

THE BUCHAREST SCHOOL OF SOCIOLOGY AND THE FAILURE OF THE INTERWAR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

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Abstract: *In interwar Romania, the Bucharest School of Sociology, founded by academician Dimitrie Gusti, theorized and implemented the first integrated program of community development, financed from the state budget, through the “Prince Carol” Royal Cultural Foundation, under the patronage of King Carol II. In this article [1] we will review the main causes leading to the failure of this project, aimed at culturally and materially lifting the Romanian village from its state of underdevelopment: on the one hand, peasants’ illiteracy, poverty, passivity and distrust of modernity and on the other, intellectual arrogance, lack of resources, Dimitrie Gusti’s utopian vision, combined with the inefficiency of the education system and failure of agriculture.*

Key words: *Sociological School of Bucharest, “Prince Carol” Royal Cultural Foundation, Dimitrie Gusti, Royal Student Teams, Social Service Teams.*

1. Introduction

In the interwar period, the Bucharest School of Sociology, led by Academician Dimitrie Gusti, introduced the first integrated community development project for the Romanian society, aimed at lifting the villages of Greater Romania from their underdevelopment.

Through the Prince Carol Royal Cultural Foundation, under the patronage of King Carol II and the executive management of Professor Dimitrie Gusti, mixed groups of students – first voluntarily (1934-1938), later mandatorily enrolled (1938-1939) – and technicians, under the supervision of

an inspector, were sent in rural areas to raise the cultural and material state of the peasantry by means of direct social action or social engineering. The Royal Student Teams (RST) (1934-1938) and Social Service Teams (SST) (1938-1939) provided the rural communities, for a few months a year during the university summer holidays, with medical and veterinary services as well as agricultural support by sowing, ploughing, doing household work, plantings and grafting of fruit trees. Public lectures, courses and various practical demonstrations were conducted. Public works were carried out: county roads, local roads, bridges and

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culverts were built or repaired, sports fields were put into service, ditches were embanked, water-wells purged, fences mended. Public libraries were founded and plays staged. Village schools, churches and cemeteries were cared for. Legal and administrative advice was provided.

2. The Causes of the Failure of the RST and SST

However, on the eve of World War II, the Romanian village was not very different from the way it had been at the beginning of the interwar period. One might argue that the effort undertaken by Gusti to elevate the Romanian village was a considerable one at the time (especially since nothing had been done in that respect until then in the rural areas), but unfortunately his endeavour was hardly sufficient, considering the urgencies, "needs, sorrows and tears that stemmed from our country's villages" [13]. In the light of this, in the present paper we intend to briefly review and analyse the causes leading to the failure of the Gustian community development project for the Romanian interwar village. We ask, hence, what were the reasons the work led by the RST or SST yielded such poor practical results?

2.1. Being an alternative for the Iron Guard work camps

In spite of the official propaganda issued by Carol II's regime, that heavily stressed the role of the RST and SST in the effort of elevating rural Romania from its underdevelopment, the primordial motive behind the Monarch's decision to found and finance the RST and SST was the opportunity to rally the Romanian student masses – a potential electoral base for the Legionary Movement – politically and ideologically, under the lead of the King,

as a viable alternative to the Iron Guard. In fact, the RST and SST were seen at the time as the political youth-counter-movement founded by the King Carol II and led by academician Dimitrie Gusti in order to compete with the increasingly popular Iron Guard work camps. Thus, King Carol II's real drive in establishing the RST and SST was not so much the genuine concern for the Romanian village, but rather the fear that the main political contender, the Iron Guard, was beginning to gain more and more supporters from the ranks of the peasantry and students through the successful organisation and implementation of its system of work camps.

2.2. The lack of resources

Apart from the political and ideological rationale beyond the creation of the RST and SST, the main problem these organisations faced was really the lack of resources. In the first four monographic campaigns, carried out in 1934-1937, RST covered a total of only 99 villages from 57 counties. In 54 villages the fieldwork was carried out during a single campaign, in 28 villages during two campaigns, and in other 17 villages during three campaigns [31]. From 1934 to 1938 – when the bill on mandatory social services was ratified – a total of 1,617 people took part in RST campaigns [32]. If we compare this data to the number of over 15,000 villages and 172 cities Greater Romania had in the 1930's and to the population it had then, of over 18 million people, we can safely say that the activity led by the Prince Carol Royal Cultural Foundation was more like „a drop in the ocean of Romanian villages”, and „could not, at this rate, change the appearance of all the villages in Romania but in centuries” [12, 14].

2.3. The two Rumanias

Interwar social reality was fundamentally marked by the deep division between the rural and urban communities, which split Romania into two populations living in separate worlds. The development gap between the agricultural, primitive, archaic, pastoral Romania of the villages and the industrial, civilised, modern Romania of the cities proved too vast to be bridged in such short time [29, p. 1; 30, p. 1].

