

Politicizing Nature. Environmental Political Thought in Romanian Modernity around 1900

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Abstract

The article starts from the general observation of a need in Romanian and central-east European literature of addressing from an environmental history lens the question of climate change and the narratives pushing the subject on the table of public policies, in a historical perspective. Drawing from the literature in the field and linking the environmental to the modernization narratives, the article investigates the different ways of politicizing and conceptualizing Nature during the Grand Transformation in the Romanian Modern State. Analyzing several case studies by using the conceptual history methods, the article argues that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, shaping modernization passes also through reconceptualizing the possession of nature which means reflecting, conceiving norms and practices and professionalizing all the narratives and the activities dealing with humanizing, territorializing, transforming, commodifying especially forests and mountains. The article also finds that the narratives on deforestation or lacking law enforcement in the matters of environment protection are to be understood also in an intergenerational transmission of concept and/or stereotypes, linked often to nationalistic discourses: the contemporary patriotic narrative comes directly, as it is showed in the article, from a certain nationalistic cult of Nature. At the turn of Nineteenth century, Romanian central and east European popular patriotism emerges also from that ideological entanglement.

Keywords

modernization; political nature; political thought; environment; nation

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“The Earth is especially interesting for its relations with humans; it is curious to note how, little by little, social facts of whatever order have slipped into the works of geography. Since man has been introduced into geography, the whole of society has been part of it”. (Urechea, 1902: 1)

Introduction

The present article addresses the general field of environmental history of political thought, through the lens of the particular case of Romanian environmentalism during the great wave of modernization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Our research hypothesis leans towards the development of a stronger and more visible connection with the European trends in the late nineteenth century, which grounds the origins of a certain type of narrative (Tudurachi, 2023).

As a thriving literature shows, the environmental history of political thought is a valuable way to understand today's ecological (Meyer, 2011), political, and social projections of fundamental political notions such as freedom, sovereignty, political power, domination. It is only by exploring the way in which these notions were formed at the beginning of modern political regimes that one can truly imagine and try to explain the basis of a collective relationship with the material world, the last moments of which we are currently experiencing (Charbonnier, 2020: 7).

At the same time, the same political thought still resiliently reflects the theme of the gap or the delay in absorbing its representation of modernity and modernization (Dorondel and Șerban, 2022, Petrescu, 2023), and thus tends to reflect in a simplified way the political cleavages of the moment, apparently reduced to a confrontation between conservatives and liberals (Worster, 2021). The implications revealed by the study of environmental political thought in its beginnings within Romanian society are in reality more nuanced, as the article will try to show through the few case studies presented.

First, from the perspective and methods of political science, it will examine if and how these premises can be retrieved in the political narrative about nature at the beginning of the Romanian adventure of modern statehood. Second, the article will address the relationship of the Romanian narrative to the environmentalist and/or political ecology discourse of the time.

The setting is far from new: modernity has been unfolding this process in various ways since the seventeenth century. In Latour's words, “the talk about ‘politics of nature’ might appear simultaneously strange and obvious, terribly new and terribly old [...] Until recently, we used to say that although politics is about conflicts, power struggles, ideologies, emotions, inequalities and the distribution of resources and wealth, the transition from politics to the natural realm meant a shift from endless conflict to certainty, from human-centered passions to object-centered reason” (Latour, 2011).

Scholars generally agree that the modernization of the period was shaped by all these different factors, which were also reinforced and complexified by the institutionalization of science, which added its insights to the mainstream evolutionist (Gibson, O'Brien and Turda, 2020), that is, secular teleological paradigm. The internalization of the associated idea of technological progress also plays an important role, as well as the rise of a technocratic philosophy associated with a democratic program: a Saint-Simonian paradigm (Charbonnier, 2022) in the European landscape, alongside the presupposition of nature as the basis for the territorialization of the nation-state.

On the one hand, the questioning of the foundations and definitions of science and progress as growth drivers can be found almost worldwide in the late nineteenth century, especially in the 1880s and 1890s. At that time, several political trends already connected the dots between anthropocentrism and destructive growth, especially when combined with poorly designed institutions with excessive commodification of land, linked to a certain distribution of power and agency (Stanziani, 2021), or with insufficiently explained and/or poorly managed technological progress (Jarrige, 2022).

On the other hand, the environmental history of political thought can help us understand current ecological, political, and social perspectives on freedom, sovereignty, political power, and domination (McNeill and Engelke, 2014). Only by examining the ways in which these concepts have been shaped in the recent past can one explain the relationship between society and the material world (Dasgupta, Raven, and McIvor, 2019). In post-communist Central and Eastern Europe, political narratives about communism have been linked to the resilience of certain nationalist stereotypes (Bădescu, Angi, Benedek, and Constantinescu, 2024), undemocratic institutional or informal practices (Stanley Wilson, 2019: 46-56), identity stereotypes, as well as sovereign narratives about national territory (Jylhä and Hellmer, 2020: 315-335) and property disputes over forests and mountains, especially when borders are involved, as "long historical trajectories have been found to play an important role in shaping current levels of democracy and development." (Beissinger and Kotkin, 2014).

