

THE “THIRD WAY”: AGRARIANISM AND INTELLECTUAL DEBATES IN INTERWAR ROMANIA

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For a proper reading of my text I propose two matrixes of interpretation: as an intellectual history of the agrarian movement from the interwar period and as a social history of the intellectual debates related to the agrarian issue. In this respect, I consider Romania's modernization as a double-tracking process: cultural-ideological and social-economical. As intellectual history, modernization here is referred to as the symbolic rapport with the West. As social history, modernization is a process which contains the first Romanian constitution: the Organic Statutes (1831-1832), the abortion of slavery and the land reform (in 1864), with the revolutionary interlude of 1848. The significance of these two moments that took place within only few decades is very important: they constituted the core of developmental debates in interwar Romania. From this perspective, the historical approach of Romanian agrarianism in East Central European context is opening as a fascinating topic.

Key words: agrarianism, modernization, interwar Romania, intellectual elites, nation-building.

The Historical context

For the East Central European political and intellectual elites of the second half of the Nineteenth century and the first decades of the Twentieth century, the foremost canonic battle was fought around the issue of national revival as well as around adapting modernity to the specific conditions of their own countries. By modernization, in this context I mean scientific spirit, neutral state, capitalist economy and secularization. By secularization, I also mean an attitude given by: 1) the passage from a significant rationality to an operational rationality; 2) the breakdown of the order attributed to the world which is synonymous with laicization.

Beyond these terminological predications, the modernization process appropriated the ambivalence of three major orientations in culture: 1) the imitation

without reserves of the patterns of Western culture; 2) the total rejection of the West in the name of preserving the traditional character and the national specificity of East Central European cultures; 3) the adaptation of Western achievements in education, society, economy and politics to the specific conditions of these cultures.

The predominantly traditional and overwhelmingly rural societies of East Central Europe had to face the competition of a West in expansion. Their relative backgrounds lay in the absence of a middle class which could have supported and promoted the process of modernization, as well as in the historical pressure of great empires, Ottoman, Russian and Habsburg, which emphasized the marginality of the East-Central European political and intellectual elites. Most of them educated in the Western universities, these elites tried to analyze their own local realities, which often proved to be far less modern, by using the patterns of modernity: the intellectual heritage of the Enlightenment, the ideas of the French Revolution and German Romanticism – a very particular and complex historical process which I would call the *re-inventing of modernity*.

In all countries of the East Central European area, in which the peasantry made up a significant percentage of the whole population, the agrarian issue was a major question in finding a proper path for development. Agrarianism has emerged as a specific reaction to the capitalist relationships upon to economies still in a medieval and very rudimental stage of development. Under these circumstances, the agrarian issue had specific particularities from country to country, depending on certain factors: 1) the level of urbanization and that of the development of the middle class; 2) the agricultural productivity and the potentials of the internal market; 3) the relationship between peasants and great landowners. The high level of urbanization in Bohemia managed to create an internal market and contribute in this way to the development of agricultural production. In Hungary and Poland, with a less urbanized social class but with a large class of nobility, the modernization of the economy, and especially that of agriculture, was slower and still remained at a traditional level. Because of the powerful Turkish influence and the lack of a local aristocracy, in Bulgaria and Serbia, the status of the peasantry was the most difficult in the whole region, and the modernization of the economy was done very slowly until the beginning of the Twentieth century.

The difference between continental Eastern Europe and East Central Europe was that in Hungary, Poland and the Baltic lands there were to be found such modern farms among the richest feudal proprietors, and slow modernization among the less rich landowners had also started, while in continental Eastern Europe even the great landowning aristocracy was no able to develop its economy in comparable proportions. (...)

The difference in this regard is not just quantitative, it is qualitative, and it reflects perfectly the differences between the two major regions of Eastern Europe¹.

In this context, the Romanian case bears some peculiar characteristics. The Romanian political elites had some choices to achieve and internalize modernity: they could have promoted a nation-building project and searched for a path of development in the direction of industrialization and urbanization or they could maintain the preponderant agrarian character of economy. But the unification of all Romanian provinces into a modern state and the achievement of independence were considered to be more realizable and desirable for the Nineteenth century Romanian political elites. These goals had a priority over social and economic reforms and this issue has shaped the whole Romanian modern history. The historical pressure regarding the unity of all Romanians was simply too strong and seductive for the Romanian modern elites. The modernized reforms of the Organic Statutes, the land reform inaugurated by Prince Alexandru Ioan Cuza, the Constitution and the parliamentary system, the foundation of universities in Iasi and Bucharest, were modern in principle and advanced for that time in the East Central European region. All these achievements contributed to the development of Romania, but they were accompanied by the continuous depreciation of the status of the peasantry, the endemic bureaucracy and the wide spread of politicianism. It is interesting how “certain social structures and institutions – the bureaucratized state and the system of public education – arose not in response of social differentiation and complexity but in anticipation of them².”

