

## BOOK REVIEW

**MIHAI MURARIU, RADICAL PERIPHERIES: HETERODOXY, MODERNITY, AND TOTALITY IN JAPAN AND ROMANIA. BUCUREȘTI: EDITURA EIKON/EIKON PUBLISHING HOUSE, 2019. 200 Pp.**

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In a sense, the present volume is something of a continuation of the author's earlier, more extensive investigation of totality, charisma, and authority in his 2017 volume, entitled *Totality, Charisma, Authority. The Origins and Transformation of Totalist Movements*, published by Springer Verlag. While only a passing reference in the first book, here Mihai Murariu, who is already making a name for himself as a very promising, innovative researcher in the field of political science and ideology, takes on an ambitious intellectual endeavour by examining how totalist ideas and ideologies developed in Romania and Japan, moving from the periphery to the mainstream and making their mark on the 20<sup>th</sup> century political evolution of the two countries which, at first glance, have very little in common and would not easily lend themselves to a comparison.

The book is based on an intriguing premise, i.e., whether two countries located in markedly different geographic and cultural milieus can present similar traits (in this case, the existence of totalist movements) not as a result of direct or indirect contacts, but owing to the existence of a

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similar set of historical and political circumstances. The author proceeds to demonstrate this hypothesis which stems from two major sources, in his own words: “interest in the impact and understanding of modernity from the perspectives of movements which have been typically considered heterodox, antinomian, and totalist in nature and, most importantly, the ultimate aims of such movements (...)” and “a persistent fascination with the case of two cultural spaces which, while apparently completely different and sharing virtually no contact with each other, were nonetheless affected by surprisingly similar transformations, crises, and developments (...)” (p. 19). The examples of totalist movements discussed in the book are those of the Legion of the Archangel Michael, especially in the early stages of its development prior to 1927 (in the case of Romania) and Nichirenism (in the case of Japan). Both movements are seen as developing on the periphery of the political spectrum and putting forward radical “alternative projects of modernity” (p. 20). Of course, many mainstream historical interpretations see the Legion as being part of a larger “family” of interwar European fascisms, so perhaps its emergence and evolution are not entirely surprising, given the reach and hold of extreme right ideas in Europe at the time. Nichiren Buddhism, in a sense Japan’s answer to a radical right movement, represents a *sui generis* case in the Asian context, developing from a set of historical circumstances peculiar to Japan alone.

The book comprises three parts: Theories, Traditions, and Totalisms, each dealing with a number of important issues the author analyses in the course of demonstrating his working hypothesis. In conceptual terms, among others, the author draws on Roger Griffin’s notion of “nomic crisis”, correctly pointing out that the occurrence of such a crisis enables the rise of totalist heterodoxies.

The first part is more theoretical in nature, dealing with concepts and definitions, as well as with the principal parallels the author identifies as the basis for his comparison of the two countries, i.e., geography, insularity and a peripheral status in relation to the Western world. Mihai Murariu is thus able to make a compelling case to support his view that a comparative look at the Romanian and Japanese instances of heterodox totalist movements is worth investigating further. Clarifying concepts such as “extremism”, “totality” and “totalism”, the author draws upon a multitude of sources, from Theodor Geiger to Maciej Starzewski, and from

Erik Erikson to Robert J. Lifton in order to explain the finer points of these concepts. He also formulates a succinct but relevant definition of totalism, seen as “a system of thought that typically places a supreme value and a minimal value on plurality and ambiguity, and which, particularly in militant variants, pursues the complete reconstruction of society in accordance with its soteriological-simplifying principles, while claiming a monopoly of interpreting the ideological truth of its own doctrinal core” (p. 46). This definition brings to mind Hannah Arendt’s argument developed in chapter 9 of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, according to which totalitarian regimes, in their quest for survival and endurance, attempt to exercise complete control over the individual’s private sphere or destroy it completely. While totalism and totalitarianism are by no means synonymous, as the author points out on several occasions (see chapter 2), the latter certainly encompasses totalist aims and claims whenever its political fortunes allow for it. A more comprehensive discussion on the differences between totalism and totalitarianism can be found at the end of chapter 2.

