

# (Not just) Memories of Underdevelopment: Reflections on Dragoș Sdrobiș' *Limitele meritocrației într-o societate agrară. Șomaj intelectual și radicalizare politică a tineretului în România interbelică*. Iași, Polirom, 2015

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With a title that recalls Henry L. Roberts' path-breaking "*Rumania: Political Problems of an Agrarian State*" (1951), the study of Dragoș Sdrobiș treats timeless problems in Romanian society, such as the failure of modernization, economic backwardness, and the presence and persistence of a political oligarchy. Though it is thematically kindred to Roberts' study (which is surprisingly absent from the bibliography), the work is closer in content to Irina Livezeanu's "*Cultural Politics in Greater Romania: Regionalism, Nation Building, and Ethnic Struggle, 1918–1930*" (1995) insofar as it posits its focus on the year 1918, as the unification of the country becomes the locus through which later disturbances which crippled the state (economic instability, the failure of parliamentary democracy and the rise of fascism) are understood. Similarly to Livezeanu, Sdrobiș focuses on the educational system, specifically on the university as a lens through which the above mentioned events are to be examined. The similarity between the two studies ends here however. Though he has a PhD. title in history, the author seems to be more interested in using history to explain sociological concepts, rather than use sociology to explain historical events. Jargon laden and heavily dependent on concepts from modernization theory, this rather disjointed study is split into three parts: a presentation of the idea

of the intellectual, the generational group and intellectual labor in pre-1918 and post-1918 Romania, a discussion of the situation of the interwar Romanian university, and finally a comparison of the different solutions which both the youths of the period and the state provided to the failure of the university to provide professional security. Despite the fact that the author occasionally uses archival material and newspaper articles from the period, quoted from the original sources, although most of the cited texts are already available in anthologies or collected works, his work is heavily dependent on secondary literature. Pre-communist Romania had a deep tradition of theorizing underdevelopment (Love, 1996), represented by thinkers as diverse as Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea, Constantin Stere, Virgil Madgearu or Mihail Manoilescu. After 1948, such theorizing was halted, as a consequence of the imposition of standard Soviet interpretations in every branch of the social sciences. Romania was mostly described in historical works as a victim of Western economic exploitation (Rura, 1961, 100–103). In spite of the fact that in the period of Ceaușescu's thaw a renewed interest led to the works by such authors being republished or monographs about them written, they failed to attract attention among those preoccupied by the subject of Romania's economic and social backwardness, in favor of thinkers

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who presented a more optimistic view of the situation (Rizescu, 2005, 283–328).

One of the most fascinating figures of the Romanian interwar period, the sociologist Dimitrie Gusti tried to solve the economic and social problems of the country by way of knowledge. After conducting his graduate studies in Germany, where he studied with the likes of Wilhelm Wundt and Karl Bücher, Gusti established a successful academic career back in Romania. Considering that intellectuals should play an active role in the country's political life, he argued that a thorough sociological study of society would identify the main problems facing Romanian life. Gathering around him a group of followers from various disciplines, obtaining the political support of the country's monarch, and harnessing the work power of university students, who had to undertake an obligatory social service in order to graduate, Gusti's project aim to close the gap between theory and praxis seemed to be on the brink of success. After plunging the country into a dictatorship, Carol II could not face external and internal threats, and was forced to resign. As Romania became a fascist state, the sociological project of Gusti was halted by the new rulers. It is however doubtful that his plan would have been accomplished even without these setbacks. A project characteristic of the "high modernist" mindset (Scott, 1998), Gusti's desire to publish a monograph that would synthesize all the details regarding life conditions in every Romanian village was ultimately deemed utopian even by one of his closest associates, Henri H. Stahl (Rostás, 2000, 76). Incidentally, Henri H. Stahl (1901–1991) is referred throughout the book without his middle initial, which might lead some to confuse him with his father, Henri Stahl (1877–1942).

Although he hoped to continue his career in the postwar years, Gusti was quickly discredited. Discredited in the eyes of Communist authorities for his collaboration with Carol II, he died forgotten and in poverty. Not even during the time of Ceaușescu's liberalization or the subsequent nationalist period of rediscovering Romanian thinkers did interest

in Gusti's work increase. Despite occasional works, such as a biography of Gusti (Bădina and Neamțu, 1967) or a collection of essays on his work (Stahl, 1980), he and his school never attained popularity in academic circles. Without any institutional affiliation, Zoltán Rostás began in the last decades of Romanian communism to undertake interviews with the living members of Gusti's school. What was essentially a one-man project gained momentum after 1989, as Rostás, now with institutional support, became a professor at the University of Bucharest and a fellow of various research institutions. His efforts now benefited from the help of his students, which were vital in making available in recent years a massive amount of material. Oral histories were written, diaries, memoirs and letters were published, and books or newspaper articles from the interwar years were re-edited. With such a wealth of resources available, one would expect Sdrobiș to use this material in order to expand our understanding of the interwar intellectual culture. Instead, he offers a rather standard portrait of the times.

