

## BOOK REVIEW

***Sociologia istorică a lui Henri H. Stahl (The Historical Sociology of Henry H. Stahl)* by Ștefan Guga. Cluj-Napoca: Tact Publishing House, 2015, 387 pages.**

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In the last few years, inside the institutional landscape of Romanian social sciences, the history of Romanian sociology has gained a paradoxical position. On one hand, it is present, through a substantial number of people and presentations at any local conference or workshop, and displays a coherence and persistence that seem to be lacking in all other recurrent themes of contemporary Romanian sociology. On the other hand, it is uninteresting for the vast majority of individuals claiming sociological credentials, from universities and research institutes to the more business-oriented parts of the profession.

The history of Romanian sociology mostly means, for the right or wrong reasons, the history of the sociology school from Bucharest, the so-called “Gusti School”. The concomitant visibility, and lack of importance of this kind of history for the mainstream Romanian sociology is rooted in the workings of a mechanism for symbolic legitimacy, and historical reconstruction linked to the interwar period. This hallowed period in the history of Romanian culture works as an important source of cultural relevance in today’s cultural fields and arenas. Present day intellectuals are able to create interwar ancestors, lines of continuity are still being built and carefully managed. The legitimizing link to Western culture is gained, safely, in an indirect way. As the interwar period is considered the highest point of cultural integration into European modernity, by constructing a reliable path to the interwar culture, modernity can be reaffirmed and the troubling Communist past can be easily set aside.

The problem with this legitimizing mechanism is that the interwar period tends to multiply and become politically complicated; the same thing happens to “Western culture”, and even the socialist *interregnum* is not as homogeneous as it used to be. The historiography of the Gusti School works like an alternative way to the interwar cultural resource, as a way of bypassing the Eliade-Noica-Cioran conglomerate or its versions that are far too complicated and dubious to be

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assumed politically and scientifically nowadays. This symbolic fight for the “good” interwar culture functions by distancing itself from the usual, mainstream Eliade-Noica-Cioran one, but also by trying to mimic its workings and by using its prestige. By doing this, it is able to put the history of Romanian sociology in a position of public visibility inside the spaces that nurture some parts of the local cultural production. Indirectly, it rebounds inside the disciplinary bounds of local sociology where it occupies a simultaneously important and marginal position. At the same time, as some kind of symbolic price to be paid for its convoluted relevance, the history of sociology is robbed of theoretical perspectives and instruments needed for the construction of coherent arguments outside the rather provincial game of interwar legitimacy.

Ștefan Guga, in his book, explicitly attempts to reclaim Henri H. Stahl, one of the most important Romanian interwar (and post-war) sociologists, as a Marxist sociologist, an integral part of local Marxist tradition and a participant in international Marxist debates. Both themes tend to (re)orient the history of Romanian sociology towards a theoretical and discursive horizon, as the author confronts head on the dominant ways of doing this kind of research. Which is a refreshing counterpoint and a good start for others writing and debating in this area, even if the two parts, the two major themes of the book, are not the same when it comes to clarity. The focus in my comment on this book is more on the first theme.

The close lecture of Stahl’s texts, in the context of larger international debates and contexts, is doubled by an attempt to deconstruct the way the Romanian sociologist was used and understood after 1989, inside sociology and history of sociology debates. Guga attempts to extract Stahl from the usual schemes that capture him as part of the Gusti School – as the “good”, “social reformist”, and quite “democratic” slice of interwar - and puts him on a Marxist theoretical trajectory. I tend to believe that, in Stahl’s case, this is an important and well-deserved salvage operation, or, at least, that it is necessary for the construction of a combined theoretical and historical argument about him and his work. The lack of clarity, especially in the first part of the book, has to do with the ways in which this recuperation of Stahl from the “Gusti School” has been actually done.

