

## **Dimitrie Gusti's finest achievement: The Social Service Law in Romania**

*Dimitrie Gusti legnagyobb vívmánya: a Román Társadalomszolgálat Törvénye*

DRAGOȘ SDROBIȘ

### **Abstract**

*The compulsory social service represented a mechanism to combat the effects of intellectual unemployment in interwar Romania. The role of the sociologist Gusti was essential: he generalized the scientific work of the students as a mechanism placed in the service of the villages. His vision was embraced by King Carol II in his way to become "king of the youth". The social service turned into a political attempt to redirect the youth from the legionary ideology to the regime of royal dictatorship.*

*Keywords: higher education in the interwar Romania – Dimitrie Gusti – intellectual unemployment – social control – social service*

### **Összefoglalás**

*A kötelező román társadalmi szolgálatot az értelmiségi munkanélküliség ellensúlyozását is megcélzó mechanizmusként vezették be. A szociológus Gustinak kulcsszerep jutott: a diákok tudományos munkáját a román falu szolgálatába állította. Elképzeléseit osztotta II. Károly, aki a „fiatalok királyaként” szerette volna maga mellett tudni a legionárius mozgalom bűvkörébe került ifjúságot: a társadalomszolgálat a szélsőjobboldali mozgalmakkal rivalizálni próbáló politikai kísérletnek is tekinthető.*

*Kulcsszavak: felsőoktatás a két világháború közötti Romániában – Dimitrie Gusti – értelmiségi munkanélküliség – társadalmi kontroll – társadalomszolgálat*

## **The University in a Changing World**

In 1932, International Student Service, led by Walter Kotsching, published the papers of a symposium called *The University in a Changing World*. The reason for such a demarche was the increasing crisis the European university had to face after the Great War. It was for the first time in history when an organization like International Student Service brought together the professors and the students, in order to adjust the consequences of certain phenomena like the overcrowding

of the universities, the connection of the higher education to the labour market, professional guidance or students admission criteria.

For Kotsching, the interwar university crisis had a deeper and, to a certain degree, a philosophical significance. If the university of the Middle Ages promoted the conception of *unitas intellectus* (Toma d'Aquino), whereby "faith and knowledge became one", the Enlightenment brought to the forefront the idea of reason. "In reason it found both the unity of the world and the way to understand it. In the beginning it gave new lustre to the universities; but it prepared the way for their downfall. *Reason* was soon replaced by her twin-sister *utility*. Utility in turn led to the subordination of the universities to *reasons of State* and to other ends unconnected with their fundamental task as it had been first understood, the discovery and contemplation of truth." (Kotsching, 1932, p. 5) For this reason, the university as a place of truth and of science had to step back in front of the university as a place for professional training.

In addition, the shift of the university from knowledge toward utility had a significant impact in shaping the university output – the elite. In the *nationalities century* the new elite was no longer supposed to pursue the truth and the universal justice; instead, these two notions became circumscribed to a national cause, leading to the *trahison des clercs* phenomenon (Julien Benda). The hiatus the First World War provoked in the European societies implied also the necessity to reveal university's responsibilities in triggering the war. Finally, the interwar university was overwhelmed by the students' discontents, as many of the students enrolled at the beginning of the 20's had just returned from the trenches. While the professors tended to adopt a sort of autistic stance regarding the "memory of the trenches", the university youth preferred to leave *civitas academica* and to become more interested in the social or political problems of their own societies. Within this context of university nationalization, "the unified conception of the university, which characterized earlier periods, has been broken. It is today no more than a memory and a hope". (Kotsching, 1932, p. 21) As for the increasing number of the students, it was no secret that this could eventually develop into a subversive movement, especially in the societies where the Great War provoked an economic depression.

### **How to convert students' discontent into a mechanism of social reform**

The European youth of the interwar period is characterized by the sense of uselessness. And, in this respect, a particular attention must be paid to the university students. First of all, they are those who translated their frustrations into a pan-European debate regarding the problem of the generation. As an identity landmark, they chose to define themselves in strong relation with the First World War, conceived as a dividing waters momentum. In addition, *the generation of 1914* (Robert Wohl) has set to change the social architecture of the