The present article contributes to the environmental history of political thought, by examining some examples in Romanian political thought during the modernization of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There are several questions to be asked that deal with a certain "environment before environment" (Warde, Robin and Sorlin, 2018: 69-70). First, how and why was the environment introduced into political discourse at the beginning of the second industrial revolution (1870-1914)? Second, how did different conceptions of nature and the environment emerge in Romanian political thought during a period of massive political and socioeconomic change, around 1900, that was generally taking place throughout the geographical area? (Bego, 2020).

This article centers on the ways in which modern political thinkers reflected upon the ambivalence, the ambiguity, and the intricacies of nature and environment in Romania between 1881, the year when the Romanian Kingdom was established under King Carol I, and 1914, the year of his death (Hitchins, 2014). Under his rule, Romania underwent an accelerated political, economic, and administrative modernization (Blokker, 2023) which also led to an increase in social inequality, social unrest, and political struggles (Laszlo and Murgescu, 2020). The 1881-1914 period is widely considered as a turning point in the country's modernization, in tune with broader European trends (Sora, 2022: 10). Romania was recognized as an independent state after the War of Independence of 1877–1878 and became a constitutional monarchy in 1881. This evolution was made possible by Alexandru Ioan Cuza's election as Prince of both Moldavia and Wallachia in 1859, which unified the two principalities under the Ottoman Empire (Georgescu, 1991: 151-154). In 1866, a coup forced Cuza to abdicate. The German Carol of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen was designated Prince of Romania, in the hope of securing German support for the country. On 14 March 1881, Romania was proclaimed a kingdom and a constitutional monarchy, with Carol as its first king. The new state, geographically situated between the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires, and the Kingdom of Serbia, looked mainly to the West, especially France, for its cultural, educational and administrative models. (Hitchins, 2014: 112-159).

The article shows that the models used for constructing the environmental narrative during 1881-1914 partially drew on the French model and benefited from its transnational diffusion. To detail these processes, the paper also maps the main narratives, stereotypes, and prerequisites about nature,

progress, and modernization that were prevalent at the time, and discusses the commodification of nature in modern Romania, which emerged from the new conception about the environment (Moore, 2016: 81). During that time, modernization called for a reconceptualization of land possession (Pagden, 2015), which in turn required conceiving new norms and practices related to nature and the environment, and professionalizing the narratives and the activities related to humanizing, territorializing, transforming, and commodifying forests, mountains, and rivers (Vasile, 2018: 170-201). Modernization was part of nation-building in Romania, and Central and Eastern European countries in general, which sought to construct a distinct national identity linked to the notions of progress, modernization, and technology (Dimou, 2009: 7-13). This link can still be found in political narratives in the region (Petrescu, 2023: 145-154).

Methodology

The paper addresses the research questions by mapping and critically investigating the main changes in the way nature and environment were defined and deployed in the Romanian political thought: the trans and inter-nationalization of nature, and the way nature was affected by, and affected, administration, liberalism, and nation-building (Espagne, 2013). It proposes a methodological toolkit rooted in the history of political thought (Forrester and Smith, 2018) and in conceptual history (Koselleck, 1990; Rosa, 2010; Escudier, 2017) in order to examine the environmental history of political thought through the lenses of political science (Charbonnier, 2020; Mateescu, 2011). It draws on these methods and disciplines to illuminate the connections between nature and the changes in the environment (Hersey and Steinberg, 2019), brought about by the Industrial and the French revolutions, although the change has its roots in early modern thought (Moore, 2016). As a result, these revolutions led to conceiving a new time/ human activity system (Rosa, 2020; Hartog, 2020) and their study can help us to understand what nature represented for the new political narratives produced (Worster, 1993; McNeill and Mauldin, 2012). At the end of eighteenth century, with the “double internality of historical change,” (Moore, 2016: 80) and the adoption of the dialectical perspective of “humanity inside nature, nature inside humanity,” human activity began to be increasingly “environment-making.” As a result, nature moved from being referred to as a noun (the environment) to a verb (environment-making). “Human organizations became environment-making processes and projects; in turn, the web of life shapes human organization.” (Moore, 2016: 81).