The problem is that, even if he rightly criticizes the mainstream historiography of the Gusti School, strangely enough, Guga tends to take at face value the descriptions of the Gusti School delivered by the same narrative. The fact that the Gusti School was a moment inside the field of interwar cultural, political, and scientific differentiations is a good Bourdieusian starting point, but it does not really show more than the fact that we should be wary not to reify or essentialize it – which is correct, but not very informative. The School, Guga tells

us, is not as many of its historiographers (and sociologists) presented it to be like: a *sui generis* organism, a clear historical and scientific organism, handy and usable in contemporary legitimacy games. Therefore, we should get Stahl out of this wrong frame of reference and dissociate him from this false image as a major member, second best after Dimitrie Gusti, and from the false existence of a coherent, cohesive “school”. His true professional and theoretical identity, namely the Marxist one, cannot be revealed inside this theoretically and politically distorting field: the Gusti School.

The argument is, I argue, only partially correct, as by getting Stahl out of this uncritical understanding of the School we have not really disentangled him from the School as such. Henri H. Stahl can hardly be recovered as a critical Marxist sociologist without reworking, reimagining, and reanalyzing the ways the School emerged, functioned and managed its inconsistencies and tensions. To put it in another way, I do not believe that Stahl can be understood (at least in its pre-WWII career) without a critical deconstruction of the interwar sociology as such, and especially of its relations with Marxism and socialism.

The complex relationships the School entertained, at different moments, with Marxism and, more generally, with various socialisms, are not part of Guga’s analysis. That is why Stahl’s Marxism seems to save him from the theoretical inconsistencies, constant militantism, mixtures of empirical science, social engineering and nationalism, and the constitutive connections with the nation building projects of the state elites, which provided the characteristic features of the School. Things are a bit more complicated. In 1919, and at the beginning of the 1920, Dimitrie Gusti, together with Virgil Madgearu, were coordinating some kind of a reformist *think tank* for the political and financial elites of the Old Kingdom of Romania, elites that were now facing the tremendously difficult task of organizing the new state that emerged after WWI. Journals such as *Arhiva pentru Știință și Reformă Socială* [*Archive for Social Science and Reform*] and, maybe less obviously, *Independența Economică* [*Economic Independence*] opened up their pages for debates over leftist oriented reforms. Texts and polemics having as their protagonists, among others, Lothar Rădăceanu, Șerban Voinea (Henri Stahl’s brother), Ștefan Zeletin, the anarchist-syndicalist Anastase Gusti (Dimitrie Gusti’s brother), Barbu Solacolu, and Virgil Madgearu were published. Persons close to the cooperative movement, *Sozialpolitik*, French social economy, peasantry and municipal socialism presented their analyses and proposals that came, largely, from some kind of vague socialism. Eugen Erlich, former rector of the University from Cernăuți and close to the Austro-Marxist movement, was published, posthumously, with a text about Marx and Marxism. Even Dimitrie Gusti, in 1920, wrote a text where he declared Marx a genius, only to quickly stress the drawbacks and incompleteness of Marxism. The Bolshevik experience from

Russia was debated, some texts about collectivization were published, and many books and articles by and about Lenin, Vandervelde, Bernstein, Marxism revisionism, Tugan-Baranowski and Russian cooperative movement, Henri de Man etc. were reviewed.

Once Gusti got convinced there was an important political potential in monographic sociology, in integrating an empirical sociology into a nation-building project, at the end of the 1920s, all this vague socialist discourse going on inside reformist scientific journals was, quickly enough, marginalized and instrumentalized by “Gustian sociology”. From this point of view, it is interesting to see how this kind of sociology looked for and found international interlocutors among sociologists and administration theoreticians like Gaston Richard, the author of a much-celebrated critique of Marxism coming from the positions of French solidarism.

Gustian sociology emerged, apart from intellectual and theoretical shifts, amidst an active process of submerging a leftwing reformist discourse inside the newly established Greater Romania. Henri H. Stahl was a part of this process. He was a member of the Gusti School with his Marxist theoretical orientation and not against it. In a way, Stahl’s career could provide one of the main keys in understanding the complex and complicated relationships between the School and socialism.

Stahl’s partial exit from the nation building *sociologia militans* happened quite late, at the beginning of the 1940s, and it can be read as a sign of his intellectual transformation and, also, of the School and Gusti’s theoretical and political failure. At the same time, starting from the 1930s, a new model of nation building, more ethnicized and sometimes even biologized was emerging as a major competitor but also as continuator, in a way, of some of the School’s projects.

