Mini Review

Calin Cotoi, Inventing the Social in Romania, 1848-1914: Networks and Laboratories of Knowledge, Series: Balkan Studies Library, Volume: 28, pp. 278.

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Introduction

This book is about the local, historical creation of the social in a very specific meaning of the term: The emergence of social expertise during the nineteenth century. The newly formed, modernizing Romanian Principalities tried to organize representationally, to build in "objectivity" through statistics, collections and self-displays.

The author looks at two major transformations that started in the 1830s and 1840s, and at their articulations. In the early 1830s, as the Romanian principalities were under the occupation of the Russian army, and administered directly by general Pavel Kiselyov, the first wave of cholera hit first Moldova and then Wallachia. The effects were devastating, but even more important were the aftermath results. It was not the first large scale terrible epidemic, as, before that, the plague was claiming probably more lives than cholera did. But the Habsburg sanitary cordon that stretched from the Carpathian Mountains to the Adriatic Sea, at least since the 18th century, successfully contained the plague. Cholera was productive as plague was not.

Cholera could not be stopped on the Carpathians and reached Paris and London were it savagely, but differentially, attacked metropolitan populations. It killed tens of thousands but also created social hygiene, apparatuses for counting and disciplining healthy and ill bodies, discourses about the "social environment" of the disease, new expert methods of understanding and representing, in a differentiated way, the collective and individual bodies[1]. This social-medical expertise wave returned, on the tracks left by cholera, to the Danubian borderlands, opening a large space for intervention and reform. Sanitary models, statistical devices, expertise, surveillance techniques, medical and hygiene science diplomas, and technologies travelled back from Paris, Berlin, and Vienna, and radically changed the social landscapes opened by cholera's rapid advance in the lower Danube area. The first wave of cholera opened, in the lower Danube, not directly spaces of emergent modernity but areas of lack of modernity, a place to be colonized by modernity projects.

The second transformation started in 1848, as the short-lived Wallachian revolution (and the failed Moldavian one), created a specific representation of the villagers and peasants - "the people" – as part of the large "social question" that shattered all Europe. One Moldavian revolutionary laboriously tried to show that Romanians were not "communists"; but the relationship between the people, social progress, and communism was a complicated one. The revolutionaries presented themselves as knowledgeable in the theories of the social and socialism and even hinted that socialism was ethical, and inevitably coming to (and from) Europe. Nevertheless, they were keen to stress that they did not envisage socialism as a solution for Bucharest or Iaşi, just peasant emancipation and agrarian reform. Socialism was not good for Romanians, at least not yet, not until Europe would become socialist itself. But it could become a devastating peasant-type of socialism if social reform was not heeded, now, by the elites (the Boyars).

This convoluted argument created, Cotoi argues, the "empty sign of communism", a discursive-representational structure that tried to co-opt both the people and the large landowners inside the promise of social progress and reform, under the threat of both European future socialism and peasant violence. An ingenious

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[1]See Francois Delaporte, *Disease and Civilization*: The Cholera in Paris, 1832. Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, and Rabinow, French Modern.

strategy for taming, localizing, and temporally displacing a European revolutionary model was put into practice – discursively but also at the level of policy and politics - by the modernizing national-liberal elites and its heterogeneous local and transnational partners.

Both cholera and communism constituted, in different ways, connected representations and "stagings" of local modernity. The immediacy of the local social practices that founded the lives of the inhabitants of the Danubian principalities, was more and more framed, created and informed by the contrasting abstract plans of nation-building reform: quarantine, sanitation projects, surveillance, medical laboratories, land reforms, military build-up, infrastructural major projects (bridges, drainings, urban administrative buildings etc.) but also long conversations about the people, science, and the "social question".

The author's mainargument is that that between these apparently disparate instantiations of modernity there were connecting threads. Individuals and theories moved around and their life trajectories intersected all these national-professional worlds that were all stemming from the logic and necessity of negotiating various models of rationality and progress. Some of these characters criss-cross chapters and themes, and travel inside the book, mirroring, somehow, their real life intellectual, emotional, and geographical trajectories.

The relative failure of most of these projects only expanded the area of intervention, as it indexed the need for better and larger expert-led changes, and made more visible the seeming improvement needing, "unmediated reality" of the collective body of the people and the nation. The social was created/ staged as both real and lacking, desired and dangerous, by social-hygienic reform and non-representable "communism". The book focuses on the ways in which revolutionaries, experts, and reformers constituted a field of technical intervention and normativity out of the tensions of real-life, historically concrete societies and polities; how individual trajectories intersected inside national and transnational political and scientific projects, and on how the constant failure of modernization opened even larger spaces prone to be 'modernized'.

The author explores five different historical junctures and their connections: (1) the local 1848ers struggle with communism, the social question, Europe and Russia; (2) the emergence of a Russian émigrés anarchist centre in Romania in the 1870s, its subsequent failure in translating social revolutionary politics into a local idiom, and the transformation of anarchists into state physicians, public administrators and experts; (3) the creation of a public hygiene reform project that stumbled on concerns centred on health, numbers, reproduction and anti-Semitism, and on its inability to cross the urban-rural divide in the Romanian principalities and in Romania (1830s-1890s); (4) the local debates between orthodox Marxists and national-populists/ narodniks that happened before, during and after 1907, the year when Romania's largest modern peasant uprising happened (1890s-1910s); (5) the first national exhibition (1906) and the emergence of a 'reformatory nebula,' the mixture of scientific utopianism and inclusive nationalism from the beginning of the twentieth century and the crisis and dismantling of 'the empty sign of communism'.

The book maps the agents involved in these historical moments, gives them a voice and tries to see the local modernity from their perspectives. Most of the characters from the book come from a national 'outside', from the Russian or Habsburg Empires, from France, Italy or Germany, but they were not simply colonial agents or experts, they were agents of professionalization and nationalization, mainstream but still somehow alien, part of a colonial continuum that made them members of the global, imperial and transnational wave of 'social progress' but also placed them inside very local concerns and conversations.

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