For a scholar interested in the study of Romanian modern history, this intellectual energy dedicated to defining themselves and to constructing a modern state can seem rather intriguing. The main direction in which the Romanian modern elites have excelled was the nation-building project. A modern state required not only laws and institutions, free access to primary education and an active public opinion, but also an effective administration and a growing economy. The development of a national bureaucracy was a consequence of the process of modernization: in the case of Romania, this process was first a political one: political modernization made bureaucracy possible but an economic modernization could have been sustained only by a local bourgeoisie, underdeveloped during the Nineteenth century. Without a strong middle class and with a very rudimentary

¹ Peter Gunst, *Agrarian Systems of Central and Eastern Europe* in Daniel Chirot, *The origins of backwardness in Eastern Europe: economics and politics from Middle Ages until the early Twentieth century*, Berkeley: University of California Press, (1991), p. 74-75. For the particularities in social and economic development of the East Central European countries, see also John Lampe, Marvin Jackson, *Balkan Economic History, 1550-1950: From Imperial Borderlands to Developing Nations*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, (1982).

² Andrew Janos, *Modernization and Decay in Historical Perspective: the Case of Romania* in Kenneth Jowitt, edit. *Social Change in Romania, 1860-1940: a debate on development in a European Nation*, Berkeley, Institute of International Studies, (1978), p. 114.

peasantry, the lack of their own land, the agrarian issue was the main problem the Romanian political and intellectual elites had to deal with it. But

The national progress of Romania did not correspond with the social or material progress of the peasantry. On the contrary, the high points in Rumanian history from the national point of view often marked a decline in the peasant's status³.

This huge contradiction between the urgency of providing a solution for the agrarian issue and the low status of the peasantry⁴ has strongly influenced the evolution of Romanian history. At the turn of the Twentieth century, the ideological context was dominated by liberals, adepts of protective state industrialization (*through ourselves alone*) and conservatives, who agreed that the situation of the peasantry should be improved, but through a slow and organic evolution which does not affect the social structure of the country. Under the specific conditions of a late modernized country, Romanian liberalism adjusted itself to certain elements of state protectionism and nationalism. The industrialization of the country demanded state support for the exports in the absence of a market to balance the change of products. In the conditions of the decline of conservatism, some specific reactions contoured to the process of modernization. For the historian Nicolae Iorga (1871-1940) and the literary movement around the cultural magazine *Sămănătorul* (The Sower), Romania should preserve its agrarian character based on the traditions of rural communities, whose resistance during Romanian history has been perceived in terms of "vitality". According to him, the Romanian society should remain agrarian, traditional and unaffected by foreign influences. A very particular response to this tendency of the idealization of the patriachality of rural life comes from the populist editorialist Constantin Stere (1865–1936) and the cultural moment around the magazine *Viața Românească* (Romanian Life). With the prestige of his revolutionary past from Russia, Stere tried to adapt both Western capitalism and Russian populism to the specific conditions of Romania. He has the conviction that the predominant character of Romanian society should be preserved, not in the direction of the idealization of the peasantry but in the direction of the emancipation of it. The foundation of this emancipation should be the small peasant property supported by a "rural democracy", a process of a gradual transformation of the status of the peasantry by avoiding the devastating consequences of capitalism. The socialist Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea (1855-1920), on his real name Solomon Katz, thought similarly of a gradual and economical change, which was different from the capitalist way, yet he argued that

³ Henry Roberts, *Rumania: Political Problems of an Agrarian State*, New York, Archon Books, (1969), p. 18.

⁴ Well-illustrated by the statesman and historian Radu Rosetti (1853–1926) in a valuable study about the peasant rebellion from 1907: *Pentru ce s-au răsculat țăranii* (For what the peasants revolted), Bucharest, Socec, (1907).

capitalism was inevitable in this evolution. He continued the idea about the importance of the agrarian issue sustaining that agriculture should follow the development of the native industry. He also described the particular situation of institutionalization of the feudal relationships between landowners and the peasants with the inspired expression *neoiobagie* (neoserfdom). It is significant to mention that Dobrogeanu-Gherea was the only socialist thinker who was interested in the agrarian issue, the other socialist leaders: Christian Racovski, Ștefan Gheorghiu or I. C. Frimu been preoccupied to the organization of the workers movement and the specific conditions of the proletariat and not to the agrarian issue. For all these, the peasantry was just a reactionary and lack of revolutionary potential social class which could not accomplish the goals of the socialist revolution even if the many peasant rebellions indicated the fact that the acutely contradictions from the Romanian society were to be found in the rural and not in the urban milieu.

