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From Peasants to Farmers? Agrarian Reforms and Modernisation in Twentieth Century Romania

A Case Study:
Bordei Verde Commune
in Braila County



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Introduction

At the end of the twentieth century nearly half of the Romanian population was living in the countryside and around one third was making a living out of agriculture. This was after half a century of extensive urbanization and industrialization during the communist period. Viewed from a historical perspective, during the twentieth century Romania was mostly a rural country and the proportion of the urban population exceeded the rural one only at the end of the seventies. Therefore, the study of the rural area is particularly important for Romania's social history.

Agriculture as an economic sector and the rural part of the Romanian society were two of the most important subjects during the negotiations for Romania's accession to the European Union. For both partners agriculture was a sensitive problem. The Common Agricultural Policy promoted by the EU was the most important instrument of financial intervention and a key element of European supranational policy. In Romania, the countryside was traditionally regarded as the least modernised part of society, retaining strong elements of backwardness¹ and the process of accession transformed its underdevelopment from a local problem to a European one. From the EU perspective there was the risk that the agricultural sectors of Romania and other Eastern European states would absorb important financial resources from the EU budget, without any real gains in terms of economic profits or development.

As the problem of backwardness in the rural area gained importance during the last two decades, the subject of this book is the transformation of the rural area as a result of the attempts of modernisation promoted over the last century. As the underdevelopment in the countryside had been acknowledged since the second half of the nineteenth century, a number of development programs specifically addressed this problem. During the twentieth century, Romania knew no less than four agrarian reforms which aimed at radically transforming the rural area: the agrarian reforms in 1919/1921 and 1945, the collectivisation of agriculture between 1949 and 1962, and the decollectivisation in 1991. Therefore, this book covers the period between 1917, when the constitution was modified to allow the 1919/1921 reform, and 2007, the year in which Romania became a member of the EU, in an attempt to investigate the transformation of the rural space and the reasons why the modernisation took place at such a slow pace.

1 PASTI, Vladimir/MIROIU, Mihaela/CODIȚĂ, Cornel: *România: starea de fapt [Romania: Layout]*, Nemira, București, 1997, pp. 49-50.

Methodology

There are two main strategies one could use in touching upon the problem of modernisation: a quantitative perspective, through the use of statistical data to generate models to investigate the main features of the process, and a qualitative one, with the aid of case studies or examinations of key phenomena.² This work makes use of both of them, in an attempt to connect the transformation of a commune³ in the eastern part of Romania with the projects implemented for modernisation of the rural area at the country level. The case study is the central element of this book, but the focus of my work is the attempt to determine the real effects that development programs had on the rural area. In turn this would provide meaningful insights on how the modernisation process really operated in the case of Romania and through extension in other South-Eastern European states. This topic will be explored from a multidisciplinary perspective, focused on three levels of analysis: the village level, the modernisation programs drawn by the national elites (the country level) and the administration as an intermediate structure between the two of them.

The village level is especially relevant for the problems of modernisation since due to the limited amount of available sources, very little is in fact known about the social transformation that took place deep inside the society during the twentieth century. Indeed, because of the low rate of literacy during the first half of the century, the rural population was mostly unable to articulate its own attitude regarding modernisation,⁴ and during the communist period it was difficult to express opinions incompatible with the official ideology. Yet, this shortcoming might be partially overcome by the use of an anthropological perspective, relying on information obtained through field interviews.

The perspective that I propose is that of cultural materialism promoted by the American anthropologist Marvin Harris. The main features of his theory that I will use are the distinction emic/etic and a materialist approach toward the investigation of culture. The distinction emic/etic is relevant for the different ways of interpreting reality employed by the researcher and the social actors of a specific social process. The emic perspective is that of interviewed persons (informants) who interpret reality according to their own cultural perception. The etic one represents the culturally neutral outlook of the researcher, in terms that can

2 SAURER, Andreas: *Modernisierung und Tradition: Das Rumänische Dorf, 1918-1989*, Gardez! Verlag, Sankt Augustin, 2003, p. 14.

3 Basic Romanian administrative division, consisting in several villages administrated by a common mayor's office.

4 SAURER, Andreas: *op. cit.*, p. 11.

be applied to other cultures.⁵ The distinction emic/etic is also relevant for the materialist perspective on culture, according to which etic behavioural conditions and processes directly influence the emic ones.⁶ Therefore, particularly relevant for understanding culture are the relations of society with the environment (etic aspect of culture), which Harris defines as “cultural infrastructure”, comprising the modes of production and reproduction. They are the foundation of the social structure, consisting of domestic and political economies of a society, on top of which one can find the superstructure, represented by behavioural and mental aspects of culture.

Cultural materialism is a suitable theory for the particular case of this book as it helps to overcome an important methodological difficulty: the impossibility to cover the whole period between 1917 and 2007 through interviews. Indeed, if the discussions with inhabitants from the commune brought numerous insights into the villagers’ life, they didn’t allow me to descend into time further than the end of the thirties. For the interwar period I used archive documents, staying in the interpretative framework of cultural materialism and attempting to determine the role of land in the local modes of production and reproduction. The emic/etic distinction allowed me to corroborate the information gathered through interviews with the one provided by documents. This was in turn especially important in offering a common interpretative framework for the social transformation noticeable at the village level and the modernisation programs drawn by the national elites.