This movement led to a vast cultural and political transfer from the technocratic social liberalism of the Third French Republic to the Romanian public administration. (Vasile, 2022; Sora, 2022: 9-39). In this context, the paper examines the perspectives of two Romanian administrators, scientists, nature-lovers, and authors – Nestor Urechia (1866-1931), and Paul A. Grunau (1860-1936) – as reflected in their most important writings and statements.

Nestor Urechia was an author, civil engineer, civil servant, nature writer and environmentalist; Paul A. Grunau was one of the best known and most influential forestry specialists and public servants in Romania at the time. They were not only conceptualizing nature for the sake of their professions, but they were also boosting public awareness of political environmentalism. They wrote in newspapers and journals such as *Revista nouă* and *Revista pădurilor*. They were not only engineers schooled in France and respectively Germany, but they were popularizing their knowledge and political theories (Grunau was also a professor of political economy in Bucharest); they taught, drafted codes and regulations, and fought for the conservation of the forests around Bucharest and the rational exploitation of timber in the Bucegi mountains (Bouras, 2018).

The two authors discussed and analyzed concepts such as nature, environment and modernization from the perspective of the centralization of state activity as well as the technological and institutional innovation that affected urban and rural areas (Laszlo and Murgescu, 2020: 315). Holding positions in public administration or belonging to the political elite allowed public servants to change not only the environmental political thought, but also related practices (Sora, 2022: 10) This selection allows us to compare environmental thought in Romania and France and to establish connections between them.

By analyzing selected documents, books, and newspaper articles, I reconstructed these authors' positions on nature, which they viewed as facilitating individual fulfilment and nation building. The written materials were selected based on their representativeness for the thought of Urechia and Grunau, focus on key concepts (nature and environment), and their relevance for politics and nation-building, visibility in the public sphere, and potential in shaping the public and political discourse (King, Keohane and Verba, 2021, 131-147). Only writings published in Romania in the Romanian language were included. To identify relevant writings, I relied on the Dictionary of Romanian Authors and *Revista Pădurilor* [The Forests' Review] (Bengesco, 1907; Zaci, Papahagi and Sassu, 1995). *Revista Pădurilor*, established in 1882, is one of the oldest journals in the world that publishes on forest-related topics. Since its inception, the quality of the contributions and their impact on public policies have been acknowledged by the public, as were its wide geographical and thematical coverage and the authors' diverse profiles (Kochanowicz and Murgescu, 2017: 91-97). To further contextualize the views of the two authors, and their narratives about nature and environment, I searched digital archives of journals and professional associations and identified other publications that appeared in 1880-1914.²

Conserve, Restore, or Transform? A Scholars' Debate within a Global Trend

Scholarship on nature and environment and their impact on politics has developed along several dimensions. The article will argue that the Romanian environmental political thought of that time combines the utilitarian (Jarrige 2022), and the more sustainable-oriented environmentalism (Siep 2020, Charbonnier 2022) with a more aesthetical approach (Hoquet, 2022) and therefore seems to merge with the transnational trends of the time.

In the Romanian case, anthropologists (Koszor-Codrea, 2021; Dorondel and Șerban, 2022) address the environmental questions mainly by investigating the role and scope of communities in the development of a particular discourse and attitude in relation to the human effect on surrounding natural elements, noting the different understanding of modernization in Romania and Eastern Europe, relative to Western Europe. Also studied are the connections established via environment within communities and/or societies (Cotoi, 2020) and institutions (Ardeleanu, 2017), reshaping the understanding of natural elements (Vasile, 2020) through labor, class, conflicts between them in the long process of modernization (Huzui-Stoiculescu, Stoiculescu, Pătru-Stupariu and Nicolae, 2017). Their work touches the issue of nature and environment, in relation to regional politics and modernization. Tudorachi (2023) and Dimitriu are addressing similar issues from cultural studies and literary studies perspective.

² Arcanum (<https://adt.arcanum.com/ro/>). Other digital archives we used: the Digital Library of the Central University Library – Cluj (<https://dspace.bcuccluj.ro/>), the Digital Library of the Central University Library – Iași (<https://dspace.bcu-iasi.ro/handle/123456789/35>), the Bucharest Digital Library (<http://digitool.dc.bmms.ro:8881/R>), and the Digital Library of the Central University Library (<https://www.bcub.ro/en/digital-library/>).

Our goal is to add a less frequent view in the literature, the narrative of nature in the political thought around 1900. Nation and nature appear to be more and more related (Nicolescu, 2014) in Romanian policies and institutional debate and are prone to sometimes sharpen the aggressive ethnicization (Coțofană 2022) of an entire span of the Romanian political model (Andrei, 2021). Similarly, French anthropologist and sociologist C. Roth (2022) studied the “nationalization of the mountains,” a process which started mainly after the 1848 revolution in the Bucegi (Southern Carpathians), on both the Transylvanian and Wallachian sides (and relied on mountaineering and touring clubs), while topics directly linked to nature as a political concept are yet to be investigated with methodological designs that account for the discourses centered on nature and its relationship to technological development.

