
ENGINEERING A GOOD SOCIETY

THE SOCIOLOGICAL SCHOOL OF BUCHAREST

NATIONAL PROJECT FOR BUILDING ROMANIA

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Abstract

The goal of the *Research and Social action* project of the Sociological School of Bucharest was to develop a good national society that would lead to other projects for a good society. This study debuted with the question: how much of the endeavor to build a good society with sociological tools relied on social engineering, and how much on community development? How did Gusti's School members plan to build a better society in the '20s and how much of the *Science of the Nation* project did they manage to apply in the '30s? To answer these questions, I have used the qualitative research method of the representative biography. It helped comprehend the socio-political context in which Gusti and his disciples published articles about modernizing the rural Romanian society, while doing research on the Romanian villages. Studying this group of intellectuals led to analyzing the type of modernization that Gusti's School members planned to implement. King Karl II royal dictatorship offered the founder of the Sociological School of Bucharest the opportunity to apply his national program of "uplifting" the villages and of building a good society.

Keywords: peasants' society, community development, communitarianism

1. Introduction

The total research of the interwar rural society, namely the monograph of 15.000 villages, was a utopia according to the belief of some researchers and some of the participants in the monographic campaigns of the '20s and '30s. Dimitrie Gusti's assistant and the technician of monograph, Henri H. Stahl, confessed to professor Zoltán Rostás in the '80s that the project proposed by the Sociological School of Bucharest and its founder was utopian, but fertile from the scientific perspective, as it consisted in a continuous experiment and had as consequences the scientific and sociological analysis of certain social issues, as well as the birth of a multidiscipline school. "I believe that trying to make a

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monography that synthesizes all the points of view into a single speech is utopian... And at this moment all of those who have tried to make such synthesis of monographies, following Gusti's school of monograph, have fallen into the same sin." [1]

Monograph was a utopia, but a 'fertile utopia' [2]. The sociologist Dumitru Sandu, former student of Henri H. Stahl, claims that monograph was "a necessary and fertile utopia (unlike another utopia, that of the mandatory Social Service). It was necessary for at least two reasons: because, in the '20s and '30s, rural empirical research had no tradition of scientific structuring, of confronting methodological and theoretical ideas with the facts. Insisting on sociological observation and on the systematic feature of knowledge, Gusti set the basis of a sociology founded on facts and method." [2, p. 9]

On various public occasions, Gusti's endeavor to study all the Romanian villages and then to intervene with his teams in order to 'uplift the nation' has been considered a project of regional and community development (according to Dumitru Sandu, in 2011, at the launch of no. 153-154 of the *Les Études Sociales* review, entitled 'Sociologie et politique en Roumanie') or a project of social engineering (according to Cristian Pîrvulescu at the launch of Antonio Momoc's volume *The political traps of the interwar sociology – Gusti's School, between King Karl II and the legionaries*, Curtea Veche Publishing).

This study has the objective to describe the theory and practice of Gusti's project of *Research and social action*. The article shall answer the questions regarding the kind of society that the sociologists of the School of Bucharest have studied, and regarding the extent in which the *Science of the Nation* (*Monograph*) was a project for a good society.

2. Theoretical frame: community development, social intervention and engineering

Gusti's project of modernizing the rural society has been characterized as community development and social intervention (Dumitru Sandu), as well as social engineering (Cristian Pîrvulescu). D. Sandu showed that "community development cannot exist without fulfilling four criteria: the intervention within a social group ('into the community'), serving the purpose of its members ('for the community'), with their voluntary or semi-voluntary help ('through the community'). What is essential is the participative dimension consisting in mobilizing the community members." [3]

Social action, sociological intervention in the villages, was legitimated through an ideology promoting the village 'uplifting'. The various ideologies supporting community actions have specific profiles that depend on the actors, means, objectives, and values they promote.

D. Sandu [3, p. 156-158] suggests the following profiles for the ideologies involved in community development: Communitarianism privileges the community and proposes education, persuasion, socializing as means of action. Its values are: the undertaken moral order; the balance between order and

freedom; the ‘good society’. Liberalism and neo-liberalism have the individual as main actor, and as means: the market mechanisms, entrepreneurship, minimal state or the rule-of-law state. Its values are: individual freedom, equality in front of the law, equality of chances. Social conservatism privileges the state and the nation as agents for maintaining the order. Its means are: governmental mechanisms, tradition. Its core value is order. Modernism has the state institutions as actors and its means of action are: innovation, social programs. Its values: rationality and science.

