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## SOCIAL AND SPIRITUAL ASPECTS OF THE INTERWAR ROMANIAN VILLAGES

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### *Abstract*

Sociological research during the interwar period was meant to be a way through which the country could be known better, in other words, to make the Romanian realities better known, especially through monographic research, initiated by sociologist D. Gusti, considered to be the starting point of the Romanian Sociological School. After the achievement of the national ideal through the Great Union of 1918, a new ideal was necessary, that could complete the former. The nation was in the process of finding itself. The social problems of the country would be understood by knowing the country. All the enthusiastic forces were called forth to help to raise awareness of the nation, which were to become part of the monographic research teams: school teachers, priests, secondary teachers and professors, doctors, agronomists, mayors and praetors, members of the community centres, and even “the superior religious and civil rulers of the Nation, cultivating an Ethics and a Politics of Truth.” This study presents some aspects of the activity of the Community Centres in the rural area, the presence of the Royal Student Teams and the compulsoriness of the Social Service in the villages.

**Keywords:** Romanian village; interwar period; Community Centres; Royal Student Teams; Social Service, population migration;

### 1. INTRODUCTION

For the Romanian village, the twentieth century was one of frequent social reforms. For better or worse, these reforms aimed to transform the Romanian village, to bring it to the standards of the modern society which was on the rise in Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, the Romanian village and, implicitly, the Romanian society went through a tense period caused by the peasants' revolts of 1907. The importance of the Romanian village and of its harmonious relationship with the Romanian society in relation with the social well-being of the country was also highlighted by the committee of the Albina Magazine, coordinated at the time by the president of the Romanian Academy, Ioan Kaliendru, in an article published on 18th March 1907:



The revolted villagers should themselves understand that it is only in a nation which is well-functioning internally and respected abroad that their earned rights can be preserved and that their condition can improve more and more. They shall not forget that such terrible disturbance can cause not only the impoverishment of others, as they believe, but also the general impoverishment of the country, that they will suffer even more terribly than the others as a result of this impoverishment. In today's states' orderliness, all social strata, all social relationships, all forms of work and production, all of these are tightly interconnected and a blow to any one of these causes the disturbance of the whole body of the state ("Albina" Committee, 1907)<sup>1</sup>.

The Peasants' Revolt of 1907 brought about certain changes, especially in the field of economic relations and to the ways in which the managing of the farming lands became easier for the peasants .

Moreover, the economic and social changes of the Romanian village are highlighted by the minister of Religious Affairs and Public Education at the time, Spiru Haret, message also signed by the hierarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, emphasis being laid on the priests and school teachers in the rural townships. These changes are called "improvements" in the minister's message, the role of the priests and school teachers being that of convincing the peasants that things will be remedied through those "improvements".

You, priests and school teachers, must now go around, make the people understand that the improvements which are made are so great that perhaps many of them did not even dare to hope would ever be achieved... until now, I haven't promised great things, because I knew we couldn't achieve them, but now we make promises, because we know we can keep our word (Haret, 1907).

The need to examine "the condition of the rural population" and to seek "the best methods to improve it" was expressed in those times ("Albina" Committee, 1907) when the Romanian society was greatly tried by the revolts. After World War I and after the enactment of the Great Union, the social condition of the rural population was once again examined, this time having a profound scientific nature.

Sociological research during the interwar period was meant to be a way through which the country could be known better, in other words, to make the Romanian realities better known, especially through monographic research, initiated by the sociologist D. Gusti, considered to be the starting point of the Romanian Sociological School. The purpose of the Romanian Social Institute, founded in 1921, was to examine Romania's social problems, in order to help people to know and understand them (The Romanian Social Institute, 1926). This institute established an awareness of the country through sociological monograph and, most importantly, through rural monographs (Gusti, 1936).

All the enthusiastic forces were called forth to help to raise awareness of the nation, which were to become part of the monographic research teams: school teachers, priests, secondary teachers and professors, doctors, agronomists, mayors and praetors, members of the community centres, and even "the superior religious and civil rulers of the Nation, cultivating an Ethics and a Politics of Truth" (Gusti, 1936).