The violent peasant rebellion from 1907 demanded not only an extended land reform but also a profound transformation of the structure of Romanian society. The lack of resources and the education of the peasantry obviously contrasted with the promises of politicians and with the technical solutions proposed by liberals, populists, nationalists or socialists. On the other hand, during the Balcanic wars (1912-1913), many Romanian soldiers, who were mostly peasants, could see to the south of the Danube a different, more emancipated and wealthy peasantry. There was already a social basis for the trend of a new social movement, *agrarianism*, with radical accents, which hoped to become national just before the First World War. In the arising of this movement a predominant role was played by the rural teacher Ion Mihalache (1882-1963), in which the emphasis was put on the alliance between the peasantry and the traditional rural elite: the teachers and the priests. The term *agrarianism*, for which the political expression will be *peasantrism*, was used for the first time by the economist Virgil Madgearu in a political speech in 1927 for depicting the agrarian issue and the solutions proposed by the newly-founded National Peasant Party. Despite the fact that Madgearu tried to conciliate the capitalism with a very traditional and rudimentary agriculture through a large cooperative system and credits sustained by the state, it was obvious that agriculture in itself could not sustain a long-term social and economic development. However, it is not a coincidence that “the peasant problem was divorced from the national question, though it was no less acute”⁵. This intellectual obsession of a proper, specific way of development, neither capitalist, nor socialist, based on the small land tenure and the large system of cooperatives, constituted the core of Romanian agrarianism. The drama of Romanian agrarianism was that it emerged in a period when the land reform was imminent, as a consequence of the promises made during the First World War, and not as a result of its own political struggle. When a peasant party actually won the power, the Great Depression and

⁵ Philip Longworth, *The Making of Eastern Europe: from Prehistory to Postcommunism*, 2nd edition, New York, St. Martin's Press, (1997), p. 137.

the attitude of King Carol II towards all political parties accelerated its decline. Some other collateral factors also contributed to the political evolution of Romanian agrarianism: i) the double origin of the National Peasant Party, formed through the coagulation of two ideologically distinct parties: the National Romanian Party and the Peasant Party; ii) the symbolic transfer of leadership: from the former populist Constantin Stere to Virgil Madgearu; iii) the political attitude towards King Carol II and towards the extremist parties; iv) the modulation of its doctrine from radical agrarianism to a more 'liberal' position as a state protectionist advocate. It can be said that *the agrarianism* was constituted from the need of a theoretical clarification related to the resolving of the agrarian issue. But, as a political movement, *the peasantry*, trying to respect the rules of the democratic games in a fluctuating political environment from interwar Romania, had more success as an opposition party than it had as a government party.

Romanian Agrarianism: a short overview

In the entire region of Central and Eastern Europe, peasant parties promoted and extended the idea of a peasant society at the crossroads between two worlds: one Western, industrialized and capitalist, the other Eastern, proletarian and communist. The historical paradox is that while peasant leaders tried to adapt liberal principles to the specific agrarian conditions of their countries, communism emerged and came to power not in the Western and more industrialized countries, as in the classical Marxist scheme, but in the Eastern and less "proletarian" ones. Communism failed in the West where the revolutionary potential of the urban proletariat could not fulfill the Marxist prediction of class struggle, yet won in the East, where the peasantry was the largest part of the population and traditionally suspicious to all urban influences.

It has always been a "proletarian" revolution without a proletariat; a matter of Communist management of peasant discontent. But while this shows that in the countries where this has happened the peasants were ripe to revolt, it does not show that they inclined to Communism. (...) It is true that Marxist Socialism had provided the first popular revolutionary movement in the West, but it is overlooked that in Eastern Europe there was a strong Populist, that is agrarian – peasant revolutionary movement before the new "scientific" Socialism came upon the scene. And even thereafter that new Socialism was never in the East anything but a revolutionary hothouse plant, an intellectual importation from the West, without native roots, clinging as a creeper to the strong growth of peasant radicalism⁶.

⁶ David Mitrany, *Marx against the Peasant*, New York, Collier Books, (1961), p. 207.

Eastern and Central European agrarian movements were more influenced by Eastern European Nineteenth-century populism than the revolutionary ideas of Western European Marxism. There existed a dream of the Populists to have a peasant society unaffected by the overwhelming Capitalism. For Marxists, Capitalism was also a main ideological enemy, but peasants were constantly considered as not being revolutionary enough, even too reactionary. The traditional and inert behavior of the peasantry was well-known for both Liberals and Socialists; but for Populists and Agrarianists, these features were signs of national specificity rather than those of backwardness.

If the true promoter of Romanian agrarianism was the rural teacher Ion Mihalache and its political leader was the old-fashioned Iuliu Maniu, then the most influential theoretician of agrarianism was certainly Professor Virgil Madgearu. Born in the Danube harbor of Galati in 1887, as a son of a local entrepreneur, Virgil Madgearu completed his first studies in the city of Galati and gained his doctorate in economics at the University of Leipzig in 1911. He returned to Romania in 1914, and started teaching at the Academy of Commercial Studies. He led an active intellectual life as the co-founder of the magazine *Independenta Economica* (Economic Independence) and as a scientific secretary of the Romanian Social Institute, headed by the reputed sociologist Dimitrie Gusti. Madgearu was deeply preoccupied with the economic and sociological problems of interwar Romania. He collected his conferences in the book “Agrarianism, Imperialism Capitalism” (edited in 1936), and realized, with a large documentary apparatus, the first attempt to an analysis of the evolution of Romanian economy from the interwar period by his book *Evoluția economiei românești după războiul mondial* (The evolution of the Romanian economy after the World War) (published in 1940). For Virgil Madgearu, the effort of industrialization, which started in Romania in the last part of the Nineteenth century – when Romania entered in the orbit of international capitalism – did not produce a fundamental change in the structure of the Romanian economy. Due to the insignificant amount of private capital compared to state capital invested into and working in it, the Romanian economy could not be considered as a proper capitalist economy. Moreover, the active rural population was more numerous than the industrial one. According to Virgil Madgearu, “Romania is still a semi-capitalist state with an economic social-agrarian-peasant order”⁷. Only the demographic rural pressure can assure the process of an authentic transformation of the economy. Under this demographic pressure, the normal tendency of agriculture would be in the direction of its intensification. The practice of an extensive agriculture on small parcels with low