old gerontocratic societies. The new generation believed that the war was supposed to establish youth into a distinct social category. But, when it seemed the society was open to further concessions, the economics gained ground. This time, it was the economic depression of 1929-1933 to increase the youth uprising. In 1934, the intellectual unemployment became part of the Nations Society's agenda and a year later, the Society hosted the conference entitled *Chômage de la Jeunesse Universitaire* (Geneve, 10-11 of April 1935). The problem had all the arguments to become a subject of a serious debate: "Les dangers résultant de l'inoccupation de cette catégorie de jeunes gens peuvent finir par atteindre sérieusement non seulement l'ordre social, mais aussi l'avenir des professions libérales et de la vie intellectuelle tout entière".<sup>1</sup> In such conditions, to conceive a youth mobilization plan in the interests of the state became stringent. Reshaping the politics and the state was supposed to bring the youth to the society's forefront. Moreover, the challenge was to integrate the state desire to create a more developed society with the youth availability to utilize the acquired knowledge and techniques. But the interwar youth crisis was a matter of timing, too. The intellectual unemployment, as a direct consequence of the economic depression, precipitated the emergence of the proper answer. This is why we can pertinently state that the social service was meant to be a way of improving society by utilizing its most endowed and skilled citizens: the students.

### **The idea of the social service in Romania after the Great War: the university serving the peasantry**

For Romania, the Great War was rather a calamity than the history's zenith. Significant demographic causalities, along with a disastrous medical condition of the population were sufficient reasons for rethinking the state. In such a direction it is notable to mention the case of Iuliu Moldovan, a hygiene professor at University of Cluj. In his works, he constantly tried to popularize the idea of the bio-political state as a new model of governance called to strengthen the population sanity. For Moldovan, the human capital was object for a rapid improvement, but grounded on eugenic principles. (Moldovan, 1926) The fact that the human capital was in a disastrous condition in interwar Romania was a pertinent observation shared by George Banu, too. In this respect, he founded *Revista de Igienă Socială* [Social Hygiene Review], calling for a new kind of responsibility: the human capital amelioration. For Banu, social service meant the concerted action of the state in four interrelated directions: to ease the suffering caused by poverty; to reinstate normal conditions of living for all individuals and

---

<sup>1</sup>The summarized debates of this conference were published *in extenso* in *La Coopération Intellectuelle* (revue de l'Institut International pour la Coopération Intellectuelle), 1935, no. 53-54, pp. 325-428.

families; to improve social life; and to constantly lift standards of living (Banu, 1938, p. 75; Șapira, 1934, p. 33) But neither Moldovan, nor Banu succeeded to detect the social category that should implement such an idea.

Instead, Dimitrie Gusti seemed to have a concerted plan for all the problems Romania had to confront during the interwar period. In the spring of 1918, when the collapse of the Romanian state seemed imminent, Gusti founded the Association for Social Study and Reform [Asociația pentru studiul și reforma socială]. The purpose was to rebuild the state on scientific basis. But, because of the winter of 1918 happy end, the call for sociology as a science for social reform was postponed. The only result – an important one – was the foundation of the Romanian Social Institute, in 1921.

Despite this, Dimitrie Gusti, as a professor at the University of Bucharest, continued to strongly believe that sooner or later the Romanian society will have to face radical reforms. For such a demarche, Gusti needed to begin the research of the social and economic background. One of the problems he confronted in the early 1920s was the students' revolts. Irrupted as an anti-Semitic frustration at Cluj, in December 1922, the students' movements rapidly spread in the other university centres, as Iași and Bucharest. As a sociologist, Gusti understood that students' frustrations had deeper causes, such as poverty or the increasing university fees. This is why he tried to channel students' energy toward constructive actions, like the return to the Romanian villages and its challenges. Concretely, it was about the idea of conceiving sociological monographs for every Romanian village. In 1925, a monographic student team went to Goicea Mare in order to notice, face and, ultimately, find solutions to the problems of the countryside. A few years later, in 1928, when talking about the proper cultural politics Romania should adopt, Dimitrie Gusti launched the idea of the Cultural State. For such an achievement, Gusti entrusted the linkage between intellect, labour and financial capital, all three being considered as factors of economic welfare and social development. This was the reason Gusti required the state to create and support special institutes capable to accelerate the development possibilities for Romania. Among these institutions, the most important should have been the university. And, as a minister of Instruction, Cults and Arts, during June 1932 and November 1933, he tried to institutionally develop the Cultural State, which is confirmed by his National Culture Minister project. Unfortunately, the economic crisis and the financial shortages of Romania engendered the abandonment of this project.

