discourse during the two decades preceding the 1989 Revolution. This was the context that gave birth to grandiose discourses using the so called “wooden – language” to describe our national cultural personalities. As the image is showing the historical occasions generate a vivid interest in Cantemir’s work. The celebration of 300 years and of 340 years from his birth is related to a rise in Romanian academics interest in this field.



The next subject of interest in my research was the ratio between books having as main subject the life of Dimitrie Cantemir and the books concerning his work. The image below is showing that the dominant interest is in the biographical aspects regarding the life of Dimitrie Cantemir. Thus, there are less books on the works of Dimitrie Cantemir than books analyzing his life and personality. There is also another important aspect: there are no books treating specific topics in one of the many works of Dimitrie Cantemir. All the researches applied on his work treat general issues such as literary style in his work in general, or his philosophy as it appears throughout his entire work. It is also important to mention that there are no introductory works that could make the ideas of Dimitrie Cantemir more familiar. There is no book called “Introduction to Dimitrie Cantemir Philosophy”, or “A Companion to Dimitrie Cantemir” in the Central University Library. The students cannot find any kind of introduction to the ideas expressed in the various works of Dimitrie Cantemir.



The next task in my research was to classify the books on Cantemir indexed in the Central University Library using the criterion of the scientific perspective they were written from. Thus, I could find an important number of books in the history field of investigation. Although Dimitrie Cantemir was also an important philosopher, writer and even musician, the main interest of the works that I could find in the Central University Library focus on historical aspects of his life: how and when he came to power, what was his role as a secret advisor of Peter the Great or what was his relation to other important intellectuals of his time.



This part of the research reveals several aspects:

- First of all there are no introductory works to Dimitrie Cantemir life and work
- There are many books written on his personality and less on his works
- There are many books on historical aspects (52%) and a small percentage on other aspects (his philosophy, his political or religious views, etc.)
- There is no systematic or continuous effort to analyze specific topics in specific works of Dimitrie Cantemir
- There are little or no critical approaches to Dimitrie Cantemir's work (what are the strengths and weaknesses of his perspectives, what are the influences, etc.)
- There are many books written on festive occasion that treat only general aspects about Dimitrie Cantemir

Conclusions

It is not my intention to make a causal connection between the situation of the books in Central University Library and the almost complete ignorance of the students in our department on central issues regarding Dimitrie Cantemir. Still, I believe it is time to be more careful about the growing gap between our "festivist" discourses and student's complete ignorance regarding one of our most important intellectuals. It seems that the greater the academics admiration for Dimitrie Cantemir, the greater the student's indifference toward him. It is not my intention to offer definitive solutions to this problem that has many causes, some of them beyond our ability to solve them. Instead I sincerely consider that this article must be a warning sign that we must find new ways of communicating if we want our students to be more informed and interested in the life and work of Dimitrie Cantemir.

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