

Alina Mungiu Pippidi and Gerard Althabe – ***Secera și buldozerul: Scornicești și Nucșoara – Mecanisme de aservire a țăranului român***. Polirom 2002, Iași, Romania <sup>99</sup>

by Sorin Ioniță

If I had to choose a motto for Alina Mungiu-Pippidi's latest book this would be Lampedusa's famous phrase "we have to change everything for everything to remain the same". This phrase reflects very well the travails of the Romanian rural civilization since the 19<sup>th</sup> century until today – the subject of this provocative book. Maybe even better than in the Sicilian case: we have here a quick alternation of development patterns, replacement (brutal, in Romania's case) of local elites, but, after all, preservation of the core of old social relations, and thus a spectacular failure of modernization. The pattern of social and economic dependency of the Romanian peasantry, rooted in medieval times, continued in modern times as neo-serfdom (Dobrogeanu Gherea's<sup>100</sup> term) and as clientelistic local politics. The book advances a challenging hypothesis: that the communist regime only created new frameworks to preserve this dependency arrangement until the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century.

What are the specific elements of this *neotraditional* communist regime – the key concept of the book? Three can be identified. First, it is the increase in peasants' economic dependency reaching, in the '80s, the absurd form of food rationing, much like during the Soviet-type communist war. Second, it is the political dependency, as Romania institutionalized total control and eliminated any legitimate alternative voice. At last, but most importantly for understanding the particularities of Romanian communism (and, maybe of Balkanic communism), is the *personalism* – the direct and complete dependency on superiors, small and evil tyrants living from redistribution of resources and gains completely arbitrary in order to preserve control. This is actually the major failure of the Romanian

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<sup>99</sup> Alina Mungiu-Pippidi și Gerard Althabe, 2002. *The Sickle and the Bulldozer: Instruments to Submerge the Romanian Peasant*. Polirom

<sup>100</sup> Constantin Dobrogeanu Gherea was a famous figure of romanian interbelic socialist movement

communism, often overlooked: it did not manage to consolidate a modern state with a system of rules, no matter how bad, but neutral and impersonal, accompanied by an efficient mechanism to enforce them indiscriminately. The Romanian state remained during communism what it has always been: a system dominated by the arbitrary and particularism, where citizens are treated according to their social status. The totalitarian regime found this pre-existent scheme perfectly suitable to its own goals, because it helped suppress all organized challenges and encouraged personal compromises, cooperation with system, for career reasons or basic survival. In this manner, neotraditionalism channeled the social anger and energy from protest towards personal effort to succeed.

Due to its centuries-old historical conditions, the Romanian village offered the most appropriate environment for this social system, extremely difficult to change today. In this context the book advances its second thesis, probably shocking the sensitivity of Romanian intellectuals with poporanist views: as long as traditional (genuine) peasants will exist, the neotraditional regime shall survive. By definition, and unlike tribes or primitive peoples, the "traditional" European peasantry is characterized not only by little control over its living conditions, but also by economic, social and symbolic dependency of an urban political center. The Small Tradition<sup>101</sup> (the perennial lifestyle of the village, idealized by philosophers like Lucian Blaga) lives on only in relation to a Great Tradition (an urban state culture, with written memory and other instruments, besides customs, for addressing the community's needs).

The book is organized around the spectacular contrasts between Nucșoara, an *un-colkhozized* mountain village where the anti-communist partisans opposed for years the regime, and Scornicești, Ceaușescu's home village from Oltenia county, a laboratory for the most advanced communist development experiments. It aims to build a theory compatible with Western standards of social research. Thus, the book comes from the school of rational social research, a minority intellectual tradition in Romania, uses empirical methods and testable hypothesis. This school reached its peak

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<sup>101</sup> The concepts of Little and Big traditions were used for the first time by Robert Redfield in *The Social Organization of Tradition. Peasant Society. A Reader*. 1967: Little Brown and Company

with H.H. Stahl and it was abandoned later, both under classical Stalinism and Ceaușism, when the Romantic-Nationalist paradigm became prevalent. In fact, the filiation is openly declared: in another recently published book (*Intellectualul român față cu inacțiunea: În jurul unei scrisori a lui GM Tamás*)<sup>102</sup>, Alina Mungiu-Pippidi argues for a program to re-connect the Romanian social sciences to the Western standards and for modernizing the political action (the two being often linked in Romania) in the rationalist tradition.

There is no idealization of a-temporal rurality in this book. However, it manages to deconstruct the mechanisms that transformed brute force in legitimate authority under communism, and explains the consolidation of the *neotraditional-type* social contract and its effects during transition. The final chapter of the book offers, yet, another challenge: going with the metaphor one step further, Romania's future does not reside in reviving Nucșoara in its interwar form (the village will slowly fade away through depopulation, aging, and underdevelopment), but in the rise toward prosperity of Scornicești. Just that not Ceaușescu's Scornicești, but the small agro-business town inhabited by European citizens in a *post-neotraditional* Romania. In a way, this a heartening message and inviting to debate.

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<sup>102</sup> *Romanian intellectual facing non-action: Around a letter of GM Tamás*