2.4. Low level of literacy and poor material condition

By 1930, almost half (48.5%) of the rural population aged over 7 was illiterate [10, p. 293]. In addition to this fact, which already put Romania at the bottom of the European ranking, rural Romania faced extreme material frustration and failure of subsistence farming. Thus, according to the agricultural census of 25 January 1948, 78.4% of Romania's agricultural owners had land plots not larger than 3 hectares (that being the minimum surface required for the survival of an ordinary family with 4 members). The RST and SST did not have nor the power, nor the resources necessary to reduce the illiteracy rate and to improve the economic state of the rural population.

2.5. Passive resistance and distrust of modernity

The westernisation of the overwhelmingly agrarian and illiterate traditional Romanian society, initiated by the aristocracy and urban intelligentsia in the nineteenth century, encountered the understandable passive resistance of the rural population. One might argue that the village universe – which often carried its wretched existence in a „semi-wilderness” state [25, p. 71] –, never understood much

from modernity nor could it be persuaded to abandon its patriarchal mentality or to embrace, with full conviction, the values of the western society [4, pp. 65-68]. The existence of such a gap within the interwar Romanian society, between the extreme poverty in the rural, underdeveloped world and the urban benefits of the modern world, which were simply unconceivable to the poor illiterate dweller of the villages, should have rang a bell about the chances of success of the Gustian project.

2.6. Ideological preconception, missionarism and intellectual arrogance

A particularly important aspect noted by prof. Zoltán Rostás [21, pp. 63-69], illuminating for the spirit of the times when the Gustian community project took place, concerns the flawed ideological preconception held by the Bucharest School of Sociology about rural Romania – which was seen as completely dependent or subordinated politically, administratively, culturally and economically to the national urban centre, represented by the capital city (Bucharest). This ideological preconception – that the Romanian village was a social space that had to be lifted from underdevelopment through a common effort of the political and urban elite (from Bucharest mostly) – was compared by prof. Zoltán Rostás with a missionary attitude, inasmuch as it implies from the start a vertical („top-down”) interaction between the intellectual (urbanized and educated) and the peasant (illiterate and living in rural areas). However such a perspective goes against the horizontal („peer to peer”) approach of axiological neutrality, completely devoid of ideological preconceptions, that is specific to modern science. Prof. Zoltán Rostás remarks that the report established between the Romanian village and the

Bucharest School of Sociology was an asymmetrical one from the very beginning, indicative of a relation of subordination. Supposedly, the RST (1934-1938) and SST (1938-1939) descend from the high peaks of Bucharest academic science into villages throughout Greater Romania, to „enlighten them” [7]. The activity of scientific research and cultural elevation of the rural areas, through direct social action, was considered a form of social assistance granted to the Romanian village by the urbanized and educated cultural elite (which consisted of university professors, assistants and students). Thus, between the scientific ideal developed in the Seminar of Sociology in Bucharest and the concrete reality of cultural and scientific work carried out in villages, there was, in effect, an enormous gap. According to prof. Zoltán Rostás [19], due to this ideological preconception, the Bucharest School of Sociology instils, most likely in an involuntary fashion, an uncanny sense, not of adversity per se, but rather of opposability between *The Power or superordinated medium* (represented by the national political and academic authorities, like King Carol II or the Gustian School) and *The Rural Community or the subordinated medium* (represented by the Romanian village).

2.7. Invasion of the rural space and hostile peasant reaction

Since the Bucharest School of Sociology assumed the aforesaid missionary (superordinate) attitude towards the rural, it should not come as a surprise that the *invasion* of a village by teachers and students could actually cause panic [20, p. 304]. In a public speech held at Dragus, in 1929, at the inauguration of the Monographic Museum of this locality from Fagaras county, Henri H. Stahl [26, p. 9]

admitted to the peasants he was addressing that „you, villagers from everywhere, receive us with reluctance and fear”. He remembered also that the main reason „you keep calling us <mister> (a rather disrespectful term from a peasant), <boyars> or <city slickers> (<lufturişti>)” was that, as a rule, the city people that visited in the past the village didn’t always come „wholeheartedly” [26, p. 9]. A similar mention makes Octavian Neamtu who suggests that „the peasant’s avoidance of the monographists and distrust towards them showed that the city folk had never stopped by in good faith and never ventured in a village with the sole purpose of helping its dwellers”. According to monographist Maria H. Oprescu, there were cases when peasants would tell the students, „<Why, have you raised my children for me? I don’t need you or your help!>. Some women would start to shout at us, wouldn’t unlock the gates. A peasant woman even threw boiling water on some of our colleagues” [21, p. 68]. In a similar fashion, Dumitru Sandu rightfully notes [22] that the student teams were received in a reserved manner in the villages. In no way were they granted an enthusiastic welcome as „messengers of the King”, like Gustian publications *Courier of the Student Teams* and *Courier of the Social Service* propagandistically led to believe. According to an informed observer, like Henri H. Stahl, „these teams were received by villagers with a disbelief sometimes bordering on hatred. The presence of such a large group of students in the middle of the village was something unusual. Their claim that they only came to do good from the bottom of their heart, in order to keep their word to His Majesty who asked to them to <carry with you to the villages a part of My soul and My love>, seemed if not downright