Sociologist Traian Herseni affirmed, in 1936, that Romania was at a crossroads. Until then, all the forces had been oriented towards the Great Union of 1918, and the integration was proclaimed a national ideal. The question that was asked at that time was: Where would things be headed for the country after the Great Union? Thus, the generation of the time was named "the decisive generation" (Herseni, 1936). In other words, a new orientation was necessary, a new ideal - the first one being that of the union. A strictly social ideal, or a national one, to complete the first. The nation was in the process of finding itself. The social problems of the country would be understood by knowing the country. The finding and creation of a national type of existence was wanted, a Romanian conception of world and life. It was desired to discover all these things through monographic research, together with the historical research. All these had the role of abolishing the imitation of the lifestyles from abroad (Herseni, 1936).

All levels of intellectuals, from the beginner student in science and the rural school teacher to the experts in all specialities, are called forth to unfold this campaign for raising awareness of the country (Herseni, 1936).

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<sup>1</sup> See the message addressed in the name of His Royal Majesty ("Albina" Committee, 1907b)

## 2.MAIN DIRECTIONS OF RESTORATION OF THE INTERWAR ROMANIAN VILLAGE

Interwar sociological studies, established and coordinated by Dimitrie Gusti, brought to the fore the fact that the population of the rural area was poorly educated, did not know how to cultivate their land according to the scientific norms of the time, did not know how to take care of their homestead or keep a good personal hygiene. It is why things had to be righted, and three of the concrete methods through which this could be done were: the activity of the *Community Centres* in the rural area, the presence of the *Royal Student Teams* in the villages, and the compulsoriness of the *Social Service* in the villages.

Together with these three main directions of restoration of the Romanian village, which were part of a more complex project of management of the cultural life, sponsored by Dimitrie Gusti, there was also a direction concerning “the organisation of cultural propaganda” through radiophony, by establishing the Radio University. Through the creation of the Radio University, the shaping of a community sense was desired, of acknowledging the values and the national solidarity. “The creation of this collective cultural consciousness had as a starting point the foundational principle of the Gustian sociological theories: unity, specificity, and values” (Pricopie, 2004). Related to the importance of radiophony, at the beginning of the 30s, Dimitrie Gusti highlighted the fact that special radio programmes would have to correspond to different groups and social circles, and that the adult programmes should be divided in programmes for the villagers, city dwellers, workers and minorities (Gusti, 1996).

The founding of the Social Service was made on the account of “the restoration of the people’s cellular life” as a result of the “damaging influences,” which have “inserted themselves into the life of healthy traditions of work and honour of our people” (Popescu, 1939).

Through the Social Service Law<sup>2</sup>, which was published in Monitorul Oficial no. 242/18<sup>th</sup> October 1938, the Church<sup>3</sup> gained a well-defined role. Therefore, articles 10 and 11 of this law stipulate that the role of the Community Centre is to help, strengthen and deepen the activity of the Church, of the School, and of the State authorities, through priests, professors, administrative functionaries, who have the obligation to run their collective activities within the Community Centre (Social Service Law, 1938).

Through this law, the Community Centres would become a space of cultural, welfare, spiritual and national instruction development, which meant that, on the one hand, the Community Centre had to

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<sup>2</sup> Commenting on the Social Service Law, sociologist Dumitru Sandu emphasises the fact that this law, which was applied in Romania for one year only, between October 1938 and October 1938, when it was not repealed, but suspended, represents one of the inconsistent social experiments of the interwar period (Stan, 2012). It was inconsistent because this law came after four years, 1934-1938, in which the royal student teams undertook, by volunteerism, exceptional social actions in the villages and, suddenly, this activity of cultural and social improvement of the villages became compulsory through the Social Service Law. There were multiple causes for this compulsoriness, starting with the counteracting of the actions of drawing the youths into the legionary and communist movement, and to the totalitarian ideology which was present all over Europe at the time.

