

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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Reading Ștefan Guga's book "The Historical Sociology of Henry H. Stahl" is first and foremost an exercise in iconoclasm. Don't get it wrong: the author deeply resonates with Stahl's perspectives, bringing out his main scientific endeavour and a much needed synthesis of the sociologist's works. Where the iconoclasm applies is in the revisiting of the post-1990 interpretations of Stahl's works by the Romanian sociological milieu. The unambiguous pattern found in most of the articles dedicated to Stahl by sociologists, was to see his Marxism either as a marginal and minor key, or as an understandable compromise made instrumentally by the thinker for his writings to pass the communist censorship. Guga claims that both perspectives are wrong, and, in order to prove that, he produced a book focused on the historical materialism embraced by the great sociologist in his entire work.

The book is built on two different alignments.

The first alignment unravels the "retro-utopical" orientation of the post-1990 Romanian sociologists who, aiming to resettle the local field of the discipline in connection with the interwar school of sociology (which was hyperbolised as the paramount standard to aspire to), were fighting to appropriate one of its main figures. Most of their articles were focusing on the role of Stahl within the well-known "Gusti School", singling him out as Gusti's right hand man, the good organiser of their field researches and "the great methodologist", a strategy that had the paradoxical consequence of ignoring the substantial works produced by the author in the Marxist paradigm, both before and after 1945. In the first chapter of the book, "Symbolical fights, appropriations and delimitations", Guga deconstructs the post-socialist image of Stahl as no more than a forefather of the sociological monography and a loyal follower of Gusti's theoretical system of "frames and expressions". Analysing comprehensively the literature dedicated by different authors to Stahl in books and journals (with a focus on Romanian Sociology), he proves that Stahl's cultural capital was consistently mitigated,

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shadowed or even misapprehended, while his symbolic capital was instrumented for personal or institutional accumulation of prestige. What have actually happened, according to Guga, is that Stahl's intellectual biography was so re-written - through a deliberate selection and emphasis on some "convenient" writings - as to match the standards of an imagined "post-communist honourability", specific to the new intellectual conformism, infused by an anti-communist ethos and by nostalgia for a romanticized pre-communist past. The result of this process was the transformation of Stahl from an "author", with his personal subjects and achievements, into a "reader", namely one of the interpreters and contributors, maybe the most profiled, of Gusti's research program. More important, and here is a main point of Guga's analysis, reducing Stahl to a "reader" figure has the consequences of disconsidering him as the creator of an original historical sociology, but also disconsidering him as a Marxist author, in fact one of the most important Romanian Marxist thinkers.

This reduction was not determined strictly by the above-mentioned post-communist ethos, but, as Guga argues, it was deeply embedded in the Romanian sociology from 1965 onward, which constantly drew lines of separation between sociology, seen as a "pure" domain, informed by "neutral" theoretical frames of, say, Durkheim, Weber or Parsons, and historical materialism or Marxism, seen as an impure and destabilising political doctrine that invaded "objective" research. Reduced to the dogma of the communist regimes, Marxism was slowly evacuated from sociologists' theoretical concerns, which made them unable to understand and value Stahl's ideas. Thus, the post-1990 process of appropriating Stahl's figure swung between equally unsuitable extremes: be that as a thinker who made a kind of synthesis of Durkheim and Weber, or (in the case of those who paid attention at least to his Marxist language) as an intellectual with certain "social-democratic"² political views, but definitely not as a thinker whose epistemology was deeply informed by Marxist debates. As a result, the cornerstone of Stahl's thinking, and his most important scientific contribution, the project of a historical sociology, was ignored, and therefore has not produced disciples and debates neither in the field of sociology, or history, nor in the larger Romanian cultural arena. When eventually addressed, at least for the reason that extensive works like "Contributions to the study of the collective ownership villages" could not be ignored, his historical perspective was reduced, in Guga's words, "to a harmless history of the Romanian village, especially fascinated by 'archaic' phenomena, and thus good to be admired in a museum" (p.54).