On the western side, Moore (2016) challenged the idea of an environmental turn strictly related to “coal and steam,” thus calling for a more nuanced understanding of the political thought of emerging modern East European thought that would acknowledge the fact that individuals act upon nature as nature acts upon them. Other scholars didn’t just go for a new localization of the human within nature but also asked for a totally new definition of the human condition (Chakrabarty, 2021), since the present one reflects of our anthropocentric misrepresentation of the world.

Scholars also link political environmentalism to degrowth, pondering over the after-crisis periods (for instance, after the oil crisis in the 1970s or after the financial crisis in 2009). Dasgupta, Raven and McIvor suggested in *Biological Extinction* that unlimited growth severely impacts the ecosystems (also in Barret, Mäler and Maskin, 2014: 95-119). A similar perspective is shared by a group of French post-Schumpeterian political economists writing from a critical perspective of the Schumpeterian concept of creative destruction analyzed not only from a pure economical perspective, but also through the lenses of the environmental crisis in relation to degrowth. (Aghion, Antonin and Bunuel, 2023).

To include both technological progress and nationalized representations of mountains and forests in the pursuit of a resilient but also tamed nature, the article also engages with the concept of “social metabolism.” By coining this term, Gonzales and Molina (2023) suggested that nature was politicized by political modernity. For Romania, this occurred after the 1859 unification of the two Principalities, Wallachia and Moldova, and especially from 1880 onwards, after the proclamation of the Romanian monarchy. The concept of “social metabolism” is useful in working with a Saint-Simonian interpretation of the human fulfilment dependent on its agency toward nature, who inspired an entire school of thought based on the idea of meritocracy, social equality, and progress.

Nature’s Professionals: Projections and Theories

During the late nineteenth century, France was emerging as a center of environmentalist concerns (Stanziani, 2021). Many of the Romanian, Hungarian and Serbian students studying in Paris and other French university centers returned to their countries with renewed interest for the environment, and with new ideas on how the government was to protect and/or to exploit it. This coincided with the enhanced bureaucratization of Central and Eastern Europe, which resulted in a permanent, hierarchical and organized body of professionals in civil administration (Trăușan-Matu, 2022: 351-370). Forestry engineering was institutionalized as a distinct field, subject to professionalization. Modernization and democratization focused on the establishment of a body of professional civil servants and forestry engineers, on the politicization of science (manifested in the medical profession as well), and on the politicization of nature under transnational pressures (Koszor-Codrea, 2023: 245-

280). In 1910, Romania adopted its first national Forestry Code, among the first state attempts at “organizing communal forests from a juridical and administrative point of view.” (Mateescu, 2011: 153)

The professionalization encouraged by the return on students from France and other Western European capitals spanned the entire nineteenth century and was subject to generational social and political objectives. From 1800 to 1830, for example, the goal was to help Romania’s new bourgeoisie to emancipate from Phanariot habits and customs (Ploscaru, 2018). The 1850s were mostly driven by the powerful revolutionary wave that swapped across Europe, and the goal was mainly to build and enforce political and cultural transnational networks with revolutionary centers abroad, and prepare the ground for the environmental turn that took place around 1900 (Năstasă, 2006; Siupiur, 2019). For the following generation, state modernization and political consolidation through the nation, the cherished project of the 1848 revolutionary movement, met a more technocratic program (Vasile, 2017). It was partially inspired by Saint-Simonism, an important political and philosophical framework for the socio-economic reforms of the Second Empire (1851-1870) and the first decade of the Third French Republic (1871-1940) (Taylor, 2015). The Saint-Simonian school of thought viewed society as a social body ruled by ability, merit and potential, not privilege and heredity. It was based on the social and political philosophy of Henry de Saint-Simon (1760-1825), whose works focused on social justice and an understanding of the new industrial order based upon physiology and history in the dawn of the industrial revolution. The Saint-Simonians sought to transform nature for the benefit of human progress and had an important role in promoting the modern *Grands Travaux* (a massive campaign of building and/or modernizing infrastructure started during the Second Empire by Napoleon III and pursued by the Third French Republic) as directly springing progress and growth (Sweeney, 2015: 100-113). The Saint-Simonian doctrine considered individual capabilities, combined after a tight selection: “an individual represents a specific set of physical but also intellectual competences, and therefore each individual is physiologically different from every other. It is thus essential to note that the concept of ability not only refers to physical skills but also to education and intellectual training” (Baujard and Lutz, 2018).

