

The Gusti School of Bucharest – a Dialogue among the Monologues

A bukaresti Gusti-iskola – párbeszéd a monológok világában

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Abstract

Hosting a rural and “delayed” society, after the First World War the enlarged Romania had to face additional provocations, due to the newly extended ethnic diversity. On the periphery of a Europe saturated with enthusiastic-revolutionary, often unfortunate national rebuilding projects, the political elite of Romania had to create its own development path in a milieu of divergent theories, conflicting mythologies and a somewhat naïve messianism of the new generation.

In addition to Europeanism and traditionalism, there existed an agrarian Third Way, and several inter-variations of these currents. All these approaches were by and large of an ideological sort and somewhat ruptured from the social reality.

On this land of deep contradictions scientifically-based, thoughtful development strategies could nevertheless arise. One of the major sociological schools of inter-war Europe, the Monographic School of Bucharest, lead by sociologist Dimitrie Gusti, did implement a long-term strategy of research and community development. The social interventionism of the School was sociologically grounded: interdisciplinary teams initiated and implemented rural reform actions on the basis of field studies.

Keywords: Dimitrie Gusti – Romanian Sociology – interwar era – social intervention – community development

Összefoglalás

Az I. világháborút követően a túlnyomórészt rurális és „megkésett”, területileg megnövekedett Románia újabb kihívásokkal találta magát szemben (többek között az etnikai arányok erőteljes megváltozásának következtében). A szenvedélyes-forradalmi, de gyakorta kisiklott nemzeti újjáépítési projektek Európájának peremén meghúzódo Románia politika elitje önnön fejlődési irányvonalát igyekezett kijelölni az ellentmondásos, sokszor egymás tagadásaként megjelenő elméletek, mitológiák és az új nemzedék ma már gyakorta naivnak tűnő messianizmusának bonyolult összefüggésrendszerében.

Az európeér és a tradicionális szemléletmódok mellett Romániában is létrejött a népies, „harmadik út”, valamint e három megközelítés számos színes elegye. Mindezek azonban erőteljesen ideologikus, a társadalmi valóságtól meglehetősen elrugaszkodott kulturális-politikai tanokként szerveződtek.

Ebben a konfliktusoktól terhes, változékony politikai és közéleti miliőben ugyanakkor átgondolt, tudományosan megalapozott fejlesztési stratégiák is születtek. A két világháború közötti Európa egyik legjelentősebb szociológiai iskolája, a Dimitrie Gusti nevével fémjelzett bukaresti Monográfiai Iskola a társadalomkutatás és közösség-fejlesztés hosszú távú stratégiáját dolgozta ki, részben meg is valósítva azt. A Gusti-iskola társadalmi intervencionizmusa szociológiai alapokra épült, az interdiszciplináris teamek

által megvalósított közösségfejlesztési programokat, falumunkát komplex terep-kutatások előzték meg.

Kulcsszavak: *Dimitrie Gusti – román szociológia – interbellum – társadalmi intervenció – közösségfejlesztés*

The interwar period is frequently idealized in the Romanian press: one can grasp a multitude of nostalgic images and accounts, virtual returns to the golden age of cultural renaissance. (Şandru, 2012, pp. 9-10) This symbolically charged reconstruction connects the envisioned post-communist revival of the country with the heritage of the 1920s and 1930s, functioning as a public attempt towards the affirmation of an organically developed national history – portrayed as temporarily lead astray by “evil” foreign influences.

Scholars warn us about the negative consequences deriving from the idealization and over-simplification of the complex and contradictory interwar decades. The Greater Romania “imported” an ethnic, cultural and religious diversity hardly manageable within the framework of dominant nationalist ideologies. Romania was preponderantly rural with a polarized society and huge civilisation gaps between various social groups. With the country at crossroads, young intellectuals were concerned with the prospects of the nation and exhibited a growing sense of messianism. The “inner callings” were formalized and synthesized in systems of thoughts and actions: interpretations, truths and prospective line of actions were divergent and contradictory, being in the same time modern, archaic, antagonistic and democratic. Young members of the intelligentsia, committed to ideals of national reform congregated around ideological pillars. At least three different ideological camps were developed, with somewhat fluid and uncertain dividing lines: *Europeanists*, *traditionalists* and *followers of the third way*. Europeanists promoted thorough structural reforms aiming at the development of “Western” Romania in the “East”, they believed in the transferability of Western models. Traditionalists were adepts of autochthonism, they displayed a cultural vision built upon the stated superiority of the Christian-Orthodox and bucolic Romanianness. The third way, a typical current of thought in the case of “*ţărănişti*” (members and adepts of the National Peasants’ Party) represented a peculiar intertwining of Europeanism and traditionalism, the social reform of the peasantry was conceived as a set of actions elaborated with a partial/targeted adaptation of Western models. (Hitchins, 2010; Văcărescu, 2012)