⁷ Virgil Madgearu, *Evoluția economiei românești după războiul mondial* (The Evolution of the Romanian Economy After the World War), Bucharest, Scientific Printhouse, 2nd edition, (1995), p. 265.

productivity could not lead to a sustained rhythm of an increasing economy. Agriculture produced goods primarily for covering its own consumer necessities. It had a sporadic contact with the market and its influence on economy was low. Some structural conditions had a decisive influence on this: overpopulation, the rudimentary agricultural technique, the small and spread plots of land, the lack of cadastre and communal roads⁸. Only agriculture organized on cooperative principles could properly assure the expansion of agricultural production. It means that smallholders should be organized into common associations on production and delivery, sustained by credits adequate to the peasant economy. Industry could not provide an impulse for developing agriculture or sustain the necessities of the internal market. An orderly economy organized by the state⁹ could limit these enormous disparities between the agricultural sector based on small individual properties and the industrial sector which is rooted in large monopolies. Such an order, called “directed economy” by Madgearu, could also provide a healthy accumulation of capital, based not on individual and anarchic necessities but on national interest. These thoughts can be summarized as follows:

He could discern no fundamental change in the structure of the Romanian economy: the capitalist sector in general was still small, since capitalism as a mode of production had touched only a few branches of industry in a significant way and agriculture maintained its predominance. He concluded that there was still no possibility that the Romanian economy could be integrated into the world capitalist system, for its structure continued to be determined by several million peasant holdings, which formed an economic network governed by values qualitatively different from those of a capitalist economy. Nevertheless, he could not ignore the fact that capitalism exerted a powerful influence over Romanian agriculture¹⁰.

Madgearu also played a significant political role. As a peasant deputy he criticized the Liberal economic policy for its overdimensioned bureaucracy, suprataxation, excessive protectionism and corruption. As minister in the National Peasant governments, he was preoccupied with the improvement of the state of agriculture, considered the main economic domain, and to establish a new trade and industrial policy open to foreign investments. The entire economic philosophy of Virgil Madgearu can be synthesized in a few main assertions.

First, agriculture is an autonomous and non-capitalist way of production. It is not related to exploitation but to providing for the needs of the peasant family; it even caters for the expenses of labor, for seeds and technology for the soil.

The evolution of agriculture follows its own way. (...)

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 271.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 289.

¹⁰ Keith Hitchens, *Rumania: 1866–1947*, Oxford, Clarendon Press (1994), pp. 333–334.

The fundamental difference between agricultural and industrial production is that in agriculture production is *organic* [underlined by the author] but in industry is only *mechanical*¹¹.

Quoting the Russian economist Alexandr Ciaianov, Madgearu shows that the structure of the peasant individual economy is sustained basically by the peasants' family needs and further by the intensity of labor, the technical means used, the natural conditions and the demands of the market¹². The small holdings are not isolated, in fact, among them exists an entire system of complex reciprocal relations; it can be argued that the peasant economy becomes the national economic unit itself¹³. Such an economic unit, in which the capitalist category of the salary is practically unknown, forms the basis of the peasant state.

Second, the great land tenures are inefficient, hard to be managed and depend in a greater way on the progress of industry and the fluctuations of the internal market. The small agricultural producer depends to a lesser extent on market laws: he can decide how to cultivate his land. A cooperative system grounded on the small property of rural producers represents the solution for getting out of the vicious circle of *neoiobagie* (neoserfdom). This new character of agriculture is due to the harmonious combination between private property and individual freedom. A real land reform means mostly a reform of private property, but a property regarded as *social function*. In this way, property creates not only rights but also duties towards society: the obligation of the proper exploitation of the land, the transmission of property through succession, the limitation of selling or mortgaging the tenures. The regime of property instituted in this way creates a class of free peasants, masters on their land, the basis of the future peasant state, and a social environment beneficial for agricultural development. Thus, agriculture and not industry is the main engine of the economy because it takes into account the true social structure of the country and fully satisfies the real needs of the consumers.

An agrarian regime established on small peasant holdings, will maintain a dense population, will intensify the agricultural production and will form an internal market for industrial production, capable to consume great stocks of goods¹⁴.