During the same period, gathered in a few professional associations and publications, several other civil engineers, doctors, political economists, progressive landowners were writing about, and fighting for, similar causes: Sava Șoimescu, I. Kalinderu, Paul Greceanu, V. M. Kogălniceau, Ștefan Furtună, Paul Riegler, I. A. Cristodorescu, I. A. Locusteanu, D. R. Ruscescu. They were generally reformist members of the upper-middle class, seeking to encourage agricultural development, especially sustainable forestry. They were also acting as important public servants, influential political actors or influential professionals.

The Romanian “Robinsons”

In 1916, the Romanian Academy awarded a prize for an adventure book apparently dedicated to teenagers: it was the *Robinsons of Bucegi*, written by Nestor Urechia, director of the construction site of the Comarnic-Predeal national road (1898-1913). Urechia had previously published other books in the same genre (Tudurachi, 2022: 41-68). His first book, *Dans les Carpathes Roumaines*, was published in French, in Paris in 1906 (Handoca, 1979). The success of the 1916 book came from the shared fashion of envisioning a peripatetic national imaginary, through a varied, challenging, wild and majestic nature. The book mainly described walks in the nature but always encountering people, connecting communities, exhilarating a national sense of pride and joy in front of the beauties of nature and of the transformative glory of human power.

Born in Bucharest, Urechia was the son of the well-known historian V. A. Urechia. From 1886 to 1897, he studied engineering at *École Polytechnique* and *Ecole des Ponts et Chaussées* in Paris. Back to the homeland in 1897, he was appointed a professor at the *Școala de Poduri și Șosele* (Bridges and Roads College) in Bucharest. From 1920 to 1929, he headed *Școala Națională de Drumuri și Poduri* (Civil Engineering School). N. Urechia was a founder of the Romanian touring club, a relentless traveler and among the first Romanian nature writers in the established nineteenth century tradition.

His writings reflected his preoccupations as a civil engineer. They shed light on his strong theoretical formation at the Ecole Polytechnique, where he listened to the lectures of professor Henri de Tourville,³ disciple of Saint-Simon (Ottavi, 2008: 77), with a taste for social sciences, political geography, and the sociology of roads inspired by Edmond Demolins.⁴ Urechia was inspired to conceive a type of democracy (a term that appears in *The Robinsons of Bucegi*) led by a technocratic government, where having trained experts has certain advantages. Writing in 1913 on the speedy five-year construction of the important road linking Comarnic to Predeal, he stresses the professional expertise and ethics of those involved: “My work has been pleasant and fruitful, because – too rare in our country, where the miserable politics orders some to undo what others have planted – all the ministers of public works since 1898 encouraged me in this work and gave me their unconditional support.” (Urechia, 2013: viii)

Urechia discusses the ambivalent support of the politicized state bureaucracy for modernization. He joins a more general anti-bureaucratic criticism ingrained in the broader effort of “inventing the social” (Cotoi, 2013: 203) via alternative routes such as an institutionalized taming of nature: the roads of Prahova Valley, safely traversing the once dangerous precipices and torrents. There is an obvious concern in Urechia’s more technical or scientific writings for safety and solidarity while traveling, especially confronting the dangerous experience narrated by foreigners encompassing Romanian Principalities before 1860s. This concern is shared by several political and public figures of the time. By the end of the century, international conferences dealt with safety on work sites, and new legislation was drafted in France, Germany and other parts of Europe and the United States (Fressoz, 2020: 318-319). The perspective was quickly changing: instead of having technological progress as a way of solving risks, as the narrative had it, the risk begins to be part of the technological paradigm.

This shift is also reflected in Urechia’s works, which identify two types of nature, “good” and “bad.” Nature is good when it serves some common purposes or when it resonates with them (sometimes in the nation building narrative), but bad when it fights or counteracts people’s actions or intentions. Nature can seem a reconversion of an already tamed one, serving utilitarian economic purposes but also constructing different forms of modern daily enjoyment with patriotic collateral effects. This last interpretation becomes obvious in the 1926 edition of *Vraja Bucegilor*, where Urechia tries a short history of human (that is, political) “good” agency in Prahova Valley. He begins by praising King Carol I, referred to as the “Wizard” who tamed the dangerous wilderness of Prahova valley into a civilized, prosperous and nationalized nature. In an almost religious form of respect, Urechia places the “Great Wizard” first among people who “gave life” to nature, who invented nature as a manufactured political object:

³ Henri de Tourville (1842-1903), French sociologist and precursor in the field of education sciences, influenced by Frédéric Le Play. He founded the Ecole des Roches together with Edmond Desmolins, a disciple and friend.

⁴ Edmond Demolins (1852-1907) A disciple of sociologist, economist and social scientist Frédéric Le Play (Ottavi, 2008: 78).