### **The Royal Cultural Foundation “The Principe Carol” and the student royal teams (1934-1938)**

Nevertheless, Gusti continued to believe in the idea of *sociologia militans*. After 1933, the success of his idea is indissolubly linked to the political evolutions of

Romania. King Carol 2<sup>nd</sup> (1930-1940) tried to implement a plan of gathering the youth in a mass movement led by himself. In the way of his plan was the charismatic figure of Corneliu Zelea-Codreanu, the leader of the legionary movement. The success of this movement was partially alimanted by the disastrous consequences of the economic depression of 1929-1933, especially among the university graduates. What was ironically called *intellectual unemployment*,<sup>2</sup> began to develop into a human capital source for the extremist movements, such as the one led by Codreanu, entitled *The Legion of Archangel Michael*. Despite the political attempts to ban this movement, the rivalry between the State and the youth increased. The implosion occurred rapidly, on the 30<sup>th</sup> December 1933, when the liberal prime-minister Ioan G. Duca was assassinated by three members of the legionary movement. At that point, Carol began to realize that the only option to become a *King of the Youth* was to build himself a similar organization for mobilizing the youth.

Starting with 1934, the unleashed concurrence between the King and the legionary leader, Corneliu Zelea-Codreanu, became more than obvious. Until 1937 it was a sort of *loyal concurrence*, in which both leaders tried to improve their master plans of youth outreach. While Codreanu succeeded to take over the most important national student's organization (like Uniunea Națională a Studenților Creștini din România [National Union of the Christian Students from Romania]), King Carol founded Straja Țării [The Sentinel of the Motherland] as a counterpart. And when Codreanu began to use the volunteer work of the legionnaires as a propagandistic weapon, the King made an appeal to Gusti to generalize the scientific work of the students as a mechanism placed in the service of the Romanian villages and peasants. King Carol explicitly enunciated the two main bases of these teams: "By calling young students to join me in the work for a healthy straightening of our villages, I purported two objectives. The highest one was to do something for our villages and our peasants. But I also aimed to show to our university youth the healthy way of work and of the surpluses of energy." (Îndrumător al muncii culturale la sate, 1936, p. 13)

The most important campaign was that of the summer of 1937, when Dimitrie Gusti sent student royal teams in 65 villages, gathering 407 students, 94 co-opted members of The Sentinel and 99 volunteers. Meanwhile, in that year, the legionary work camps were banned. Besides that, the compulsory labour law for public interest project, sustained by Ion Nistor (rector of the University of Czernowitz), became a reality in March 1937. Under this law, the entire youth with an age ranging from 18 to 25 years old had to participate for a period of 3 weeks at works of public interest. In fact, it was a political mechanism for the social control of the youth adopted in many European countries, like the

---

<sup>2</sup> For instance, some journalist preferred sardonic answers to such a problem, affirming that "the intellect cannot be unemployed", while others were quite surprised to find such a phenomenon in an agrarian society.

institution of *Trudovo Podvinost* in Bulgaria or the public work implemented in Poland as a way to find jobs for the intellectual unemployed. It is also true that the Germans founded the *ArbeitCamps* in 1931, as volunteer institutions for the unemployed university graduates that were transformed into a compulsory activity in 1934, during the Nazi regime.

The propaganda aspects of this activity cannot be obliterated. In 1935, Gusti began to print *Curierul echipelor studentești* [Student teams' courier], while the scientific results of these campaigns were especially published in *Sociologie Românească* [Romanian Sociology Review] since 1936. In each researched village the teams had to put the basis of a Cultural House, while at the beginning of June, during the Restoration Celebrations, the scientific results had to be presented to the King and the public, too. For Gusti this activity was supposed to lead to the creation of the iconic village. Obviously, for such a demarche, the first step had to be the research of the social realities and the dissemination to the public. This is the main reason that led to the creation of the Village Museum, inaugurated on the 10th of May, 1936, in Bucharest.

### **The Social Service Law in Romania (1938-1939)**

The generalization of the *cultural work* was increasingly promoted by Dimitrie Gusti. In an article from January 1937 he emphasized the "coerciveness to research Romanian nation", which should be accompanied by "another ethical and social-political duty: the *compulsory social service* in the countryside for everyone who intends to profess in Romania (...). Six months a year this duty to the country and nation should be accomplished by any in intellectual of Romania." (Gusti, 1937, p. 3)

The speeding of Gusti's project was possible due to the political shifts of 1937-1938 winter. The parliamentary elections of December 1937 could not provide any political winner. It proved to be the perfect moment for King Carol to install a dictatorial regime that eventually occurred in February 1938 by adopting a new fundamental law for Romania. Thus, political pluralism was forbidden and the first unique party from the Romanian history was founded: the National Renaissance Front. Meanwhile, in fall of the 1938, the leaders of the legionary movement were assassinated by the King's order. The end of the concurrence between Carol and Codreanu had to lead to an improved network for mobilizing the youth.

Despite these changes, during the summer of 1938, 63 villages were researched by student royal teams, involving 849 students, technicians and volunteers. After 5 simultaneously years of monographic campaigns (1934–1938) the results were encouraging: 228 work campaigns in 114 villages. Passing to a higher level became possible and desirable for some actors.

