

RECENZJE

Lucian Boia, *Scurtă istorie a dezastrelor naturale. Epidemii, cutremure și dereglări climatice*, București, Humanitas, 2020, 137 pp.

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The Romanian historian Lucian Boia has published (Humanitas Publishing House) in 2020 a work entitled: *Scurtă istorie a dezastrelor naturale. Epidemii, cutremure și dereglări climatice* (A Brief History of Natural Disasters. Epidemics, Earthquakes and Climate Change¹). This is not Lucian Boia's first work on the history of climate and the environment; a couple of decades ago he published *L'Homme face au climat. L'imaginaire de la pluie et du beau temps* (Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2004, 208 pages) (also published in English under the title, *The Weather in the Imagination*, London, Reaktion Books, 2004).²

It is worth noticing that the books written by Lucian Boia are a demonstration or expression of the complexity and thematic variety of his historical and historiographical approaches, namely: (1) the history of contemporary historical myths; (2) the history of communism; (3) the theory of history, and historiography; (4) the history of

¹ An interview with the Romanian historian about this work was published in the cultural magazine of the Colombian newspaper *El Espectador* under the title: *Lucian Boia, "The fear of death is more powerful than hope"*, a dialogue with Cristian Pătrăreșconi: <https://www.elespectador.com/el-magazin-cultural/lucian-boia-el-temor-a-la-muerte-es-mas-poderoso-que-la-esperanza/> [accessed: 19.8.2021].

² This review is prepared within the framework of the implementation of the Project: *Teaching the history of natural disasters: epidemics, earthquakes and environmental problems in the work of Lucian Boia*, Code VIII 4-21-10. Vice-Chancellor's Office of Research, Innovation and Extension. Universidad Tecnológica de Pereira-Colombia. Work in progress.

the imaginary; (5) the history of the present time and contemporary Romanian society; (6) the history of democracy and the West; (7) the history of climate; (8) the modern and contemporary history of France and Germany; (9) the cultural history of contemporary Romanian society; (10) the history of the nation; and (11) the history of epidemics and earthquakes.

Taking into account his complex historiographical approach, there are good reasons to study Lucian Boia's historical work on natural disasters, although it's not the only one.³ Firstly, we have to mention that in the Spanish-American world, there were only six of his works⁴ which are known. Secondly, his conception and perspective of history is new, original and suggestive not only for the specialised community, but also for all those who are interested in history. Lucian Boia has a reputation as a historian with an immense ability to disseminate and polemicise on those ideas that society rarely questions. He has published dozens of historical volumes on topics anchored in the present, from nationalist movements in Central and Eastern Europe to the collective imagination on climate. Despite his high recognition and reputation, Lucian Boia has retained the privilege of not becoming a star author; on the contrary, his books are at the forefront of his historical concerns. Furthermore, the Romanian historian's work is rich in ideas and in theoretical and methodological details and working hypotheses. In his view, there is no single definitive history that can be reconstructed, but a set of histories, always polyform and open: *the histories of Lucian Boia*.⁵

Thirdly, history for Lucian Boia has two meanings, history as past and history as representation:

We invent words and then we allow ourselves to be subjugated by them. Without words, there would be no knowledge, but all words become independent entities, an obstacle that stands between us and the "world of truth". It brings us closer and, at the same time, distances us [...]. History is a kind of defeating word. Few people think about its meaning. History is history, we all know it. Nor do historians, with few exceptions, go beyond it. They make history faster than they think about it. One should be attentive from the beginning, because history, as a "science", has the curious peculiarity of having the same name as its object of research. In other words, the mission of history is to reconstitute the past (history). We name in the same way two different concepts; however, we may wish to get them closer: history in its effective development and history as representation. The image aims to be confused with reality. The identification of the terms is fed by the deeply perceived need to anchor in the past. The past is the only reality we can evoke (reducing it in the end to history) and it would be in-

³ C. Pătrăreșconiu, *Interviu Lucian BOIA: Ce este istoria. Dialog exclusiv Lapunkt între LUCIAN BOIA și Cristian Pătrăreșconiu*, "LaPunkt", <https://www.lapunkt.ro/2016/11/interviu-lucian-boia-ce-este-istoria/> [accessed: 21.11.2023].

⁴ L. Boia, *Entre el Ángel y la Bestia, Santiago de Chile 1997*; *idem*, *¿El fin del Occidente? Hacia el mundo de mañana*, Madrid 2015; *idem*, *La tragedia alemana, 1914–1945*, Madrid 2018; *idem*, *Un juego sin reglas: sobre la imprevisibilidad en la historia*, Pereira 2021; *idem*, „Magazine El malpensante” 2020, no. 223, p. 8–17; *idem*, *Jugando con el pasado: Historia entre la verdad y la ficción*, Pereira 2019; *idem*, *Dos siglos de mitología nacional*, Bogotá 2022.