“It is now suitable to speak, with piety, about the great Wizard who, building a castle on the banks of the Peleş brook, at the foot of the Bucegi Mountains, in a deserted land, surrounded by unfathomable forests, performed the great miracle: proud houses sprang from the meadow in our time, and the Prahova path, the old road of Braşov, a beautiful and protective path for hikers, now travels through towns and villages, where Romanian efforts thrive.” (Urechia, 2013: 22)

Several important elements are present in this quote. First, a definition of nature through culture, which emerges as the true nature as opposite to the hostile, unfriendly, uncivilized nature from before. Second, an almost theological-political view of the state and the monarch, who not only symbolically embodies constitutional principles, but also has an active role in domesticating the wild Prahova Valley and initiating the great national project that will be completed after his death by King Ferdinand. Third, a clearly elaborated national modernization project through economic growth obtained from exploiting nature and its resources. This eclectic gathering of political and environmental stances echoes Darwin’s description of the domestication of nature by humans as a “magical wand.” Beyond that action, Darwin also saw the action of nature on itself, as a succession of layers. (Koszor-Codrea, 2023: 250). Beneath harmony lies a merciless world, where our moral, human ideals are constantly abused.

Embracing progress with all its dark sides, the writer is gazing from the top of the mountains to the Prahova Valley, but then the book provides a vision of progress and catastrophe, quite frequent in the related literature around 1900 (Fressoz, 2020: 324). He pleads for technological progress but fears the unknown brought about by it. This type of caveat appears in other literary texts written at the time by Urechia, even in texts dealing with a very modern and technologically advanced topic, like the construction of roads (Vasile and Iordăchescu, 2022). Urechia’s French professors, Le Play and Demolins, and neoclassical political economists such as French Léon Walras (1834-1910), Austrian Carl Menger (1840-1921) or British William Stanley Jevons (1835-1883) advocated for cautious industrialization and considered the natural environment as valuable in grounding societal welfare (Parrique, 2019). The mathematician, economist and theorist of degrowth Georgescu-Roegen (Grienevald, 2015: 473-477) also noticed this tendency in the early years of pre-industrialized Romania, meaning mainly till the Second World War (Latouche, 2016: 107-11). The concept of social metabolism finds its utility as well: both Urechia and Grunau see the capacity of humans to work on and with nature in a dutiful manner. Not only they can do it, but they must do it, being parts of an enormous organism. This conception also links them to Saint-Simonism, where the ability of individuals implies the physical, intellectual and moral competences of an individual. Saint-Simonism was carried as a doctrine not only by engineers, but also by influential physicians: Philippe Buchez (1796–1865), French physician and politician who linked the functioning of the human body with the industry and with the progress of the new society aligned with the industry; Louis Peisse (1803–1880), French philosopher specialized in physiology and exceptionally elected to the *Académie des médecins* in 1866; also known for his translations of John Stuart Mill. Consequently, the human body becomes an integrated part of the social organization, without losing its power to act on itself, since this individual agency is crucial for setting the differences between members of that particular organization (Baujard and Lutz, 2018:7).

An Underused or Ignored Model of Climate Policy?

In 1906, when Urechia published *Dans les Carpathes Roumaines*, P.A. Grunau published a History of Forestry Education in Romania (*Istoricul învăţământului silvic în România*). His previous books were *Prescripţiunea în materie forestieră* [Prescription in Forestry Materials] (1901), and *Necesitatea*

modificărei dispozițiilor penale ale codului silvic [The Necessity of Changing the Criminal Provisions of the Forestry Code] (1902). Grunau's *History* is a valuable source because it is not purely technical, but provides an account of the conceptions and the public agenda in the environmental administration of modern Romania. Similarly to Pompiliu Eliade, whose PhD thesis defended in Paris talked about the French influence on the Romanian "public spirit" (Eliade, 1898), Grunau makes a case of the French influence in the development of the environmental thought among the forestry professionals, schooled in Nancy before having a Romanian-based educational system available:

Nancy has remained the metropolis of forestry education for all Romanians wishing to train in forest culture; in the bad days as well as in the good, that is, both when forestry sciences were taught in special schools, and in the era when they were only taught as a corollary of the complex of knowledge necessary for the farmer, the Romanians make a pilgrimage to the forestry Mecca (towards Nancy) and adapt themselves to the French forestry doctrine. Too few scholars deviate from this path and take the road to German forestry schools. If we look at Nancy's school yearbook, we see that from 1855 to 1905, that is, in a period of exactly fifty years, only eighty-one Romanians attended that school, i.e. almost half of the total number of foresters trained in special Romanian schools between 1860 and today (Grunau, 1906: 3).