Third, a powerful peasant class cannot be consolidated without a "consciousness of class" and a "capacity of political action"¹⁵. Under the specific conditions of the universal suffrage, class tendencies of the peasants concretize themselves in peasant parties. The specific interests of the peasantry are quite different from those of the bourgeoisie who, in order to supplement their income, has to increase the taxes and this leads to unjustified increase in the prices of land

¹¹ Virgil Madgearu, *Agrarianism, Capitalism, Imperialism*, 2nd edition, Cluj-Napoca, Dacia, (1999), p. 42.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 75.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 84.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 52.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 58.

and, as a direct consequence, to the decrease of the living conditions of the peasantry. The interests of the peasantry are also different from that of the proletariat, who promote a social revolution against the capitalist bourgeoisie. Because in the majority of the East Central European countries the social organization is preponderantly agrarian and because the proletariat has an insignificant social ponderosity, the social evolution in this part of the world simply cannot follow the directions of the Marxist theory¹⁶.

Under those conditions, can agrarianism, based on the autonomy of traditional smallholding, as a non-capitalist way of production, provide a satisfactory explanation for the social evolution of modern Romanian history? Can agrarianism provide the possible conditions for a genuine peasant state? Virgil Madgearu tried to answer in the positive, starting from a statistically determined fact: because in the first half of the Twentieth century in Romania, the number of peasants was significantly greater than all other social layers, the agrarian issue was the main challenge which had to find an adequate solution. His assumption is that the peasantry constitutes a very distinct social class, different from the urban bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The peasantry is a traditional social class, not an artificial social construction of the society. With the political support of the universal suffrage, the peasantry could become, according to the political predictions of Virgil Madgearu, the decisive political factor in interwar Romania. This political force demands its own party, which should be “national”, because of the great number of the peasants, and “peasant”, because of its political goals. These goals implied a profound social and economic transformation of the country, according to its new political structure.

This could happen in two ways: i) through the creation of a powerful class of free peasants, proprietors on their small holding and united in cooperative associations based on mutual help; ii) derived from the first, through the creation of a peasant state, because this effort implied a national ideal. A peasant state could be achieved only in a democratic way, using the instrument of elections and local autonomy, and actively involving the peasants in public affairs. This kind of state was far from the revolutionary ideal promoted by the socialists. It was also far from the bourgeois ideal of capitalism, considered inappropriate for the real structure of Romanian society. Although Madgearu was a convinced democrat in promoting his political goals, he could not see his ideal he fought for achieved.

He anticipated *correctly* the electorate potential of the peasantry, under the conditions of free elections and universal suffrage, but he considered *inaccurately*, in my opinion, the peasantry as a uniform social class with the same goals and political ambitious. The economic conditions differing from one region of Greater Romania to another (even within the same rural community) proved the fact that the peasants were mainly interested in the achievement of immediate material interests. The interaction between the individualistic interests of the peasants with

¹⁶ Virgil Madgearu, *Agrarianism, Capitalism, Imperialism*, 2nd edition, Cluj-Napoca, Dacia, (1999), p. 70.

small holdings and the “bourgeois” interests of the middle-landlords created disparities among the peasantry, and this caused the collapse of the basis of the cooperative system and finally ruined the proposed peasant state.

The Third Way

Virgil Madgearu was not only an eminent economist and an active politician eager to promote the principles of agrarianism; he was also a reputable polemist. In a public conference sustained in 1925 at Romanian Social Institute¹⁷, Virgil Madgearu prepared a critical analysis to the volume of Ștefan Zeletin dedicated to the Romanian bourgeoisie. Like Zeletin himself, Madgearu agreed that a local bourgeoisie developed in the Romanian Principalities at the beginning of the Nineteenth century under the influence of the Western capitalism. But – and this is the major difference – for Madgearu, this bourgeoisie had no developmental characteristics, it only exploited national wealth. These characteristics were related mainly to the organization and exportation of cereal production. To accomplish this purpose only two solutions were theoretically feasible: i) the expropriation of peasants; or ii) the expropriation of boyars. The first solution was unacceptable for Western capitalism, because it would determine the destabilization of the internal social structure of the Principalities. The second solution was inoperable, because it would have implied a revolutionary bourgeoisie and an industrial proletariat strong enough to oppose the great boyars and landowners. The result was a historical compromise, concretized in the land reform of 1864, and with a juridical justification in the Constitution of 1866. The phenomenon was named “neoserfdom” and this is the real origin of the local bourgeoisie. Because the regime of “neoserfdom” was an artificial construction, the result, logically, was that the Romanian bourgeoisie was itself an artificial creation. This pattern was not disposed to follow the normal way of Western capitalist evolution: from commercial capitalism to the industrial and to the financial one. A normal evolution would involve the undermining of the regime of “neoserfdom” and the creation of an agrarian peasant regime, much more adequate to the new economic and social conditions of Romania. But this great transformation presumes, first of all, a deep reform of schools based on “morality” and “social idealism”.