⁵ C. Pătrăreșconiu, *op. cit.*

conceivable to let it slip through our fingers. The past means legitimisation and justification. Without the past we cannot be sure of anything [...], the history we produce is smaller than the real history, but it resembles it to the point of identification. History is the great reduction to scale, its synthetic replica [...] We must confess that it does not mean anything other than what we want it to mean.⁶

It is worth saying that this would be the natural tendency, which is common to any historiographic presentation. The history of the discipline, the presentation of debates and currents of thought become the succession of dominant historical schools that fall and succeed each other under the effect of a paradigmatic and institutional revolution. Perhaps the following could be a good account: from the 1930s through the 1970s, the triumph of the Annales School; in the 1980s, the “return of the actor”; in the 1990s, the issue related to discourse and, simultaneously, that of memory. But this issue is not that simple, and the extraordinary work of Lucian Boia proves it. Today’s history is a rupture and a change: the renewal of objects and debates are strong in recent decades. Increasingly linked to the issues related to social and human sciences, and questions of society and individuals, history is clearly considered plural⁷ as well.

In this respect, any historical work on natural disasters, epidemics and earthquakes, the subject of this review, should focus firstly on how historiography deals with these three types of natural disasters: epidemics, earthquakes, and climate change. Inspired by the Romanian historian, one might take into account the following: (1) interpreting the history of epidemics as Lucian Boia did, based on the historiographical work of Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, on his idea of the relatively isolated evolution of civilisations, each with its own specific microbial background; (2) analysing from a historical point of view, based on the works of Lucian Boia, earthquakes as expressions of nature that humanity endures without determining them and as processes of adaptation or coexistence with these devastating possibilities, which, from a historical point of view, could occur in a society at a moment of crisis in its evolution; (3) studying from the historical point of view of Lucian Boia, climatic change, a global and highly topical issue, which manifests itself as an acute problem or as environmental imbalances (frosts, rains, forest fires, high temperatures, etc.). If these changes aggravate, the functionality of public institutions and infrastructures is reduced, reinforcing the spread of epidemics, often facilitated by the biological deterioration of malnourished populations. The methodological approach adopted is the so-called “documentary and bibliographic analysis” by means of which a written document (in this case a book by Lucian Boia) constitutes an invaluable and irreplaceable source in any reconstruction that has to do with a relatively present past, near or distant.

The history of mankind has been constantly marked by epidemics. They have always been combined with migrations, places of trade, or wars. These epidemics, defined as plagues before modern times, could be caused by different agents (typhoid,

⁶ L. Boia, *Jocul cu trecutul. Istoria între adevăr și ficțiune*, Bucharest 2013, p. 5–6.

⁷ A. Prost, *Douze Leçons sur l’Histoire*, Paris 1996, p. 9.

smallpox, bubonic or pulmonary plague, yellow fever). The recent acceleration of travel by plane increases the speed of spread of new epidemics. However, progress in stopping cases and the rapid implementation of treatments often makes it possible to limit their natural consequences. From the plagues of ancient times to the current COVID-19 pandemic, including the Black Death and the Spanish Flu, the major epidemics of the past are analysed, as well as the number of the victims, from various points of view or fields of knowledge, in this case from a historical point of view.⁸

In this regard, we should mention that, in 1985, Lucian Boia had already published a book entitled *Probleme de geografie istorică* (Problematics of Historical Geography), at the University of Bucharest Publishing House, under modest publishing conditions and with a print run of no more than 100 copies, in which he outlined a relatively new field, the evolution over time of man-environment relations. The problems caused by the brutal action of man on the environment found their place in this book, as well as the imprint of the environment on societies (an environment, in turn, more or less modified after multiple human interventions). At that time, however, other concerns were of primary importance; environmental problems or imbalances did not yet generate the obsessions and panic we are experiencing today. When he published his book on “The End of the World” years later, in 1989, I myself continued to look at the various “apocalyptic” scenarios as far apart, as evidenced by the subtitle he chose: “A story without end”. Lucian Boia started from the conviction that the end, so often announced, would never come in real history. In those times, which seem so distant today (although only a few decades have passed since then), only the danger of war fuelled the seemingly justified fear of a possible end. The nuclear arsenals of the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, seemed more than enough to annihilate, in the event of an armed conflict, the whole of humanity and even all life on earth. Now, 35 years later, the issue of “the end of the world” becomes relevant, considering the COVID-19 pandemic that does not seem to be coming to an end.

On epidemics. Lucian Boia mentions in this regard a very interesting study by Le Roy Ladurie,⁹ which is based:

on the idea of the relatively isolated evolution of civilisations, each with its own specific microbial background, until the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the modern era, when the phenomenon of world unification took gradually place, including at the microbial level. The process was accompanied by a series of destructive epidemics, until, ultimately, a world equilibrium was reached; thus, constituting a sort of microbial common market.¹⁰

⁸ J. Sardon, *De la longue histoire des épidémies au Covid-19*, “Les Analyses de Population & Avenir” 2020, vol. 26, p. 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.3917/lap.026.0001> [accessed: 4.8.2021].