Besides being a passionate professional of the forest, Grunau also became a teacher and a public servant, founder of several secondary schools of forestry, and author or translator of numerous handbooks in the field. He was the son of a renowned doctor, well connected to the political world, friend of C. A. Rosetti and Ion C. Brătianu (prominent Romanian politicians during Grunau's time). His grandfather, born in Germany, was the commander of the first Central Military Hospital in Bucharest between 1831 and 1838. Grunau studied abroad at the Academy of Forests in Tharandt, Germany, where he defended his PhD in 1887 (Năstăsă, 2006: 158). Back in Romania that same year, he served as director of forestry schools, then became a professor at the *Școala Politehnică* in Bucharest.

Grunau stands for the paradigm of sustainable exploitation of nature, in the context of the construction of sovereign nation states in the second half of the century (Mishkova, 2022: 2-3). He appears fully aware of the finite character of natural resources, specifically the wood from mountain forests. Forests and mountains were already embedded in the nationhood (Roth, 2022: 177) and politicized as a grounding frame for the modern political regimes (Vasile, 2018). The newest element appears to be the intense commodification of nature at large, and of the forest in particular (McNeill, 2014: 377-382), seen through the specific framing of the main produce, which is wood. "Wood, this undeniable raw material necessity for any household, small or large, is an asset that exists only thanks to natural forces of production, without interviewing, besides these, other factors of production: labor and capital." (Grunau, 1906: 3)

In Grunau's opinion, wood had been considered for a long time as a common good with unhindered access, but in the „universally shared” conception, it was

“free in nature, we can dispose of it like we dispose of the game, fish, air, light, etc. It is natural that in such circumstances the intervention of man, to give perfection or to activate timber production by his labor and by his capital, is utterly excluded, it is clear that not even routine, at least as it concerns forest culture, does not have the reason to be as long as nature satisfies it: abundant human needs in wood.” (Grunau, 1906: 4)

On several occasions, Grunau brings in the context of the social state the idea of common interest, the intergenerational solidarity, and the principle of sustainable exploitation of nature:

“Wood is a product that is formed slowly; the one who cultivates, the one who cares for the forests, as a general rule, will not see, will not rejoice, neither he,

nor his immediate heirs, the fruits of his labor. [...] There is a need for preparation, a long education, which takes place only in the last stages of civilization, to plant in the human heart, the care not only of its own future and of its children, but the care for the people, to push man to make sacrifices that will be enjoyed by his great-grandchildren.” (Grunau, 1906: 5)

Grunau’s conception about wood and the benefits of a stable, durable growth appears in related earlier writings. For instance, the Romanian agronomist Ion Ionescu de la Brad (trained in France, like Urechia) wrote in 1861 criticizing the supposed laziness of the Romanian peasants to plant fruit trees, precisely because they did not want to benefit from the fruits of their labor:

“Many of our residents are too lazy to plant and graft trees [...] Others have nowhere to get good varieties, likewise many believe that in some places they could not grow trees of a good variety [...] By planting trees, someone lives not only for himself, but also for those who are born after him, he enjoys and benefits not only himself, but also one’s descendants.” (Ionescu de la Brad, 1943: 278)

What makes Grunau’s stance essentially political is the translation of his convictions and empirical observations into public policies, regulations and, most importantly for the investigation led in the present article, the intellectual will and capacity to put all these observations into a political narrative. Nature becomes a commodity only when instated by the political power and enforced by its institutions. Therefore, we can observe the need for: (1) establishing a serious education for public servants but also for the general population; (2) strong regulatory provisions; and (3) a political theory of the sustainable exploitation of the environment. Grunau is in this respect a utilitarian, a neoclassical political economist, who sees in the preservation of nature the source of human welfare, the argument for rational exploitation, but also a social-liberal Saint-Simonian, who advocates for an improved democratic society by means of professionalization in the public service.

Hence Grunau’s concern with the development of a scientific and professional community. He was close to another important figure in the history of Romanian political environmentalism, C. A. Robescu (1839-1920). Though one generation older than Grunau, they shared similar views on the social-liberal stance, regarding nature as a common good in need to be rationally exploited but always associated to the welfare of the nation (which is the unanimous consensus, regardless of the political orientation). He is mentioned in Grunau’s *History...* as one of the first-generation alumni of the silvic School of Brănești, (Biriș, 2017: 58-84) which operated only for two years, between 1860 and 1862. Founder of the *Society for Silvic Progress* in 1886 (placed under King’s Carol I High patronage, gathering important political figures of the time: I. Câmpineanu, I. Kalinderu, D. Sturza, and A. Stolojan) and cofounder of *Revista Pădurilor*, where he signed the Original Manifesto, Robescu was a rather important political figure, member of the National Liberal Party, twice mayor of Bucharest and a close collaborator of Ion C. Brătianu during the long liberal government (1876-1888). (Hitchins, 2014: 115 and further).