<sup>3</sup> This action of transformation of the Romanian village in the interwar period, which announced a radical change and threatened the spirituality and the traditions of the Romanian village, received a reaction from Professor Father Dumitru Stăniloae. Referring to the Social Service Law, he noticed that it sought a vast and systematic action of helping and strengthening our forlorn villages and the poor Romanian peasant, the spring of the Romanian future. This law took shape out of a great love for the people and it was engulfed in an impressive idealist will. This will, however, was not supposed to be one that brought all sorts of foreign influences and theories into the villages, that would have annulled the Romanian originality, but a will to listen to their traditional spirituality and to work with it (Stăniloae, 2012). The Professor Father’s attitude was just, and his intervention left a positive impact on the implementation of this project.

support the Church's activities and, on the other hand, the Church had to get involved in order to help this social project unfold properly (Popescu, 1939).

The cultural activity of the Community Centres was supported by the "Prince Carol" Royal Cultural Foundation, established in 1921 (Law regarding the "Prince Carol" Royal Cultural Foundation, 1921), which was the successor of the *Royal Cultural Foundation*, initiated by King Carol I in 1891 and whose purpose was to help, support, and perform cultural acts, therefore enacting the social and cultural reform, especially of the Romanian villages.

The 3815/7<sup>th</sup> May/1937 circular decree, given by the Braila County Prefecture, was addressed to the mayors of the rural townships in the county who had to implement it and to the parish praetors who had to supervise it, stated that

The "Prince Carol" Royal Cultural Foundation ... has, in almost all the rural townships in the country, lands that can be used for building community centres and, especially, demonstrative lots in the country which should produce something until the achievement of the objective proposed by the Foundation, asking you once again to take immediate actions... for lease through public auction, or through arrangement of the lots that belong to the Foundations, at the best prices possible. The lease length will vary between 1-3 years (S.J.A.N.Br., 1937, f. 209).

The culturalization of the Romanian village may also be exemplified through an address of Braila County School Inspectorate towards the Braila County Prefecture, no. 823/9<sup>th</sup> June/1937, through which the School Inspector, M. Popescu, asked for as many "of our writers' books" as possible: "P. Ispirescu, I. Creangă, Mihail Lungeanu, etc.," to be forwarded on time to the primary schools in the county, necessary for awarding the "hardworking and well-behaved" students on the occasion of the end of the academic year celebrations. These books "of stories and popular science, besides encouraging the good students, would also make for good and healthy cultural propaganda, as it is known that they can be appreciated by both adults and children" (S.J.A.N.Br., 1937, f. 233). Through Ruling no. 121/19<sup>th</sup> June/1937 "it was approved that the school inspector would be handed 132 books from the prefecture's library to be distributed as prizes to the county schools" (S.J.A.N.Br., 1937, f. 234).

An address to the Braila County Prefecture, registered with no. 1002/29<sup>th</sup> January 1937, informs us that in the township of Tufești, the "Lieutenant Dima Grigore" Community Centre affiliated itself with the "Prince Carol" Royal Cultural Foundation. The address ends with the following sentence, significant for the present study: "When you provide books for the county's cultural centres, please provide us with some, as well." Signed by director Father Constantin Agapie (S.J.A.N.Br., 1937, f. 17).

### **3. THE CULTURAL, SOCIAL, SPIRITUAL AND ECONOMIC ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY CENTRES**

Through the village courses they organised, the Community Centres had the role to elevate the cultural level of the villagers, and the Royal Student Teams had the role to examine the Romanian village, to notice its traditional and authentic traits, as well as to indicate any cultural, spiritual, social, sanitary or economic dysfunctionality and methods of rectifying them. The sanitary campaign of August 1938 can be recalled, undertaken in the villages, where the royal student teams, together with the Ministry of Health and the administrators of the Community Centres, implemented "the problem of the Culture of Health," which entailed actions on: "social diseases control; changing the conditions of life of the peasants, from an economic, hygienic and spiritual point of view; examining the family, concerning the homestead management, budget and alimentation," all these aiming to change the villagers' mentalities, as well as improving the well-being of the Romanian villages (Gusti, 1996).