In the summer of 1938, the debates for the Social Service Law began, while the main role was held by Dimitrie Gusti and The Cultural Foundation Principe Carol. On the 13<sup>th</sup> of October 1938, the Social Service Law was adopted by the Romanian government. Its goal was to develop the Romanian villages and towns, by utilizing the youth in what was called to be a national and civic duty. Especially the university graduates were supposed "to provide a social work in the countryside before entering the professional life", later than one year. In this manner, the youth should have taken contact with the village considered as "the most significant Romanian social reality". The youth work should have been continued through the Cultural House, while The Romanian Social Institute had to guide the scientific work of the social service.

The presidency of the social service was held by Dimitrie Gusti, while in the Permanent Committee of this institution were co-opted dr. Iuliu Moldovan (the leader of the Bio-politics and Eugenics School in Cluj) and philosopher Constantin Rădulescu-Motru (president of the Romanian Academy during 1938–1941). The management of this institution is a clear clue for the doctrine of the social service: "to call to work the entire intellectual youth and all country's scholars". But, as Gusti put it, the call was not for a manual work, but for an intellectual one. "Our goal is not to create a civilian political army, but to raise the villages through the collaboration of the intellectuals. In fact, our intellectuals have rural origins, but an erroneous education gave them the exclusive desire for the city and the bureaucratic life. The time for ceasing this state of affairs has come." (Gusti, 1939, p. 19)

The campaign of the social service from 1939 meant the apogee for the monographic research of Romanian village. In that year, 128 teams were sent in 51 counties of Romania, involving 3210 university or special schools graduates. Because of this great amplitude, the collaboration with the Ministry of National Education was required, especially in the field of the statistical data regarding the graduates. 33 social service preparation schools were founded for the higher education graduates, with a training capacity of 3708 students. The instruction was supposed to last 4 weeks, providing a theoretical preparation (called "Social Service – requirement of our time") and practical applications. Although in the first stage social service was opened for everyone, the ethnic criteria began to prevail, especially after August 1939.

### **The end of the social service in Romania**

The German aggression against Poland from September 1939 was the final proof that the Romanian security was in danger. As a consequence, the Romanian government led by Armand Călinescu tried to allocate more financial resources to the defence capacities. At the same time, the dictatorial regime of King Carol became more and more unpopular. For many observers, the *New Regime* was as

old as the imposture, built by “iconic” figures of the political milieu like it was the case of Constantin Argetoianu. In such a context, the new leader of the legionary movement, Horia Sima, became confident in the chances of success of the legionary movement, due to the aggressive German policy in international relations. This is why he ordered the assassination of the prime-minister Armand Călinescu, on the 28th of September 1939.

After such a violent measure, Romania was, in the fall of 1939, on the brink of a civil war. The establishment preferred to adopt a repressive policy, instead of continuing to build the alternative. In this case, the alternative was the Social Service Law. After one year of existence, on the 13<sup>th</sup> of October 1939, the Gusti’s project was “suspended”. The reason was that, in fact, social service was another home for political agitation, especially for the legionary members. Besides that, one cannot ignore the tensed relations Gusti had with some members of the Cabinet. Argetoianu’s antipathy for Gusti was obvious and he wasn’t the only one to share this feeling. In fact, Gusti was perceived as a naïve person that should remain first of all a university professor. After a year, on the 8<sup>th</sup> of September 1940, two days after the King’s abdication, The Sentinel of the Motherland was dissolved, too. It was the end of the social engineering project Carol aimed to materialize. But the idea that “Who has the youth, has the future, too” remained valid. The Sentinel of the Motherland, the Compulsory Labour Law or social service became perennial sources of inspiration for the communist regime in Romania.

## References

- Banu, G. (1938). Educația fizică în serviciul poporului român. *Revista de Igienă Socială*, 8(2).
- Gusti, D. (1937). Despre știința națiunii românești și serviciul social oblogatoriu al studențimii. *Sociologie Românească*, 2(1), 1–4.
- Gusti, D. (1939). *Principiile și scopurile Serviciului Social (Biblioteca Serviciului Social)*. București: Fundația Culturală Regală Principele Carol.
- Îndrumător al muncii culturale la sate*. (1936). București: Fundația Culturală Regală Principele Carol.
- Kotsching, W. M. (1932). The University in a Changing World. In Kotsching, W. M. & Prys, E. (Eds.), *The University in a Changing World (a symposium)*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Moldovan, I. (1926). *Biopolitica*. Cluj: Institutul de Igienă și Igienă Socială.
- Șapira, B. (1934). Serviciul Social în lumina concepțiilor actuale. *Revista de Igienă Socială*, 4(1).