“Communitarian ideologies guide social actions according to the ‘good society’ model, founded on morality and on the equilibrium between the individual freedom and the morally undertaken order. In return, the ideologies based on ‘social capital’ point out the action potential that cooperation has”. [3, p. 156-157]

Unlike community development, “social intervention aims to achieve the change throughout an ‘agent-client’ relationship, having as models the interactions between, for instance, medic-patient, parent-child, lawyer-accused” [4]. Social intervention is based on social relationships in which the initiator of the intervention aims to answer and act in the interest of the needs that the targeted population experiences. The implementation agents are better informed regarding the resources and the regulations for accessing and using them than the potential beneficiaries of the interventions. Because of the informational asymmetry between the agents and the beneficiaries, the latter are often suspicious regarding the agents, even if the resources are used for community purposes.

Dumitru Sandu asserts that community development and social intervention are partially overlapping: “There are social or communitarian interventions that have the characteristics of community development, because they meet all the criteria of volunteering, communitarian participation and subordination towards the interests of certain community groups. There are also interventions that do not have a participative dimension, but represent the simple deployment of a ‘social medic’s’ action for treating a patient, who is a sheer beneficiary of the treatment, without having an active involvement in its diagnostic, treatment, evaluation etc.” [3, p. 39-40]

Dimitrie Gusti’s Sociological School has initially manifested in the form of the Sociology Seminar and of the student teams that deployed the first monographic campaigns in the villages after 1925. The project of modernizing the Romanian rural society was in its pilot phase. We can state that Gusti’s School encountered its *research and social intervention* stage during 1925-1931. While it was first concerned with *community development and social intervention*, the School evolved towards a more centralized control of the *cultural work* (1934-1938) performed by the Royal student teams.

Focusing especially on the royal dictatorship period (1938-1939), political theory specialists such as Cristian Pîrvulescu are entitled to assert that the Sociological School seemed to apply a *social engineering* project. Dumitru

Sandu admitted that: „One cannot do community development based on volunteer participation if under constraint” [2, p. 8].

Zygmunt Bauman and Tim May observed in their paper *Gândirea sociologică (Sociological thinking)* [5] that “some of the first sociologists have imagined themselves playing the part of social order architects or builders. From a high level, society was looked upon as an object of manipulation build of a resistant material, whose internal properties needed to become very well known, in order to be able to mold it in the ultimate desired shape.” During 1938-1939, the period of Social Service, Gusti’s School can be assigned to the tradition of the social engineers, of those sociologists or philosophers who believed that was possible to direct the evolution of a society towards the good of all its members. This direction overlaps with Dimitrie Gusti’s closeness to King Karl II.

3. Research method

Gusti’s School members intended to study all the Romanian villages with the goal to provide the obtained data to the authorities, so that, together with them, the scientists and the community members could fix the shortcomings of the researched rural communities. Under King Karl II dictatorship, the research work and village intervention efforts had become mandatory for all the university graduates through the introduction of the Social Service.

To study the extent in which Gusti’s project was a project for a good society, as well as the endeavors for implementing this project of modernizing a society comprising of 90% peasants, I have used the method of representative biography. As described by Jerry Muller [6], representative biography follows the history of an individual’s life, depicting the social contexts and the experiences he/she shared with other individuals who have had similar social-political evolutions. In order to perform an inventory of the political ideas and behaviors of Gusti’s sociologists, as well as their projects for a good society, I have identified the model of society that emerged from Gusti’s work and from the work of the disciples who remained loyal to his system in the ’30s: Henri H. Stahl, Octavian Neamțu and Anton Golopenția. I have analyzed their journals, memoirs and correspondence, as well the series of oral history interviews conducted by professor Zoltán Rostas with those who participated directly or indirectly in Gusti’s School.

4. Dimitrie Gusti’s project of modernizing the society

The consequences of World War I, the administrative and national issues that followed the Great Union, the international economic crisis, the loss of the Parliament legitimacy, the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, and the ascension of fascism in Italy and Germany compile the cultural-political context that influenced the political attitudes and behaviors of the members of the School, and their project for a ‘good society’.