Setting aside Guga's book for a moment, Stahl's political leftist options, which did not adhere to any party line neither in the in the interwar period nor in

² Wrongly understood in the present meanings, and not in the one specific to the pre-WWII era, which was clearly related to a socialist option.

the socialist times, as well as his consistent historical materialist focus, do not need much of an interpretation after 2000, when the publishing of the interviews taken to Stahl by Zoltán Rostás³ made available Stahl's own words about these options, with all the needed nuances. Even so, a "will of not knowing", to use Foucault's phrasing, is still largely at work by interpreters and readers, who prefer to "read between the lines" and see in this text mostly "dissidence" (thus confirming the real need for a book like Guga's). To give a few examples, discussing critically the activities of Romanian rural Houses of Culture (*Case de cultură*) established during socialist times was not one of Stahl's instances of "dissidence", but an opportunity to discuss how things could have been done, taking as reference the proletarian cultural house organised in Vienna by the social-democrats in the 1920's (pp. 31-33). His genuine belief in the virtues of agricultural cooperatives was also not hidden. Still, there is an important nuance: their proper organisation should have been done, in his views, from below, by grafting, with incentives (but not control) from the state, new institutions on the old communal social and property structures, as a free option of the peasants. If the state *would really have been socialist*, mentioned Stahl, unambiguously criticising the really existing socialist state, this could have been done successfully (pp. 294-297). When it comes to his theoretical positioning, he clearly saw himself as a sociologist who aimed at synthesising history with present social facts, which was done only by him among all monographists precisely because, as he stated, "Marxism constrains oneself to make the synthesis between all particular social sciences" (p.256). More important, he mentioned that his Marxist views predetermined his encounter with Gusti, and while he found convenient Gusti's sociological model of "frames and expressions" for field-researches, his main scientific endeavour went ahead "against Gusti" (p.257).

Returning to Guga's book, we find out in the second chapter, "Marxist adventures", a different set of arguments and explanations for the disregard of Stahl's main contribution, but also about where, precisely, Stahl's actual dissidence should have been searched for. "Critical Essays", a book published in 1983 which unites texts produced from the interwar period onward, had a quasi-unanimously negative reception. Dealing with the issue of "national specificity", an issue that was intensely debated in the interwar period and which was reopened after Ceaușescu's nationalist turn, the book analyses critically different variants of this theory, with an accent on the works of Lucian Blaga and Mircea Eliade, authors who were at time recently rehabilitated after years of being officially banned or marginalised, and on their way to becoming "sacred" figures of Romanian high culture. The aim of the book was to reveal, within the "national specificity" debate focused on rural culture and folklore, Stahl's interpretation of the

³ Zoltán Rostás (2000). *Monografia ca utopie. Interviuri cu Henri H. Stahl (1985-1987)*, București: Paideia.

peasants' culture, based on a scientific analysis. Stahl's main point was that Blaga and Eliade lacked the direct and detailed knowledge of rural life and, by promoting inadequate methods for the subject - the introspection or the hermeneutics of text - they built metaphysical, anti-empirical, non-historical and non-sociological theories of national specificity. For Stahl, these theories are reactionary and anti-modern. They promote a chauvinistic nationalism, obscurantism and they are opposed to a scientific research of the peasant world, which can be provided by the empirical research of sociology. What Guga made clear in this chapter is that with "Critical Essays", Stahl has retaken his criticism of these reactionary views that he had already addressed in the interwar period against the promoters of the nationalist philosophies and against the extreme-right movement of the Iron Guard. In doing so, Stahl aimed to strengthen the place of sociology in academia, especially against philosophy, which was keeping sociology under its tutelage, and to provide an alternative discourse to the dominant conservative discourses appropriated by the communists after 1968. Stahl provided here, in my view, the rare case (for Romania) of criticising from a leftist standpoint the official cultural alignment, a criticism that was matched maybe only by Pavel Câmpeanu's analysis of Stalinism. Guga's judgement in this respect is that if the criticism of official ideology hardliners was understandable, less so was the sociologists' criticism, who both before and after 1990 mistakenly read Stahl's position as a "positivist" one, once again interpreting Stahl's involvement in the national specificity debate through the lens of "Stahl, the methodologist", and thus identifying his opposition to the metaphysical ontologies as one against theory, tout court. Reducing Stahl's quest for a theory deeply informed by empirical investigation to mere positivism, and reducing Stahl's Marxism to irrelevance or compromise, they lost from sight Stahl's very early adherence to the views of the branch of Marxism which debated in detail the question of nationality from a historical materialist standpoint, namely the Austro-Marxism. Consequently, they ignored Stahl's sustained efforts to build a Romanian sociology as Marxism upon this early influence, coupled with influences from Dobrogeanu-Gherea and from the interwar socialist groups. Such sociology could have provided, among other results, a historically and ethnographically informed, and scientifically accurate, approach to the nationality issue.