More liberal than Grunau and more comfortable with the idea of capitalistic commodification of forests, Robescu still remains an environmentalist, conceiving nature and society as a whole in which each part has to find its balance: “For the rational culture or scientific exploitation of the state forests, which must serve as a model for private individuals, laudable attempts have been made by spreading forestry science, or by training forestry agents in special schools.” (Robescu, 1886: 1)

From a more general perspective, at the end of the nineteenth century, this take becomes a dominant political and philosophical idea all around the globe, pushing forward the unified concept of nature and society as a social metabolism. Robescu also shares with the quasi unanimity of the environmentalists in his time – Romanian, American but also French or German – the idea that nature

must be linked to the national identity. Mountains, forests or rivers are to be protected for their intrinsic value but most importantly because they are part of the bigger picture of national edifice. Society and nature are working together for the construction and safeguarding of the nation. The philosophy is made clear in the Opening Manifesto:

“For a long time, the importance of forests from an agricultural, climate-related point of view, and even from the point of view of national industry and trade in general, has been contested here in Romania [...] The protection of forests against unconscious devastation has taken a step forward, rather weakly, but it still manifests itself through the defense of mountain forests.” (Robescu, 1886: 1)

Conclusion

The main innovation of the article is the introduction of the study of the Romanian national narratives in a crucial time for its modernization process, using the perspective of environmental history of political thought, and the methods of political science (Isaac, 2013: 364). Nature became more and more a major playground for bargain, for negotiation, a place for colonization and post colonization paradigms, but the roots of such a politicized nature and environment are to be retraced to the nationalization of the Earth and its commons, to the struggles and grand transformations which occurred in the second part of the Long Nineteenth Century (Leonhard and Hirschhausen, 2011). As a consequence, this direction of expandable analysis has the potential to further fill the remaining gaps in understanding the entanglements within Romanian institutional policies during the Belle Époque, while also aiming to provide an alternative research tool for scholars.

A second innovation brought by the article is the selection of sources and the cross analysis: as showed above, none of the writings, books or journal articles presented in the article, have never been analyzed before from this perspective. Deforestation, and the lack of law enforcement in environment protection, is to be understood also in an intergenerational transmission of concept and/or stereotypes (Vlad, 2016; Folschweiller, 2017), linked often to nationalistic discourses: nowadays' patriotic narrative comes directly from a certain nationalistic cult of Nature.

Using the environmental frame, a third finding of the article points to a specific trend, less investigated in the political history of the *fin de siècle*: a possible alternative to the traditional binary design of the Romanian modern political spectrum, in the use of an environmentalist stance as a transversal political reasoning. Moreover, conceptualizing nature and even planning policies for the environment represents, sometimes, a heteroclite congregation of conservatives, progressive or liberal actors. At the turn of nineteenth century, Romanian central and east European popular patriotism (Judson, 2005: 1-18) also emerge from that ideological entanglement.

The collection of these different elements calls for a reflection on the relationships between institutions, civil society, nature (considered both a mode of production, and a living environment). It also raises the observation, already made at the end of the nineteenth century, of an unprecedented deterioration brought by overexploiting nature and the environment due to human action in the new extractive capitalist model (Stanziani, 2021: 148-149). The case studies presented in the article revealed a need to both conceptualize the issues and take pragmatic measures. N. Urechia, P. A. Grunau, together with C. Robescu, and the *Society for Silvic Progress*, were initiating such actions as normative proposals, thus public policies and actions of professionals were set in motion. Going further, the case studies revealed a transnational background both in narratives and in proposed public policies and regulations, due, among other factors, to the common educational ground of all these professionals of the environment: the Nancy School doctrine radiated on at least two continents.

However, the winning neoclassical model underpinned legislation and public policies in environmental matters, but also pushed the interpretation of nature as a background for naturalizing markets and economic competition, in a battle for unlimited growth often ignoring the normative framework and using or initiating corruption. Conceptualizing nature in Romania (and elsewhere, for that matter) in that period opens a conflicted and/or ambivalent manner (Siefert, 2011: 78)⁵ of perceiving, treating, processing other crucial political concepts: Nation, Sovereignty, progress, modernization and exploitation of the Capital-Earth (Hartog, 2022: 7-16).

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⁵ Siefert notices the gap between the advocates of technological progress and its enemies, quoting Alexander Herzen on the role of progress, in 1853, in a letter to his compatriot Pecherin: “not through propaganda but through chemistry, mechanics, technology, railways, may [the masses] adjust the brain which has been cramped morally and physically for ages”.

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