Anthropologists like Vintila Mihăilescu [7] noticed that the modernization project of Gusti's School was positioned between the French civilization model and the German culture model: "Having a frail bourgeoisie, often mostly foreign, Romania has been and has remained the most compact rural and agrarian society in Europe. Considering this social status, we had to tailor a modern nation. The model was the French civilization, but the means was the German culture. The outcome was the construction of a cultural nation, having its source and legitimacy in the popular – that is peasant – culture. Nowadays we call this an ethnic nation, according to the 'German model', completely opposite to the civil nation that is typical for France.

Even for Gusti, the nation was simply the most comprising 'community', not an association of free individuals. It was probably the only possible way, but the results remained the same and its effects are still visible today. The problem has been – and still is – a structural one and derives from overrating the culture of the Romanian peasant, while underrating the weight of the peasants' society. The Peasant has been provided with a museum instead of a policy – and the policies were rather reactive, in a society that has known basically the last big peasants' revolt in Europe. Gusti's disciples have studied the peasants' society and 'people's' culture as a product of this social reality. And they have deliberately studied it to modify it.

The society project as envisioned by Gusti has been exposed as early as 1910, after he returned from studying in Germany and France [8]. Modernizing the society with the help of the scientists was an idea inspired by the French philosopher Saint-Simon [9]. While analyzing the social-political systems, Gusti confessed in 1920 that: "Saint-Simon's propositions to reform the legislating method have set the basis on the *Association for Social Study and Reform* and deserve our full attention. *Politics*, points out Saint-Simon, *has to be subordinated to Science*; it has to become an observation science, a positive science, a science of production" [10]. Later on, in a lecture held at the Romanian Academy in January 1940, Gusti admitted that he was inspired by Count Saint-Simon's thinking system and stated that the program of sociological monographies and of village action is "*Saint-Simon's life program*, who proudly declared in the most difficult moments of his life 'I still live in the future'" [11].

The scientific messianism has also characterized Gusti's activity as the Minister of Education (1932-1933), when he proposed that the *Cultural Senate* should be a Legislative Cultural Chamber with a consultative role, according to the model suggested by Saint-Simon [10, p. 52]. According to Gusti's *Law Project for organizing the culture*, the Ministry of Education, Cults and Art and the Parliament were going to consult this Cultural Chamber during the debates on issues related to cultural institutions or manifestations. While exposing the reasons for this Law, the Minister of Education explained that the Cultural Senate had to be composed of the representative cultural personalities of the science, literature and arts, as well as the representatives of the culture institutions: the Romanian Academy, the universities, the superior art schools,

the churches. *The Law Project for organizing the culture* was submitted to the Senate on March 23rd 1933, but was rejected by the Parliament of Romania.

Gusti's project based on the Sociology-Politics-Ethics system aimed from the beginning to prepare the politicians for taking decisions in a rational and scientific way. This objective was pursued by creating the *Association for Social Study and Reform* in Iasi, in 1918, which later on became *The Romanian Social Institute* in Bucharest, in 1921. Henri H. Stahl remembered during his conversations with Zoltán Rostás that: "Gusti wanted to raise all the politicians at a certain level of objectivity, so they could treat problems in a scientific way. The Romanian Social Institute had this purpose. You would not believe who was working there. It was surprising to see who were the speakers at his series of conferences, starting with Brătianu family, Marghiloman, people from the Peasant's Party, Răducanu, even Voinea and Moscovici. And Iorga." [1, p. 56] Gusti's vision on modernizing society involved the intellectuals' and scientists' descent in the village to uplift the rural community. "There were two cultural types that I have closely studied. [...] The peasants' superior universities or schools in the Northern countries (Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland), and the so-called people's houses or centers in Vienna." [12]

The Cultural Community Center is an institution inspired by the Austrians and it used to be the local headquarters of the village cultural work, which gathered the villagers, the state employees and the intellectuals who originated from a certain village. The Cultural Community Center had a council assembled of the village elite.