According to the necessities of the moment in a new united Romania, the idea of school reform also interested Ștefan Zeletin. Therefore, these two theoreticians met at the point of educational reform in an essay written one year later under the title “Nationalizing the School”¹⁸. Zeletin was not only a sociologist

¹⁷ The title of the conference was “Formarea și evoluția burgheziei române” (The formation and the evolution of the Romanian bourgeoisie) and is a direct answer to the very controversial volume of Ștefan Zeletin, *Burghezia română: originea și rolul ei istoric* (The Romanian bourgeoisie: Its origin and historical role). The text of the conference is inserted in the volume *Agrarianism, Capitalism, Imperialism*, 2nd edition, Cluj-Napoca, Dacia, (1999), pp. 98–122.

¹⁸ Ștefan Zeletin, *Naționalizarea școlii* (Nationalizing the School), Bucharest, Cultural Foundation Principle Carol, (1926).

interested in the analysis of the evolution of the Romanian bourgeoisie; his preoccupations were also related to philosophy and historiography. With a doctorate in philosophy on the influence of the Hegelian determinism on English empirical philosophy, obtained in 1912 at the University of Erlangen, Zeletin was a materialist, for whom traditional history was only a chronological row of figures and facts and social history dealt with the large historical processes produced by collectivities and not by individuals.

The fundamental scientific difference between the traditional chronologic history and social history is that the first occupies with *the unique facts* and the last occupies with *the reversible facts*¹⁹.

The reply would be given by the reputed medievalist Gheorghe Brătianu, who considered that the research of historical sources should be made “without preconceived ideas”, paying attention to the connections between facts and their evolution²⁰. Brătianu, a connoisseur of the subtleties of historical documents, rehabilitated chronology in the study of history and considered historic Darwinism proposed by Zeletin unilateral, based on an *a priori* approach to history, and not on the authentic research of historical sources.

The main theoretical contribution of Ștefan Zeletin regarding the modern social history of Romania was the intimate correlation established between the origins of the modernization of Romanian society and the formation of a native bourgeoisie. He tracks the beginnings of the process of modernization as a direct consequence of the Organic Statutes and the introducing of Western capitalism in the Romanian Principalities. Western capital and the demand for cereals in the Principalities stimulated the commerce and made possible the initiation of a local industry. This process was beneficial not only for the industry but also for agriculture²¹, which could take advantage in this way from the possibilities opened by the new markets. Because both the native bourgeoisie and the peasantry have the interest of becoming as prosperous as possible, a competition between them is logically impossible. The development of agriculture is directly influenced by the development of industry. In the incipient phase of capitalist development and in the context of the “neoserfdom” regime of the peasantry, the essentially feudal working relationships within the bourgeois institutional framework are a normal phenomenon. This “neoserfdom” is not only the characteristic of the situation of the Romanian peasantry as some “random authors”²² used to say; it is a universal phenomenon in all countries in the transition process towards capitalism. Zeletin tried to lend a scientific basis to the

¹⁹ Ștefan Zeletin, *Istoria socială* (Social History), Bucharest: Agrarian and Social Pages, (1925), p. 9.

²⁰ Gheorghe Brătianu, *Teorii nouă în învățământul istoriei* (New Theories in Teaching History), Iași, (1926).

²¹ Ștefan Zeletin, *Burghezia română: originea și rolul ei istoric* (The Romanian bourgeoisie: Its origin and historical role), 2nd edition, Bucharest: Humanitas, (1991), p. 244.

²² Ștefan Zeletin, *Burghezia română: originea și rolul ei istoric* (The Romanian bourgeoisie: Its origin and historical role), 2nd edition, Bucharest: Humanitas, (1991), p. 213. The “random author” is no-one else than the socialist Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea and the text is a polemic replica, but it used similar bibliographical sources, like Karl Marx, Werner Sombart and Friedrich List, against his book: “Neoserfdom”.

evolution of the native bourgeoisie by using a historical Hegelian pattern and a Marxist economic rhetoric against the “literary sociology” promoted by theoreticians of the “reactionary currents” like Titu Maiorescu, Nicolae Iorga, Constantin Stere, Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea and Henry Sanielevici²³.

The economic interpretation provided by Ștefan Zeletin on the formation and the evolution of the Romanian bourgeoisie came to similar conclusions to the cultural approach of another literary critic: Eugen Lovinescu. In his massive three-volume book²⁴, *The history of the Modern Romanian Civilization*, Lovinescu uses the theory of imitation of the French sociologist Hyppolite Taine to prove the idea that the process of modernization in Romania was due to the imitation of Western patterns. The constitutional projects from the beginning of the Nineteenth century which were started by the elites of Moldova and Wallachia, using as the *Code Napoléon* as model, are considered to be the first manifestations of liberalism in a broader sense and a Western type of mentality. Conscious of the huge gap between the development of the West and patriarchal Romania, the native urban elites imitated and internalized Western laws, institutions, mentalities and habits, in short, an entire civilization. This process was called by Lovinescu “*synchronism*”. The entire modern Romanian civilization is solely the creation of this urban, bourgeois class, and no other “reactionary force” could achieve this.