Sdrobiș at times stresses that Romania's political and economic situation in the epoch was similar to that of other countries from Southeastern Europe, but whenever he turns for historical comparison he does it with Western countries, such as France or Germany. While Nazism was *similar* to Romanian fascism insofar, as it promoted nationalism and xenophobia and opposed democracy, the causes which led to the coming to power of the NSDP in Germany and those that led to the rise of the Iron Guard in Romania could not be more *different*. As Mr. Sdrobiș is not writing a history of fascism, but of political and economic development, he should be aware of this fact. As there is a considerable amount of literature available on the subject (see, for example, Chirot, 1989; Banac and Verdery, 1995; Janos, 2000), there is no reason for him to ignore the structural similarities between Romania and other neighboring countries. For example, while his discussion about the role of the university in interwar Europe and the

United States, as well as the projects developed by the League of Nations, could serve as a useful introduction to the grounding of Romania's educational system, but at almost twenty pages, it distracts from the general discussion and is out of place in the overall narrative. Again, while it is fair to suggest that Romania's educational crisis took place within an international context fraught with anxieties regarding the university system, to suggest that the issues faced were similar to those with which other Western states were confronted is misleading.

In choosing to give voice to the actors from the epoch who were confronted with economic hardship, Sdrobiș comes back again and again to the members of the “young generation”, keeping in tradition with the prevalent obsession over them and their works and that sees the whole period as one marked by their efforts to elevate Romanian culture (see, for example, Mihăilescu, 2008, 237). The voices of writers and thinkers from the period, of different orientations, are mostly left out, which, considering the vast literature available on the subject, is an unwarranted choice. Thus, the “left” is relegated to one paragraph (p. 150). Rather than providing these views as a side-note, they should be presented on an equal footing with those of right-wingers, considering that the Criterion group easily accommodated diverging political orientations (Rostás, 2000, 25–30). At one point he observes that the worker's strikes from the Grivița plants of 1933 are unfairly ignored in contemporary Romanian historiography (p. 245). But considering that the “new generation” was situated at the right of the political spectrum, his ignorance of left-wingers – whether communist or social-democrats – who approached the subject of youthful unemployment, makes him part of the same tendency he so rightfully criticizes. He concludes that Titu Maiorescu's critique of forms without foundation (“formele fără fond”) is an adequate one when it comes to describing the interwar situation (p. 185),

without taking into account the criticism leveled at this theory (Rizescu, 2012, 92–97).

Although economic insecurity affected the majority of the student population, it manifested itself differently according to ethnic divides. Though negligible, small factors such as increased family support in the case of Jewish students, as compared to their Romanian colleagues, led to resentment of the former by the latter. Except for leftist groups, there was no attempt to build solidarity among all members of society on the basis of economic vulnerability. This would have disastrous consequences for the Jews after the outbreak of the war, when the “Romanization” of the economy promoted upward mobility for members of the Romanian majority at the expense of the Jews. A critic of Romania's corrupt political institutions and a committed admirer of French literary culture, Camil Petrescu struggled with severe poverty throughout the interwar years (see Petrescu, 1975). Despite this, Petrescu had no qualms about benefiting as a result of the persecution of the Romanian Jews, and was indignant about not being able to obtain a house expropriated from a Jewish owner (Sebastian, 2000, 337)

When it comes to the analysis of Romanian fascism, Sdrobiș relies on Eugen Weber's thesis that the Iron Guard promoted an anti-modern ideology, advocating a return to the past (p. 14). This program, expressed in a style which fused popular mysticism with populism, attracted the peasant population who desired to see the country cleansed of atheism, communism and Jews (pp. 199–200). Weber's analysis of the Iron Guard in his and Hans Rogger's groundbreaking *The European Right: A Historical Profile* (1965) represented an important contribution to the existing literature on the history of the movement considering that, at the time, most accounts of the Legion were written by ex-members, keen on developing a hagiographical corpus. Subsequent research has since however disproven Weber's main contentions. The Iron Guard manifested its propaganda efforts in the south and center of the country, where barely any

Jewish communities existed (Veiga, 1989, 115; for an in-depth analysis of voting patterns which goes against Weber's speculations, see Heinen, 1986, 406–413). Despite the Guard's declared adversity to the innovations of modernity, they nonetheless relied on them in order to relay their propaganda, for example. One could thus better describe their relationship between an idealization of the peasant past and the forms of European civilization following Clark's (2015) use of the concept of "reactionary modernism" (Herf, 1984) as applied to the Romanian context.

The book lacks an index, which makes it difficult for those who might want to consult it only for exploring certain themes.

There is a risk that the renewed interest in the work of Gusti and his followers might lead to the kind of adulation which characterizes most books on the "young generation", in which the fascist connections of the Criterion

group are ignored or dismissed as youthful mistakes. Research tends to overlook or minimize the problematic relations that the members of the Bucharest School of Sociology entertained with Romania's dictatorial regimes (for exceptions, see Bucur, 2002; Cotoi, 2009; Wedekind, 2010). Critical studies are thus needed which will integrate the intellectual history of the Bucharest School of Sociology within the nexus of twentieth century Romanian politics. Unfortunately, the study under discussion fails to achieve this task. As a general study of the situation of the university in interwar Romania and its relationship to politics, economy and nationalism, I find it hard to recommend "*Limitele meritocrației...*". Much more useful are the works by Livezeanu and Momoc (2010). Similarly, when it comes to the politicization of the youth and the rise of fascism in Romania, the studies by Veiga (1989), Heinen (1986) and Clark (2015) are considerably more illuminating.

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