Between 1934-1938, in Romania there were 2305 Community Centres functioning in the villages, most of them in Bessarabia – 653, in three counties there were at least 100, 108 in Bălți, 100 in Soroca and 100 in Lăpușna, compared to the counties in Transylvania, where there was a total of 146 Cultural Centres, most of them being 31 in Năsăud County (Gusti, 1996, Annexes).

The great number of Community Centres in Bessarabia can be explained through the fact that in this part of the country rural townships predominated. Making use of the activity hubs established by the Social Service, in the bishopric of Hotin, the All-Holy Bishop Tit encouraged cultural activity through the priests in the whole area, ending up having 475 Community Centres, which had as purpose the

intellectual and material development of the villages; it can be added that His Holiness was an active director of the Bălți County Community Centres at the time (Popescu, 1939).

There were 101 village courses organised in the Community Centres in 1938 and, between 1934 and 1938, the Royal Student Teams carried out 230 campaigns, 114 in the villages, 2553 people taking part in this activity and most of the courses, namely 48, taking place in the Soroca County (Gusti, 1996, Annexes). The presence of the villagers at the courses was monitored through proceedings, summons and activity reports, which meant that the process of culturalising and educating the villagers was taken seriously. The development of the Romanian interwar society depended on this process. These village courses continued even after 1938. They also took place in the Ianca Township, Brăila County, at the beginning of 1944.

In order to understand the way in which these courses took place, multiple addresses from Braila County shall be presented. The summons of the Ianca mayoralty, Braila County, from 4th January 1944, no. 5106, was addressed to all the residents in the township, where they were summoned to participate in the village courses, on the basis of a register, in compliance with decree no. 112817/1943 of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The participants were informed that these courses would take place every Thursday and Sunday afternoon, “with the purpose of educating them on the good management of the homestead and clarification on all material, moral and national problems.” The summons highlights the importance of these courses and “the great concern of the State leadership for the development of the villages.” Signed by Gh. C. Vlad – mayor and D.I. Pisciă – notary (S.J.A.N.Br., 1944, f. 15).

Decree no. 112817/1943 of the Ministry of Internal Affairs mentioned the necessity, importance and organisation of village courses, claiming that the “specificity of the Romanian social reality is the village,” where 80% of “the country is made up of villages,” and the main preoccupation of the State is to “develop the village.” The purpose of the administration is that of developing field actions, and “the field is but the people. The Romanian State is a peasants’ State,” which meant that this was the idea from which “all the action programmes and all the reform projects” had to start. “The duty of developing the village belongs to the administration.”

The decree further mentions that the administration “has to transform itself into a school of civil instruction for the villagers, which, on the one hand, has to complete and continue the primary school instruction and, on the other hand, to supply the lack of culturalisation methods in the cities, which lack in the villages.” It was also specified that these courses would be organised in each township, following a well-defined schedule, under the direct supervision of the Prefectures, Mayoralty and Community Councils, experts in all fields of activity being involved as well, and working closely with the Community Centres. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that at the end of this address there was a reminder for the people involved in this action that “the activity undertaken within the village courses represents a condition for the respective functionaries to advance,” in other words, their advancement to superior positions depended on the way in which they participated, knowing that the fulfilment of the decrees in the territory was not so well-organised (S.J.A.N.Br., 1944, f. 19).

In the address of the Mayoralty of the Ianca Township, no. 509/7th February 1944, the mayor reported to the Ianca parish praetor that, starting from 6th January 1944 up until the date of the respective report, village courses had taken place every Sunday and Thursday, with the men in the township, and from 9th January until 30th January, every Thursday, with the women, but “the attendance was not a satisfactory one,” as part of the men had been mobilized, while others had not been moved by the importance of those courses.