The Popular Universities or Peasant Schools were inspired by the Danish. H.H. Stahl recalled that his first contact with professor Gusti occurred on a conference about Grundtvig and the Peasant Schools in Denmark: "Grundtvig was one of the great creators of the Peasant Schools. Gusti only described what they consisted in, the results they obtained, and concluded that something like this would be very useful to implement in Romania. Which he did later on through his movement, of the peasant schools. [...] Gusti was very convinced of the efficiency of these schools. Besides, peasant schools were not the only very good technique that he envisioned for the cultural uplifting of the masses, but his entire conception about school followed the same line of combining the study with the practical necessities of the social life. You had to know the social life, to feel its shortcomings in order to direct the whole scholar organization towards solving these problems. Without generic theory that has nothing to do with life." [1, p. 48]

4. What is 'a good society' for communitarianism?

As D. Sandu showed communitarianism has 'a good society' as core value [3, p. 156-158]. Analyzing the political ideologies of the 20th century, Andrei Țăranu underlines that "communitarianism starts from the hypothesis that the liberal society continuously generates alienation because of the permanent appeal to individualism – considered to be panacea of the society – and

disapproves the social groups that act within the society for gaining strictly material benefits. Communitarianism aims to re-create the natural space of the individual, the space of the community. From the communitarians' perspective, the society purpose should be to apply the concept of 'Common good', assumed by everyone talking about democracy, but violated almost instantly in the name of individualism." [13]

The communitarians support the transposing of the subsidiarity principle into the reality, meaning that the state should intervene only where society (specifically, the community) has no possibility or interest to act. For the communitarians, programs and policies are built based on the proposal or the involvement of the communities that are the beneficiaries of these projects.

A key concept that the communitarians depict in the following description of a good society is the term 'community'. Etzioni Amitai defines it as follows: "Community is a combination of two elements: A) A web of affect-laden relationships among a group of individuals, relationships that often crisscross and reinforce one another – rather than merely one-on-one or chainlike individual relationships; B) A measure of commitment to a set of shared values, norms, and meanings, and a shared history and identity – in short, to a particular culture. [...] Even in the most modernized societies, many individually are members of communities. Indeed, it is best to think about societies as communities of communities, which also contain a fair number of unaffiliated individuals." [14]

A good society is founded on morals, community, social responsibility, and consensus upon a set of values. It is an attempt to reconcile tradition with modernity, the moral values – as the basis of the social organism – with protecting the individual autonomy, brought by modernization. The implicit 'community' according to Etzioni's communitarianism is not just the village or similar local groups, but can include "any social entity, from the village to the group of nations" and is "a set of attributes, not a concrete place" [15].

Andrei Țăranu noticed that "in Europe, communitarianism manifested itself especially through the thesis of decentralization or regionalization, according to which certain minorities or certain historical or cultural regions desire an extended political or economic autonomy. Due to this reason, communitarianism is rather "linked to ideologies such as conservatism or Christian democracy" [13, p. 222]. We shall try to answer the question concerning the extent in which Gusti's society project was a 'good society' project, according to the communitarians' description of this concept.

5. Science of the Nation, as project for a good society

When designing his project, Dimitrie Gusti seemed to have focused on studying the village as basic social unit. But Gusti conceived the complete knowing of the nation through research as an ascendant process, starting from small units, like the villages and cities, up to the medium ones, like regional units, and up to the understanding of the national level, which cumulated all the

other units. According to Gusti's research project, the regions – called either counties, or provinces – were going to be studied after the villages and cities, because they were bigger, therefore “harder to be researched” [2, p. 7].

The first student teams from the Sociology Seminar were led by the monographists and they handled the community research within small units like the villages and cities. Dimitrie Gusti was named general manager of the ‘Prince Karl’ Cultural Royal Foundation in 1934, after being the Ministry of Education during the National Peasants’ Party Government (1932-1933). From 1934, Gusti and the Foundation's teams pursued to capitalize the experience of the monographic campaigns that took place during 1925-1931 by introducing a new formula for *cultural work in the villages* [16].

The royal teams, selected and prepared by Gusti's old collaborators (Stahl, Neamțu, Golopenția) – now employed at the ‘Prince Karl’ Foundation – carried on the program of *social intervention in the countryside*, aiming to develop the *culture of work, health, mind and soul*, as well as the youth cultural movement programs, attached to the Monarchy and to the sovereign King Karl II.