What accurately defines the intellectual Romanian environment in the interwar period was definitely the tone and the intensity of the debates relating to the relationship of Romanians with the West. Lovinescu and Zeletin can be considered as Westernizers in a period in which the struggle for symbolic domination was dedicated to defining the national essence and the place of Romania in the new European context. They advocated the determinative influence of Western patterns of civilization on modernizing the traditional structure of Romanian society. They also tried to promote the values of the bourgeoisie and liberalism²⁵ against those who tried to defend the virtues of the peasantry. Among Traditionalists, as they were called, were theologians, philosophers, even historians. In order to define a genuine Romanian specificity, unaltered by the contact with the decadent Western civilization, a new element would be introduced in public debates: religion and, more precisely, Orthodoxy. The most illustrative example is Nichifor Crainic, a famous theologian and journalist of the interwar period, and the editor of the traditionalist magazine *Gândirea* (The Thought). For Crainic²⁶, Orthodoxy was definitely an element of Romanian specificity,

²³ Ștefan Zeletin, *Burghezia română: originea și rolul ei istoric* (The Romanian bourgeoisie: Its origin and historical role), 2nd edition, Bucharest, Humanitas, (1991), pp. 247-252.

²⁴ Eugen Lovinescu, *Istoria civilizației române moderne* (The History of Modern Romanian Civilization) (vol. I-II-III), (1924-1926), 2nd edition Bucharest, Minerva, (1992).

²⁵ As a curiosity, neither Lovinescu, nor Zeletin were members of the National Liberal Party. Zeletin was, indeed, for a short time enrolled as a member, but in the People Party; he refused to enroll in the National Liberal Party because he considered it “too corrupt”.

²⁶ On his real name Ion Dobre (1889–1972); his ideas were published in the volumes of essays *Puncte cardinale în haos* (Cardinal Points in Chaos), Bucharest, Vremea, (1936), 2nd edition Albatros (1998). A very detailed presentation of texts about the intellectual debates of the interwar period can be found in Jordan Chimet, *Dreptul la memorie* (The Right to Memory), 4 volumes, Cluj-Napoca, (1992-1993).

maintained by belonging to the Eastern spirituality, which was qualitatively different from the Western civilization, and was based on the traditional strength of the peasantry. Tradition is perceived as a dynamic force which could assure the existence of Romanians along history. Even more, modernity eroded Romanian spirituality. To save it, Orthodoxy should be imposed on culture, science, law and on the state, the latter envisioned as an “ethnocratic” form of national community.

The volume of Ștefan Zeletin, *The Romanian bourgeoisie*, raises a fundamental issue: the modernization of Romania, should it go in the direction of Westernization and industrialization, or in the direction of preserving the traditional agrarian character of the country? The intellectual reactions come not only from Romania and the peasants, but also from Paris and the social-democrats. Because Zeletin used a Marxist scheme in presenting his ideas in which capitalism should triumph in Romania, Șerban Voinea directly attacked Ștefan Zeletin that he simply ignores the fact that

The entire socialist Romanian thinking is supported by the central idea that the social developing of modern Romania is constructed under the influence of Western capitalism²⁷.

The Voinea – Zeletin debate about the specificity of Romanian modern social history did not only have intellectual connotations, it also entailed an ideological one: it is related to open versus closed strategies of development²⁸, in the original terms: neoliberalism versus neoserfdom. According to Zeletin, the economic realities and a new mentality created the real Romanian bourgeoisie, and its evolution is quite similar to that of the Western pattern of history. According to Gherea, Romania was in a very specific situation in which pre-modern relationships co-existed within a bourgeois institutional frame. For both, the course of history should lead to capitalism: in a liberal and nationalist²⁹ manner for Zeletin, as a way to socialism for Gherea. A different form of development for Romania was envisioned in a corporatist way by the engineer and economist Mihail Manoilescu (1891–1950) in his incisive study “Rostul și destinul burgheziei române” (The Meaning and the Destiny of the Romanian Bourgeoisie). Neoliberal

²⁷ Șerban Voinea, *Marxism Oligarchic Contribution to the problem of capitalist developing in Romania*, Bucharest, (1926), p. 17.

²⁸ About this debate in the essay of Daniel Chirot, *Neoliberal and Sociodemocratic theories of development: the Zeletin – Voinea debate concerning Romanian’s prospects in the 20’s and its contemporary importance* in Kenneth Jowitt, ed., *Social change in Romania: 1860-1940 A debate on development in a European Nation*, Institute of International Studies, Berkeley: University of California, (1978).

²⁹ I added “nationalist” to “liberal” because the thought of Zeletin is ambivalent. According to Balazs Trencsenyi, Zeletin tried to achieve a “national autarchy and ‘Westernization’ simultaneously” and that was a “Munchausenian moment” of modernization. The whole essay, *The ‘Munchausenian Moment’: Modernity, Liberalism and Nationalism in the Thought of Ștefan Zeletin* can be read in the volume Balazs Trencsenyi, Dragos Petrescu, Cristina Petrescu, Constantin Iordachi, Zoltan Kantor (eds) *Nation-Building and Contested Identities: Romanian and Hungarian Case Studies*, Budapest, Regio Books, (2001); the quotation is from page 74.

in economic theories, royalist in political activity, Manoilescu was a technocrat with a solid international recognition, who tried to construct a sociological foundation for his original theory³⁰ of corporatism, “integral and pure”.