Guga sees well the crisis and tensions apparent in the monography on Nerej (1939) which is “not just the only text that uses the Gustian conceptual scheme but also the only where Gherea’s problematic is predominant” (p. 143) that corresponds, I think, with this moment of crisis.

Interwar Romanian sociology, while theoretically and empirically sophisticated and creative, was, at the same time, built on the blind spot of an un-reflexive convergence between science (seen as a legitimate source of reforms), social engineering, and progress, and its main research object, the nation. The social that was analyzed (and created) inside the political and scientific projects and alliances that the School forged, was deemed to be transparent to the scientific gaze and, concomitantly, rooted in the continuous flux of national substance and history. It is probable that Stahl, especially in such a late publication as *Eseuri critice [Critical Essays]*, was the most distanced from this orientation. However, I would say that, as long as the School existed, and even after that, he was part of the project.

One of the major problems encountered by the history of the Bucharest School is ensconced in the annoying Gustian concept of “social will”. The notion is hardly defensible theoretically but still essential for how Gusti envisioned the role of sociology in smoothly building the nation with the help of the state. None of the main figures of the School was comfortable with this 19<sup>th</sup> century notion, but nobody meaningfully criticized it. Even Stahl, when he got to criticize this fundamental concept did it by stressing its genealogies in German 19<sup>th</sup> century sociology and social psychology but not its central importance and amazing resilience in the School.

The first phase in the relationship between Stahl and Marxism is presented as engendered by a double influence: one coming mainly from narodnicism, the other from Austro-Marxism. There is an interesting tension between these two sources. The influence coming from Russian narodnicism is complex and mediated through Gherea and local *poporanism*, while the Austro-Marxist one is more direct. However, there is a parallelism between Stahl’s theoretical problems and the ones present in narodnicism.

The main topics of Austro-Marxism, that were related to the state, nationalities, ethics and social science, Marxism and sociology, but, mainly to a theoretical and pragmatic reaction to the transformations that went on inside the Austrian working class, had to be drastically adapted to be relevant in a Romanian context. Guga’s attempt to elaborate on the connections between Stahl and Austro-Marxism is important and should be, probably, investigated further.

Stahl, Guga tells us, “saw in the rural world the resources of a critique of state-led modernity and expressed a firm belief in the institutions that made peasant self-government possible; on the other side, Stahl was critical towards the romanticism of *sămănătorism* and *poporanism*, as he considered that the idealization of the village cannot create the fundamentals of good state policies” (p.94). Another context for Stahl’s theoretical dilemmas, avowedly harder to retrace than the Austro-Marxist one, is the Narodnik one. Ssorin-Chaikov, for example, shows us how the Narodnik ethnographers, who were exiled in Siberia at the beginning of the 1900s, were more than willing to take into account the role the state played in the emergence of rural communities. Northern Russia was not seen anymore as a depositary of original communities, but as a direct product of colonial expansion, where peasant colonists, financed and supported by the state, dislodged weaker, Finnish-speaking communities. Nevertheless, the fracture between organic rural communities and real ones, that the Narodniks knew from “going to the people”, from the Siberian exile, from critical historical and ethnographic works, strengthened the populist-socialist ideal. By constructing an alternative way of temporally grasping “progress”, Russian Narodniks instituted the people as the only solution for closing the gap between modernity “as it is” and “as it should be”.

In the second part of the book, things look clearer as the shadow of the School fades from sight. Stahl emerges not only as influenced by the social history and historical sociology debates starting with Dobb-Sweeny and continuing with Robert Brenner, but also as an active part in Immanuel Wallerstein's and Perry Anderson's attempts to understand the transition from feudalism to capitalism.

The dynamic and history of Stahl's scientific productivity, as Guga presents it in this book, stretches from the interwar period to the 1980s and provides us with a Stahl that is very hard to use in the usual contemporary symbolic legitimacy games, but, maybe because of that, even more necessary for local sociology and history alike. Even if the Marxist salvage operation is not a total success, I would say that we have a slightly different Stahl to deal with after this book.