Nonetheless, there were between 50 and 80 participants at each meeting. The topics tackled during the courses for men, both theoretically and practically, were diverse, from homestead management, agricultural management or personal hygiene, to the people’s heroes and the observance of country laws. Among them, the following are worth mentioning: the hygienic, economic and national importance of the forest; frequent animal diseases: anthrax, swine fever, sheep pox, how to prevent them, vaccination (Ion Bărbulescu – forest ranger). Heroes of the village, sacrifices for the nation, great sins and vices, correspondence with the sons of the village and the soldiers on the battlefield (Gogu Sârbu – priest). Authorities are organised by God, rights and obligations of the good Romanians, country laws and their observance (I. Giurea – chief praetor). The topics tackled during the courses for women covered the field of homestead activities: The role of the woman in a homestead, the woman as mother (Aflătârlă Sofia – nurse). Setting the table and serving the meals, cleanliness and aesthetics (Octaviana Antohi –

school teacher). Clothing, traditional garment, wool, flax and hemp weavings, brushing them off, organising and maintaining them (Zoe Moroianu – school teacher). Personal hygiene, washing up, parasitic insects (Ion Moroianu – sanitary agent). Preparation of diverse ointments, baths for children, washing, ironing and maintaining the laundry (Aflătârlă Sofia – nurse) (S.J.A.N.Br., 1944, f. 11-13).

The development of the cultural level was also accomplished by the means of the literary gatherings, organised in attached provinces, which had the role of elevating the national and patriotic consciousness of the denizens. For example, there is an address of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, namely no. 2645 A./17th March 1937, in which the Braila County Prefecture is informed that:

According to its purposes and working schedule, the Romanian writers' society will organise literary gatherings in the attached provinces, where writers Victor Eftimiu and N.I. Herescu, university professor, will deliver lectures, and Alex. Cazaban, Ion Agârbiceanu, Ion Minulescu, George Gregorian, Ion Pilat, Aron Cotruș, Mihail Sorbul, Zaharia Bârsan, Mircea Damian etc. will read from their works., free entry for students and pupils.

By forwarding the aforementioned information and taking into account the cultural and national importance of this initiative, we have the honour of asking you to consent to warmly and festively welcome the writers at the train station, exchanging the literary gatherings for cultural celebrations and supporting, with everything that is necessary, the delegate of this society, Mr George Gregorian, writer and member of the committee, to assure the success of these cultural activities, at the same time making sure that part of the entrance tickets will be distributed to these gatherings by the respective people in charge in the county and city (S.J.A.N.Br., 1937, f. 64).

The Royal Student Teams, together with the "Prince Carol" Royal Foundation, were created as action teams in the field of the people's culture. Practically, they had to explain what to do and how to implement civilised lifestyles, being supported in their activity by the Royal Foundation (Gusti, 1996).

Through all these cultural and social institutions, a better administration of the country was desired, in which the village was to be regarded as the heart of this type of action.

Dimitrie Gusti speaks about the "participation of the villages in the administration of the country," where, together with the "centralist conception" of country administration, the "local administration conception" should also be taken into account, this being seen as a horizontal action, from which monographic research of the villages should not be missing, as well as the activity of the student teams, which will bring about the revitalisation and the change of mentalities in the villages; all these having the Community Centres at the core. "In the process of improving the village, the Community Centres create solidarity among the villagers, the functionaries, the priest, the school teacher and the sons of the village who have moved to cities, in order to undertake actions of improving their village, and bring it to an accessible level in the twentieth century, and necessary for the good consolidation of the Romanian village." To these, "the compulsoriness of the social service for all graduates of higher education who are about to start working in the field of state administration" can be added. The action of the social service brought about youthful energies and numerous useful methods to extend and finalise this action. With the introduction of the compulsory social service in the villages, a new step towards the administration of the country began (Gusti, 1938).

#### **4.THE POPULATION MIGRATION PHENOMENON IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD**

More often than not, it is considered that the migration from village to city was only occurring during the communist regime, when it was known that it was encouraged, regulated and imposed. This problematic of migration towards the urban areas was reported in the interwar period as well, by the sociologist M. Constantinescu<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> The sociologist M. Constantinescu's article was elaborated in the summer of 1939 to be presented during the 14<sup>th</sup> Sociology Congress, which should have taken place in the autumn of 1939. The outbreak of World War II caused the congress to be cancelled and the article was published after three decades, in 1971.