⁹ E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Un concept: L'unification microbienne du monde (XIVe–XVIIe siècles)* [in:] *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte*, “Revue suisse d'histoire — Rivista storica svizzera” 1973, no. 23, p. 627–696.

¹⁰ L. Boia, *Knights and microbes* [in:] *Jugando con el pasado: Historia entre la verdad y la ficción*, Pereira 2019, p. 13–16.

Lucian Boia stated that those areas with low human density or lack of commercial traffic were always a barrier to the spread of epidemics, while human concentrations favoured them. This was always the case, and some cities during the Middle Ages were substantially decimated, losing even half of their population. On the scale of epidemics, there are two contradictory trends: on the one hand, we talk about the great progress made by medicine in recent decades; but, on the other, human interdependence has never been at a closer level than it is today. Thus, the Ebola pandemic in West Africa was stopped at a local level precisely because the rest of the world did not have very close commercial or human relations with this poor part of the world, whereas, in a totally different way, things happened with the COVID-19 virus coming from the People's Republic of China. Probably in the future we will find much more information about the origin and the initial evolution of the pandemic which will support this theory.

On earthquakes. If epidemics or uncontrolled exploitation of the earth, which determine climatic changes, are “works” of mankind, earthquakes are experienced by humankind without provoking them. Lucian Boia emphasises the human ingenuity of the societies developed in areas where these phenomena have a high incidence, which learned to adapt, and to co-exist with these devastating possibilities. We cannot help thinking of what would happen in Romania in the case of a devastating earthquake such as the ones of 1940 and 1977 or in Columbia in the eventuality of an earthquake like the one which occurred in 1999 in the Colombian “Eje Cafetero” (coffee-growing area in Colombia). This could generate a very difficult situation, more than a pandemic, precisely because the health system would have to deal with a larger number of patients at the same time, an uncertain situation that maybe could not be overcome.

*On climate change.*¹¹ Global warming is a much-discussed subject, which has become a trendy topic, a true ideology (and even a kind of a religion), and one of the favourite topics of Hollywood producers (with two versions — global warming or global cooling). It is true that mankind had to adapt to the climate from the beginning. There would be no reason not to do it, considering that the industrial era of mankind dates back more than two centuries, while, in the rest of history, man has endured the effects of the climate, without being able to intervene in any way. More than 95% of the history of mankind has seen man as a passive spectator of natural disasters. It is not difficult to understand why man's ambition, in recent centuries, has been to somehow subdue nature or at least control its negative effects. The “subjugation of nature” — or more precisely, the ever-increasing appeal of the possibilities offered by the environment — is, essentially, the key to the explanations of any system of civ-

¹¹ Idem, *L'homme face au climat. L'imaginaire de la pluie et du beau temps*, Paris 2004; M.-A. Gómez, *Climate as an innovation in teaching history* [in:] *Encyclopedia of Educational Innovation*, eds. M.A. Peters, R. Heraud, New York–Berlin–New Delhi–Singapore 2020, chapter 217-1; E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Histoire humaine et compare du climat*, Paris 2005; vol. 1; M.R. Rojas, *Climate History in Latin America* [in:] *The Palgrave Handbook of Climate History*, eds. S. White, C. Pfister, F. Mauelshagen, p. 213–224. New York 2018.

ilisation and its successive transformations. A process, which is positive as a whole, because it was only in this way that man detached himself from his animal condition and gradually reached the present degree of civilisation (...). However, human action, which has had positive consequences for mankind, has negatively affected a very delicate and unstable equilibrium.

Not just a specific area, but the planet as a whole must be considered a vast ecosystem. Pollution factors affect it as a whole and may, in the long run, affect the very fate of humanity and life in general. Lucian Boia's book makes us think seriously when we listen to the news of how hectares of forest are cut down every day in Romania. This is not just a matter of cutting down a few trees over a few decades, but of an ecological cycle that is affected.

Lucian Boia wrote:

The forest represents the main shield that defends the soil against erosion caused by wind and water. It fixes the soil and, at the same time, regulates the water cycle, by protecting the respective areas both from drought and from the anarchic manifestations of water flow

The Romanian space has witnessed all these disasters and the future does not look great due to, among other things, the pollution brought about by the heavy industrialisation of Romania during communism, yet another heavy inheritance of this regime. In the past, Romania has experienced devastating earthquakes (however, not as frequently as in other places like Japan), epidemics (cholera, plague, typhus, Spanish flu, etc.). Now, the country faces desertification, which affects southern Muntenia, the Baragan area, and southern Moldavia, areas that might have a Mediterranean climate in few decades or maybe earlier.

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