An important distinction for the process of modernisation in the rural area is the one between peasants and farmers. According to the anthropologist Eric R. Wolf, the latter form a modern category and use the land to produce marketable goods while the former use it in order to assure their subsistence.⁷ This distinction, which could be also described through the pair of economic concepts of commercial and subsistence agriculture, is closely related with the concept of land property. In this regard Wolf identifies four categories of land property: patrimonial property, where the land is inherited from generation to generation as in the case of European feudalism, acquired property with the land belonging to the state which grants rights to it to the local administrators, commercial property, in which case the land is the individual property of an owner who regards it as a marketable good and, finally, the administrative property, peculiar to the communist regime, where not only land but also agricultural production

5 HARRIS, Marvin: *Cultural Materialism: The Struggle for a Science of Culture*, Random House, New York, 1979, pp. 32-42.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 56.

7 WOLF, Eric R.: *Țăranii [Peasants]*, Editura Tehnică, Chișinău, 1998 [1965], translated by Florin Tudor, p. 2.

was controlled by the state.⁸ As I will try to prove in the following chapters, the development of commercial property in Romanian agriculture has taken place very recently, during the last ten years, and has been directly correlated with the growth of EU influence during the negotiations for accession.

Despite the emphasis on the case study, I consider the village and state levels of analysis to be interdependent. Indeed, it is very difficult to investigate one without the other, but the methodological tools one needs to use are very different. The reform programs drawn by national elites didn't manage to modernize the rural area but nevertheless transformed it. Therefore, when interpreting the "state level" one has to define both concepts of "modernisation" and "elites" and the relation between them.

Defined from a historical perspective, modernisation represents the deep transformation of society that has its economic and social roots in the English industrial revolution from the second half of the eighteenth century and its political origins in the French Revolution in 1789.⁹ From the social point of view, modernisation means the development of specific, "modern", conceptual structures, strategies of action and social institutions which converge toward the extension of economic capacity of production and political participation in a given society.¹⁰

In the last several decades the concept is used in the social field of research to describe the efforts of development undertaken by states perceived as less developed. Its usage marks a difference of perception between the evolution of the less developed states and the already industrialized ones. The former are regarded as evolving toward the actual level of the latter, which in turn evolve in an "open future", without a specific model of development.¹¹

This definition is appropriate for the case of Romania at the end of World War I, since, as shown in the second chapter of this work, the programs of agrarian reform contained clear references to the Occidental model of development and emphasised the role of land granting in the increase of agricultural productivity. However, it has also two weak points which require further explanations.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 50-59.

9 STERBLING, Anton: *Eliten, Realitätsdeutung, Modernisierungsprobleme: Aufsätze 1987-1988* (from now on: *Eliten, Realitätsdeutung...*), Universität der Bundeswehr, Hamburg, 1991, pp. 3-4. GROTHAUSEN, Klaus-Detlev: "Modernisierung und Nationsbildung: Modelltheoretische Überlegungen und ihre Anwendung auf Serbien und die Türkei", in *Südost-Forderungen*, 43(1984), p. 137.

10 STERBLING, Anton: *Eliten, Realitätsdeutung...*, p. 7.

11 GUMBRECHT, Hans Ulrich: „Modern, Modernität, Moderne“, in BRUMAR, Otto/CONZE, Werner/ KOSELLECK, Reinhart: *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, Bd. 4, Mi-Pre, Stuttgart, 1978, p. 129.

The first one concerns the communist period, in which the Western reference model seems to have been replaced by the Soviet one. According to this view the interwar and the communist periods were actually two very different historical intervals, without any elements of continuity. This theoretical difficulty might be overcome if one regards communism as a modernisation attempt by emphasising its social rather than ideological aspects. Granting electoral rights to women, industrial development, electrification of villages and development of social services, just to give some examples, are processes that actually took place earlier in the Western Europe¹² and are representative for the extension of the economic capacity of production and political participation. Of course, all this was defined by the interpretative framework of communist ideology,¹³ but it was nevertheless based on Marxist ideology and Marx had as a reference the capitalist world as it existed during his lifetime. Representative for the obsession of the communist elites for the development of heavy industry which closely resembled the industrial plants in nineteenth century Western Europe is the record productions of raw steel, cement or coal during the eighties.¹⁴

The second weak point of the definition of modernisation which I make use of is its inability to explain how the process spread from the Western space toward other areas and, in the particular case of this work, toward South Eastern Europe. Even in the most optimistic perspective, one could say that modernisation started in Romania around 1830, which still represents a gap of more than half a century if one should refer to the industrial revolution in England and forty years in the case of the political ideas of the French revolution. Therefore it is rather implausible that the transformation according to Western development model spread through cultural diffusion. To overcome this difficulty I propose the theoretical framework of World System Theory, developed by the sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein. According to him, the development of the capitalist economic system took place in Western Europe during the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries and slowly expanded to incorporate other regions of the world.¹⁵ Accepting that capitalism became the dominant socio-economic system

12 KARNOOUIH, Claude: *Comunism, postcomunism și modernitate târzie* [*Communism, Postcommunism and Late Modernity*], Editura Polirom, Iași, 2000, translated by Mihai Ungurean, pp. 37-39.

13 Indeed, the political participation was so “democratic” that an open opposition against the regime was considered an attack against the popular democracy and was punishable. Nevertheless, as I will show in the third and fourth chapters of this work, the political mobilization exceeded by far the interwar period one.

14 CHIROT, Daniel: *Societăți în schimbare* [*How Societies Change*] (from now on *Societăți...*), Editura Athena, București, 1996 [1994], translated by Daniela Tabac, p. 182.

15 WALLERSTEIN, Immanuel: *The Capitalist World-Economy* (From now on *World-Economy...*), Edition de la Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, Cambridge University