The success his School had during 1925-1937 determined Gusti to believe that it would be possible for him to study all the 15.000 villages of the interwar Romania. In his system, Gusti has never separated the science of social reality – sociology – from the particular economic, juridical and administrative social sciences, neither from the science of human ideals – ethics –, nor from the science of the means for transforming society – politic. He actually imagined all of them united, in an interdisciplinary vision. In 1937, Gusti was writing that *the science of society – Sociology* – studied the social status of the nation as a whole and was going to aggregate in a *Science of the Nation*. *Politics* was meant to apply the solutions proposed by the researchers, and *Ethics* was going to offer the ideal that the Nation aimed to, in order to rise among the other nations of Humanity: „*Science of the Nation (Monography)* shall determine the *Ethics* and *Politics of the Nation*, through which the people will find the path to its true self-accomplishment. The Science of the nation will be the foundation of the *Politics* of the nation, meaning the science of the means through which the nation will be able to achieve the national ideal. The Science of the Nation does not show us only what it already done, but opens the paths to what should be done, to the ideal, and points out the tools to reach it. The Science of the Nation reveals the creative forces of the nation, which have to be ignited without delay, in order to accomplish the national destiny, to fulfill the Romanian mission in the world, to show the humanity our national specificity within the complete display of the Romanian culture.” [17]

The solution for this effort of total research and “nation uplifting” was to introduce the mandatory Social Service: “We were anticipating the introduction of the mandatory Social Service. All the country's intellectuals, of all ranks and specialties, were going to be compelled to serve a few months for the benefit of knowledge and of uplifting the motherland. As leaders, we have to assign all the country's scientists, geologists, geography specialists, naturalists, biologists, anthropologists, psychologists, historians, economists, folklorists, jurists and

sociologists.” [18] The Law of the Social Service functioned for one year, between October 1938 and October 1939, during the royal dictatorship.

Although he did not use concepts like communitarianism, ‘good society’, or community development, the project of the School of Sociology pursued the cultural upgrade of the villages from the perspectives of *work, health, mind and soul*, which subsequently led to ‘uplifting’ the interwar rural society. The Cultural Community Center inspired from Austria and the Peasants’ Schools inspired from Denmark were the means of community development that stimulated the initiatives of the local community.

Gusti’s good society project is conservatory-reformist. To Gusti, the improvement of the peasant’s material or spiritual status had to happen organically in the rural environment, namely in the original social environment of the peasant. D. Gusti did not question the matter of migrating from the rural community to the urban, bourgeois, civil society. Traditional rural society modernized (‘uplifted’) in the sense of stating its originality and improving the peasants’ life status through the cultural action focused rather on the social and economic aspects, than on the civic aspect (for which Gusti has shown less interest).

Sociologist Dimitrie Gusti did not define the nation in the terms of a political community on behalf of which political power is exerted and whose rational and educated citizens (regardless of their confessional, ethnic or social belonging) are aware of their rights and obligations. The professor defined the nation rather as the population that historically occupied a certain territory delimited by the borders of a state, and that created a culture with traditional values around which the community members developed solidarity.

“The integral monography of the village, the social atlas built through the monography of all the villages and through determining all the intellectuals to perform work in the villages – they were all utopian.” [2, p. 8] But Gusti’s system and his teams have crayoned a work method typical for community development during 1925-1937.

Dumitru Sandu asserts that Gusti’s teams manner of work in terms of *Research and social action* supported the idea that Gusti’s social movement for uplifting the villages has been conducted from a community-regional perspective, rather than a monographic one: “This assessment is valid especially for the works and projects for which Henri H. Stahl and Anton Golopenția were authors or main contributors. The label of “monographic school of Dimitrie Gusti” is more related to its mentor, to his publications and intentions. In return, the denomination of social community-regional movement is correlated particularly with the publications and effective actions of the entire movement in the period between the Wars and afterwards.” [2, p. 12]

6. Conclusions

Dimitrie Gusti was conservatory by privileging the cultural nation as main actor of his project, but he was a progressist/reformist conservatory through the

accent he placed on the science and the role of the scientists in ‘uplifting’ the nation. Due to the fact that his system was influenced by Saint-Simon, Gusti was a modernist that valued science, rationality and the scientists’ associations.

The fact that Gusti was a communitarian guided by the ideal of a good society is proved by his national project that involved social intervention and community development. *The Science of the Nation* – the ‘uplifting’ of the rural Romanian society through *Research and social action* – was a cultural work and community development project, which transformed into social engineering at the end of the ‘30s.

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