The final chapter in the book’s first part deals with the question of modernity, religion and secularisation, mainly through the lens of the Löwith-Blumenberg debate, whom the author sees as the “most erudite and far reaching” of its kind; added to this is a brief overview of Eisenstadt’s arguments on the tension between mundane and transcendental order in the case of totalising visions encompassed in Axial Civilisations. While no doubt interesting in terms of intellectual excursus, this chapter does not necessarily, in my view, bear a clear link to the rest of the book and would have benefitted from a discussion on how the theories and arguments presented apply to the two case studies, especially in terms of their evolution towards modernity.

The second part of the book represents an interesting historical exploration of, first of all, heterodoxies in the Japanese and Romanian cultural spaces, respectively, drawing attention to a series of impactful periods and events, such as the Tokugawa shogunate (1600-1868) and Sheikh Bedreddin’s revolt of 1416, or the influence of Hesychasm in the Romanian principalities in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, both of which rarely appear in historical texts dealing with more mainstream events. In the second chapter of this part, the author puts forth a useful taxonomy of

totalist moments, dividing them into three main idea types (p. 105): renovative totalism, whose aims focus on the past and its ideal models, trying to transform the state to conform to these ideal models; utopian totalism, pursuing the emergence of a perfect new order; and a hybrid type combining characteristics of the first two types in various proportions.

The last part of the book, entitled *Totalisms*, opens with an overview of Nichirenism, one of Japan's most influential nationalist currents which played a significant role in pushing the empire towards a conflict with the West during World War II, derived from the works and ideas of a 13<sup>th</sup> century Buddhist monk. In the author's words, "Nichiren's doctrine held appeal among the wider populace due to the immanent nature of salvation it offered and thus offering a sense of hope, as well as guidance for the hardships of everyday life." (p. 118) While Nichiren's ideas, including his concept of the Lotus Sutra, were not particularly influential in his lifetime, their reinterpretation in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century through a nationalist lens by Tanaka Chigaku gave them a new lease of life. In the Romanian case, the notion of "foreignness" and the profound antagonism within the Romanian society between the "natives" and the "others" played a significant role in forging the ideology of the Legion of the Archangel Michael, as the author demonstrates in the second chapter of this part. Foreigners, especially Jews, were considered to be the source of the "degeneration" of the Romanian nation, a polluting influence on a society that should be homogenous and bound together by the ties of history, blood and God. The author argues that "Codreanu's Legion was a unique moment in Romanian history, in the sense that, rather than being greatly influenced by the West, it represented a wholly native vision of implementing an alternative project of modernity" (p. 143). While this statement is not necessarily inaccurate, in my view, one should however not dismiss the influences of European fascist ideology on the "intellectual fathers" of the Legion, such as A. C. Cuza.

The situation of Romania and Japan at the end of World War I presents some notable similarities briefly explored in the final chapter that discusses comparatively the Japanese Kingly Way and Ishiwara Kanji's Final War alongside the writings and deeds of Corneliu Zelea Codreanu and Ion Moța, in order to prove how, in both countries, we have examples of hybrid totalist versions. The author considers the role and use of political

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assassinations in the interwar period in both Romania and Japan and makes a convincing case for the significant influence of their totalist movements on the countries' political and social life. The book's conclusion, drawing on William Blake's aptly used metaphor of the tiger from his poem *The Tyger*, ponders the idea of how successful the two examples of hybrid totalists were in putting forth an alternate version of modernity. He argues that "they answered to something which is fundamentally part of human nature, namely, the demand for final answers, for a clear, ordered vision that could correspond to the internal structures which become ever more solid as an individual matures." (p. 181) As Dr. Murariu correctly notes in the book's final section, one should not consider that the idea of totalism, and totalisms in particular, disappeared at the end of World War II; on the contrary, the rise of new authoritarianisms, illiberal democratic regimes, and terrorist organisations such as ISIS prove that totalism is far from being an extinguished political and social force.

Although the book does have its minor shortcomings, *Radical Peripheries* represents an original, audacious addition to the relatively little-known field of studies on political totalism, especially in the Romanian intellectual milieu, and both a specialised reader and a "lay" person would be well served by reading it.