The major intellectual attraction centres could be characterized by predominantly right-wing approaches, their combination with anti-democratic ideas could be understood in the context of an intensified and enlarged European extremism. The Romanian Legionarism, a sort of atypical fascism, constructed around a mystical-religious and nationalist philosophy, attracted a growing number of young thinkers: famous writers, artists, philosophers, scholars were lured by the Legion, the movement hence gaining extra legitimacy. The phenomenon cannot be seen as unique, fascism was reinforced and advertised by world-class thinkers, philosophers throughout the whole Europe. (Şandru, 2012, p. 16) Several representatives of right-wing thinking remained immune to the mysticism of the Legion, they instead developed a more constructive nationalism (mixed with autochthonism).

The abundance of orientations could be considered the sign of a creative eclecticism of public life, an authentic force necessitating adequate management, channelling the “divergent energies” through cultural dialogue towards sound social development

projects. Certain Romanian thinkers stressed the superiority of the societal good over exclusive and dominant doctrines: social interventions must be pursued on ideological syntheses and common grounds. This type of purposeful action was promoted by the Monographic School of Bucharest. The leader of the school, Professor Dimitrie Gusti founded pluralistic organizations in a country with a rather incipient democracy, in a political milieu characterized by totalitarian oscillations and legitimacy-authority crises.

The integration of reformist visions in the endeavours of the School could be identified as far back as 1918, in the founding of the Association for the Study and Social Reform. Professor Gusti, at the 10th anniversary of the Romanian Social Institute (24 February 1929) outlined in his speech the importance of reforms at the end of the First World War: "For the reconstruction of Europe it was and still is necessary the parallelism of an economical and financial reform with a moral, spiritual and political reform." He also stressed the importance of social research in developing reforms: "It was [about] the idealism for which ideas, theories, studies could only be symptoms of the ascending and descending of social life, and they [ideas etc.], through their creative power built upon the understanding of necessities arisen from the social reality, would eventually reverberate upon the very same realities for modelling and improving them." (Institutul Social Român, 1929)

It is worth to observe an early example of Gusti's approach: during the 1922 anti-Semitic student uprisings he did not start blaming the victim, but launched a sociological survey meant to identify the real social causes of the students' problems. Gusti later developed a complex set of reforms for the improvement of student life. The research was conceived as a multifaceted sociological endeavour, as a harbinger of the later complex monographic studies. (Butoi, 2012, p. 44)

An emblematic organization of the Gusti School, the Romanian Social Institute (successor of the Association for the Study and Social Reform) from Bucharest became a public forum for scientific and politic debates, a veritable intellectual arena for dialogues between public figures, scientists and renowned politicians. (Rostás, 2000, p. 56) The Institute ensured an open atmosphere, facilitating rational scientific exchanges between divergent political platforms, with Gusti having the professionalization of political life in mind. The Institute yielded direct gains in terms of Gusti's relational capital and played a significant role in the promotion of the monographic method. (Rostás, 2005, pp. 21-22).