fairytale stuff, at least indicative of some hidden agenda. Sometimes not only the peasants but the village intellectuals as well showed the same distrust" [27, pp. 97-98]. Not infrequently, this feeling of mistrust or even hostility, which arose in the heart of the locals towards the members of some of the RSTs was determined by the arrogant attitude and unacceptable behaviour that some of these students showed towards the villagers. As attested in a report, filed in July 16, 1934, by Henri H. Stahl, as inspector of the Prince Carol Royal Cultural Foundation, some of the students from a team quartered in the locality of Slobozia-Pruncului from Bucovina, in Suceava county, „used to abusively take the riding horse belonging to the director of the local school, the latter being forced to close the saddle under lock" or would „prance around dressed in woman's clothing" [2, pp. 242-243]. It was even rumored in the village that „they didn't treat the wife of their host appropriately" [2, p. 243].

2.8. Centralist vision

Despite the fact that the Gustian community project inherently implied a top-down type of intervention – i.e. from the capital-city to the backward villages, in terms of development – Dimitrie Gusti [11, p. 3] seems to have been aware from the beginning of its prospective failure, when asserting „from above one cannot either give, nor command" (although this corresponded to the centralist spirit of the times). Imposing cultural and judicial norms from the centre, by legislative or administrative means, often constitutes an erroneous approach, since they often prove ineffective and yield no local results. These few visionary lines are early evidence (since 1936) for the Gustian projects' defeat before social reality, unknowingly foreseen by the founder of the Romanian sociology.

2.9. Monographic utopianism

The methodology developed by the Bucharest School of Sociology states the foundation of social intervention on prior sociological research, conducted through monographic method and aimed at determining the actual social realities which would later be subjected to the action of social intervention. Based on this methodological approach, very viable otherwise, Dimitrie Gusti proposed the monographic investigation of all the villages in Greater Romania (over 15,000 of them) within 4 years (which implied studying a number of about 3,700 villages annually). In order to complete this not only utterly unrealistic, but also scientifically futile sociological endeavour, a number of 53 or 54 villages had to be monographically investigated every year in each of the 71 counties of Greater Romania. However, the founder of the Bucharest School of Sociology did not stop here and also suggested the creation of additional special teams assigned with the monographic study of the 172 urban localities. In a session held at the Romanian Academy on 20 May 1943, acad. Dimitrie Gusti presented once again his majestic and lofty plan of examining the whole rural Romania for the well-being of the peasantry, this time with the financial endorsement of the Romanian Academy. This completely unrealistic idea was then invoked one last time after 23 august 1944. In response to these assiduous proposals of Dimitrie Gusti, his fellow academician – Constantin Rădulescu-Motru [16, p. 115] – estimated that for the execution of the unrealistic plan developed the founder of Romanian sociology, the budget of the Academy had to be entirely destined to monographic investigations and also had to be in the ballpark of hundreds of millions (which was much more than the yearly budget of

the Academy and therefore absurd). Also, the practical implementation of the abovementioned Gustian conception called for an organisational effort of an institution even larger than the Academy [18, p. 20]. At the time, the utopian designs of prof. Gusti have been challenged, methodologically-wise, by some of his own disciples, like Anton Golopenţia [9, p. LXXXI]. Even if one acknowledges that the founder of the Bucharest School of Sociology and his colleagues were driven by positive intentions, it is none the less true that all the major Gustian projects – the exhaustive monography of the village, the Sociological Atlas of Romania (meant to be based on the sociological research of all the Romanian villages) and the mandatory conscription of all university graduates for labour in rural areas, through *The Law for the Establishment of the Social Service* – remained entirely unfeasible [23, p. 8]. All these generous and utopian Gustian initiatives, economically unsound, impossible at the time, requiring huge state funding, died out with the reign of King Carol II (who encouraged and financed them) and quickly ended up in oblivion.