He tried not only to define and structure the character of the Romanian bourgeoisie but also to position himself against the peasants’ doctrine³¹. He reproached to the peasants that they simply “did not understand the peasant issue”. Edifying the peasantry only on the basis of the smallholding and ignoring the density of rural population was to design an artificial experiment far from reality. Their aversion against industrialization and the bourgeoisie was just a politicianist attitude, lacking a real scientific ground. Also, for him, the way in which the peasants achieved a land reform proved theoretical inconsistency and political dishonesty. Finally, the peasant doctrine was unrealistic and incomplete; it treated only some “adjacent issues” and did not have a social ideal to follow. They visualized a social revolution in the name of and for the peasantry, but this goal has proved to be over-ambitious for the peasantry. The declared goal of Manoilescu was to apply the “principles of scientific organization” to the whole society, which function on corporative basis. His unorthodox economical views were opposed to the Madgearu’s agrarianism and specially to the Zeletin’s line of liberalism. Because of the low productivity of agriculture, despite the all efforts of the peasants, Romania should center its policy on industrialization. He sustained that in the international economic relationships predominated the “disadvantageous exchanges” between the agrarian countries and the more industrialized ones. From this reason, the rhythm of industrialization should rapidly grow up. His voluntarism led toward a corporatist direction, inspired by the model of Italy, which was quite different than the reformist liberalism promoted by Zeletin.

Conclusions

In the mid-Nineteenth century the Romanian intellectual elites rediscovered their own socio-economic realities, in fact their own roots, mostly through their Western academic experience. They realized the huge gap between the cultural and economic level of the Western countries and Romania and that something should definitely be done in order to solve the problem. An increasing number of theories were provided to find the most adequate way of developing the country.

The passion with which the Romanians have argued these various views for the last half century derives from the urgency of the very

³⁰ Significant studies about his theory belong to Philippe Schmitter, *Reflexions on Mihail Manoilescu and the political consequences of delayed-dependent development on the periphery of Western Europe* in Kenneth Jowitt (ed.) *Social change in Romania: 1860-1940. A debate in Development in a European Nation*, Berkeley: University of California, (1978) and Joseph Love, *Crafting the Third World: theorizing underdevelopment in Rumania and Brazil*, Stanford University Press, (1996).

³¹ See *The peasant doctrine and the bourgeoisie* in *The meaning and the destiny of the Romanian bourgeoisie*, (1942), 2nd edition, Bucharest, Albatros, (2002), pp. 265-178.

difficult problem of adjustment to modern Western society as well as from the fact that the sides taken in the dispute often reflected the social and economic interests of their proponents. In turning to the political movements, one finds in their party ideologies, in their economic policy and practices, and in their political behavior all the elements of crisis and distortion associated with Western influence and inspiration³².

Among these theoretical contributions to the development debate in the first decades of the Twentieth century, agrarianism undoubtedly has its own position. First, agrarianism emphasized the idea, similar to those of Constantin Stere, Radu Rosetti and Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea, that because of the increasing number of peasants without the possibility to support themselves (especially due to the numerous obligations towards landowners), the agrarian issue represented the main problem which demanded an adequate solution applied to the specific conditions of Romania. In order to achieve this goal, the agrarian theoreticians, Ion Mihalache and Virgil Madgearu, proposed the sustaining of the small peasant property through a cooperative system based on mutual assistance and preferential rural credits. Second, the agrarians considered that the small peasant tenure is a non-capitalist and autonomous way of production, which should be self-sustainable and could assure the development of industry. Ștefan Zeletin completely rejects this idea; he thought that capitalism had a beneficial influence on the peasantry, assuring a débouché for the development of industry. Third, the agrarian doctrine should be redesigned for counterbalancing the devastating effects of the Great Depression and more “liberal” measures should be taken to protect the economy. This doctrinal inconsistency was severely condemned by Mihail Manoilescu in his study dedicated to emphasize the significance of the Romanian bourgeoisie. The above authors prove that the importance of the agrarian issue was acknowledged and that they tried to provide a satisfactory solution, but they did not hold unanimous views. Numerous compromises had to be reached to obtain the political unification of two different parties and to retain power under the conditions of increasing political extremism. All this eroded the structure of agrarianism. To sum up, agrarianism was a political movement in the period of great opportunities that helped to keep the idea alive. Similarly to agrarian movements in East-Central European countries, Romanian agrarianism was an attempt at establishing a basis for a peasant state, exactly at the moment when capitalism succeeded in surviving political threats of extreme nationalism and the challenges of economical crises. From this perspective, the “peasant solution” proved to be economically untenable and politically disadvantageous. Agrarianism and its political expression, peasantry have opened an immense horizon of expectations but did not deliver in terms of political solutions. It was a political as well as intellectual movement with favorable prospects and competent leaders yet average achievements. Posterity will have to judge agrarianism in the context of its inevitable limitations.

³² Henry Roberts, *Romania: political problems of an Agrarian country*, pp. 340-341.