A moderately tension-fraught diversity became somewhat functional in the framework of the Sociology Seminar, but, above all, in the everyday workflow of the monographic campaigns. (Văcărescu, 2012, p. 37) Teams consisted of young researchers of varied backgrounds and value orientations: different disciplines, dissimilar social origins, different levels of inner group legitimacy, different political beliefs etc. Despite this colourfulness, the School retained a relatively unitary organizational culture and the leading members were able to prevent the over-politicization of fieldwork, through the consequent application of scientific criteria, such as: neutrality, non-interference and respect for the subjects. (Văcărescu, 2012, pp. 30-31) Nevertheless, overt political conflicts between some team members did exist, though the majority of the monographists did neither contest Gusti's interdisciplinary method, nor his theoretical model. A notable exception was the "desertion" of the so-called Bernea group, the sliding of four team members into legionarism meaning a concomitant abandonment of the Gusti model. (Rostás, 2005, p. 129) Regarding the wide variety of scientific approaches displayed by the researchers, the sociological monograph proved to be fairly inclusive, albeit some endeavours were evaluated critically by the sociologists of the School. This

was the fate of certain research projects based on racial-eugenicist considerations. (Rostás, 2000, pp. 301-302)

The Monographic School institutionalized Romanian sociology and it had a major contribution to the international recognition of the Romanian social sciences. Representatives of the School participated in international scientific events, the monographic method became recognized far outside the country limits, and members of the School cooperated with renowned Western sociologists. International collaborations existed on the level of fieldwork, too: foreign students joined the monographic campaigns, thus disseminating Professor Gusti's ideas and methods. These intercultural effects are indisputably the most visible in the case of two, somewhat linked social study "landscapes": the sociology and sociography from Hungary and the ethnic Hungarian sociology of Transylvania. The key role in the methodological transfer towards Hungary was played by the young Hungarian ethnologist Gábor Lükő, who had continued his studies in Romania (from 1931). He internalized the pluralistic vision of the Gusti School and facilitated the cooperation between young Hungarian and Romanian intellectuals in a disadvantageous political context. (Rostás, 2005, pp. 86-95)

The Gusti School had beneficial role in the improvement of interethnic relations in Transylvania. A major ethnic Hungarian cultural, scholarly and social movement, the Transylvanian Youth (Erdélyi Fiatalok) became an adept of the School, carrying out several research/intervention campaigns in Hungarian-inhabited villages of Transylvania. Group members even participated in the monographic teams of Gusti. The ties between the two movements became so strong, that a mixed campaign of an ethnic Hungarian village could enter in the planning phase, though the project had to be abandoned due to political reasons. Numerous social thinkers of the interwar ethnic Hungarian Transylvanian elite had been marked by the Gusti School, some of them (most notably József Venczel) had major roles under the communism in the salvage of the monographic spirit, in the context of a blacklisted sociology. (Hitchins, 2007; Rostás, 2005)

Following Gusti's appointment as the director of the Royal Foundation (1934), the monographic campaigns became completed with elements of social intervention. This is how the formerly envisioned social reformist component of Gusti's conceptions was brought to light and implemented in the form of concentrated actions, even though the so-called 'cultural work' was not embraced by some of the older members of the School. The interventionist activities of the royal teams and those pursued within the short-lived Social Services resemble to present-day community development projects to some extent. With the launch of Social Services the monarch also attempted to counterbalance the growing influence of the Iron Guard, thus social and cultural work became organized in a paramilitary manner. In the context of wide-spread fascism, and due to the intense internal political agitations, the incursion of the Legionary Movement in the Social Services Network could not be stopped, therefore King Carol II was concomitantly forced to suspend the Act in the autumn of 1939. (Rostás, 2005, p. 137)

Apart from its already mentioned contributions to the consolidation of Romanian social sciences and its social reform role, the Gusti School had key roles in the interwar media, too. Sociologists launched scientific, popularizing and professional communication publications, field researches were paralleled with veritable PR campaigns, and Gusti's conceptions were aired through the radio. Gusti himself accepted several public positions (e.g. responsible for the organization of Romanian pavilions at international

fairs). The School realized “durable monuments”, such as: community centres (culture halls), museums, the Village museum. (Rostás, 2005, pp. 138–147)

This review of the main accomplishments of Dimitrie Gusti and his Monographic School permits us to revise the (exaggeratedly) critical approach employed in the presentation of the interwar Romanian intellectuals. Although the fragile interwar Romanian democracy could be justifiably described in rather negative terms, as having deep structural problems and being conflict-ridden, the country still permitted the development of an authentic and internationally acclaimed institutional system, a sociological school and reformist movement, which even obtained sound financial support from the state (royal) authorities.

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