2.10. Failure of the RST and SST members in determining the peasants to project realistic expectations about their limited power

The students introduced themselves to the villagers as having been sent by the king of the country in a mission to uplift their village. This was indeed true. As a result, the peasants would put forth requests or express needs, for the solving of which the RST or SST would have had to possess Romania's entire budget and the state authority as well (which was

unconceivable). The peasants expected the students from the teams to openly intervene financially or to have the power to propose amendments of legislation. Otherwise put, the RST and SST „would have had to be State, county and commune, with unlimited budget and powers” [24, p. 1]. This obviously wasn't the case. The peasants asked the monographic teams „to bring the heaven down on earth: to make laws, expropriations, to find finger-snapping solutions to matters of gravity and interest for entire counties and requiring years of tackling with” [24, p. 1]. Such demands, exceeding by far the possibilities of the Gustian students, generated a long row of disappointments and disillusion among the peasants who felt betrayed in their expectations.

2.11. The appearance of state's omnipotence and the powerless passivity of the locals

These unrealistic expectations the peasants had from the supposedly all-powerful RST and SST added to the habits they acquired during the electoral campaign. In order to gain votes, a candidate would recklessly promise the villagers a lot of nonsense. And so, the Romanian peasant eventually got to believe that the state would come and sweep his yard [8]. And since of course, things didn't happen, it all became a perpetual source of discontent and frustration. Also, it caused inertia among the locals, who waited in vain a rescuing intervention from the state and did little for their community in the meantime.

2.12. The state of degeneration of the rural areas

Despite all efforts made by the Gustian School to raise the Romanian village

from underdevelopment through the RST and SST, the Romanian social reality has remained largely unchanged. Towards the end of the interwar period, due to poverty, lack of hygiene, sanitary culture or promptly provided healthcare, many times due to the very passivity of the local and central administrative authorities, disease and poverty still affected severely large segments of the population, especially in rural areas. Even though the Prince Carol Royal Cultural Foundation started to organize and dispatch all over the country the RST (1934-1938) and SST (1938-1939), the public health state of the agonizing Romanian village was utterly precarious and reached extreme gravity. And not at all surprising, since in Bessarabia for instance, in 1933, „whole villages, whole regions, did not know how to wash, and refused to bathe” [28, p.41]. And indeed, in the interwar period, the villages of Romania were in a „truly derelict state, forgotten by god and by leaders”, „with squalid shacks, pasty-faced children, malnutrition, feeble livestock, dishevelled yards”, the women looking old at 25, the men weary, apathetic or worn-out [13]. Generally, a tired and desponded population. Medical services were almost non-existent. Because of that, „crone’s spells and clandestine midwives” were still hold in high regard [6, p. 14]. And as a result, epidemics were a permanent reality in the Romanian villages. „Tuberculosis, syphilis, malaria, pellagra, eruptive diseases, all commonplace, coexisted with childbirth performed exactly as it had been in the Saviour’s time” [13]. Venereal diseases were especially rampant: there was almost no village without dozens or hundreds of people suffering from untreated syphilis. For this reason, many children were born already infected with *eredosifilis*

(congenital syphilis). Interwar Romania registered the highest infant mortality in Europe (400,000 children deaths annually).

2.13. Inadequacy of the educational system to the specifics of rural economy

Agriculture, the primary occupation for most of the population of Greater Romania, was regarded as "positively bankruptcy-prone" (due to fragmentation or excessive parcelling of farmland). In a country with a huge agricultural potential, as Romania, agricultural productivity was very low compared to other Western European countries. Having „run astray”, the Romanian educational system offered mainly theoretical specialisations, inadequate, however to the agricultural profile of the country. The Romanian villages came to be full of pseudo-intellectuals or failed intellectuals, „baccalaureate alumni and drop-outs, bachelor’s degree alumni, indifferent teachers, resourceful loafers, slackers and laggards”, but – inexplicably – no agronomist. Even if in the interwar period almost every city had a high-school, surprisingly, in a Romania with a newly-developing industry, there were quite a lot of industrial high-schools and almost no agricultural ones. A prevalent idea of the era appeared to be that „in our country of ploughers, what we need are agricultural high-schools” (which were entirely absent) [13].

3. Conclusions

Finally, the main explanation for the failure of the Gustian interwar community project for the villages of Greater Romania lies in the fact that the plans conceived by acad. Dimitrie Gusti

were „disproportionately high compared to the means that were available to him” [17, p. 85]. Apart from such misfires, the Gustian School „left the legacy of an intellectual adventure that marked a generation and shaped the development of the Romanian sociological school” [3, p. 116]. Despite the predominantly utopian character of the Gustian ideas, one has to stress that they were „necessary and fertile utopias”, since they helped lay „the foundations of a sociology based on facts and method” [23, p. 11]. Even though the Bucharest School of Sociology did not succeed, through the RST and SST, to reduce the „backwardness” and „primitive living standards of our peasants”, nor to effectively improve „their low level of culture and intellectualism” [5, p. 1], we are still left with the warm memories of the first and only Romanian school of sociology which set the basis for the Romanian intellectual and methodological tradition in social research.

Notes and References

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