One of the problems that the Romanian villages were dealing with in the interwar period was that of overpopulation. This overpopulation was the cause of the impoverishment of the lower social stratum of the peasants (Constantinescu, 1971a).

The area of emigration varies from village to village, from region to region: Transylvanians migrate to Bucharest and the industrial centres, where they can take better-remunerated positions; some Moldavians go to Dobrogea, Ialomița, the Lower Danube and work as day labourers, ploughmen, buffalo ranchers, sand suppliers; Oltenians come to Bucharest and have specific jobs: greengrocers, yoghurt, bagel, coal, newspaper sellers. From Transylvania they would immigrate to America, especially before the war, those who returned to the village would, however, resume agriculture, the traditional garment, and they would get married in the village.

The purpose of the emigrants is not to remain in the city, but to gain some money so that when they returned to the village, they would be able to buy land and big houses. But there's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip, when life becomes something else and mentalities change. (Constantinescu, 1971a).

The effects of the emigration were the destabilising of family life. Family life falls apart, women finding other lovers, which results in many scandals when their husbands come back home; biological damaging, as a result of social diseases; the transforming of the primitive rural mentalities, magical and religious, into a positivist-utilitarian one; the exchange of the traditional garment for the urban outfit (Constantinescu, 1971a).

The rural exodus is becoming larger and larger, reaching more and more rural strata, being an essential phenomenon of our village life. The attention of both scientists and political thinkers has to be drawn to it, so that they could contribute to finding solutions for the new and serious problems that it entails (Constantinescu, 1971a).

It can be noticed that the interwar period did not lack drama and social tensions, which were caused both by the misunderstanding of the social phenomena, in all their complexity, and by the helplessness of the local and central administrative structures to go through with a specific social programme. The problematic of migration towards the urban areas reoccurred during the communist regime. This time, the phenomenon of migration could not be repressed and controlled as it should have been, either<sup>5</sup>.

With the instauration of communism, sociological research also suffered some modifications. This time, it would have been conducted from a Marxist-Leninist ideological perspective, bringing to the fore sociological studies regarding the social processes that accompanied the socialist industrialisation of the country, its urbanisation, the socialist development of agriculture, the transformation of the villages or the technical progress (Constantinescu, 1971b).

Sociological research during the communist regime made efforts in order to exist in such a difficult time. Moreover, it was not the only institution which had to fight for its survival and to see its purpose and mission through.

Their worth lies in the fact that they did not abolish our traditions, scientific research, culture and spirituality, but they preserved, protected and developed them into new forms of existence which, more often than not, could be hardly deciphered by the communist censor and, if they were deciphered, they would get away with it, probably thanks to the censors who, after all, did not want ethics, religiousness, traditions and the politics of truth to disappear forever.

This fact is also acknowledged by the sociologist M. Constantinescu. He confessed that tackling the social phenomena present in the period of the construction of Socialism required intense preparation so that it would be able to overcome a series of objective difficulties or, quite often, subjective, and these difficulties appeared when choosing the topics, preparing the thematic plan and enacting it on the field, as well as processing the data (Constantinescu, 1971b). There is no doubt that all these difficulties had an aspect that belonged strictly to the sociological field of research, to which another socio-political aspect could be added. This double language is specific to the communist regime, a laudatory aspect towards the communist system existing within the specialised studies, followed, obviously, by a scientific one.

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<sup>5</sup> See (Constantinescu, 1971b), where the process of urbanisation, of the rural masses' passage towards urban life, of change in mentalities and in interhuman relationships, in the context of an era of rounding off of the socialist construction.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis in the present paper, with the concrete examples from the Romanian rural space in the interwar period, emphasises the transformations which were desired by the Romanian society, based on the sociological research, following certain strategies and stages, through the thorough study of the Romanian village. This process continued after World War II, following other perspectives of Marxist-Leninist making. After the communist period, the Romanian society was and still is in a perpetual process of remaking, revitalising, developing the Romanian village, yet most of these projects have remained and still remain simply projects. Hope remains that, after this pandemic, things will return to normality, to development and transformations that will bring the values of the Romanian village to light.

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