If the first alignment of Guga's book was dedicated to revealing how Stahl was, on one side, used after 1990 as a totemic figure for different legitimising purposes, and, on the other side, ignored in respect with his most important scientific contribution, it was logical for the second alignment of the book to bring to light what was indeed ignored, being thus dedicated to a detailed overview of Stahl's theoretical system, and to its developments in time. This second half of the book, comprising of the following four chapters, and also being lengthier, pens a systematic analysis of Stahl's vast published work in order to grasp the relevant instances of his project of a historical sociology.

Noticing that Guga chose no shortcuts in reading Stahl, producing a much needed comprehensive and dense (if sometimes redundant) analysis of his texts, I have to restrain myself here to only bringing out the main lines of this inquiry.

Chapter three, "A project of a historical sociology", identifies the genesis of Stahl's project in his concrete concern with issues related to the rapid and malign social change of the Romanian rural life under modernising pressure. A case in point was the dispossession of the peasants from Vrancea's villages of their collective forest properties by capitalist interventions that were encouraged by a national legislation which disregarded the particular age-old social organisation of these villages. The solution to correct this would firstly be to understand - through minute in-depth researches - the local social arrangements, a task that could be achieved only through a perspective that would be at the same time historical and sociological. The advantage seen by Stahl in this combination was that a historical-cum-sociological perspective could be applied to both empirical researches, focused on micro-levels, and to larger social processes, like the specificity of the feudal relations in Eastern Europe. By practicing a "social archaeology" which could retrace the past of the villages' social life from the survivals of the old territorial structures (or to elaborate backwards on the history of the villages in the context of a lack of written documents), Stahl envisioned to give empirically-based answers to the specificity of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the modes of production, or the states' formation in the case of Romania and Eastern Europe. What Guga stated here is that by following this path, which was sprung up by his early adherence to Marxism as social science, Stahl contributed to the international debates on these issues - unlike different post-socialist scholars - as an autonomous thinker, neither imitating western intellectuals, nor searching for legitimacy by invoking them.

We are made aware in the following chapter, "From capitalism to feudalism", that Stahl's strategic lines of thought had been already crystallised before 1949, and was focused around the principle of social archaeology, similar to Marc Bloc's approach, but with an accent on social change as determined at least to the same extent by class conflict as well as by technology and culture, which Bloch favoured. The accent is decisive, having in mind that in his efforts to create a typology containing the diversity of the Romanian villages across time, Stahl considered the primitive collective ownership (*devălmaş*) village (whose survivals he traced in Vrancea's villages before WWII) as predating the formation of the medieval Romanian states and the formation of a politically organised nobility class. He argued that the latter class was formed by the old lineages' leaders who, by appropriating the system of tax collection imposed to the villages by the nomad conquerors, eventually brought out a centralised

government and gradually got involved in the villages' mode of production, challenging the peasants' collective ownership and, after the appropriation of their land, exploiting them as serfs. Still, not all the villages followed the same path; there was a specific dynamic of the primeval village itself, which produced different types of social organisations, that, in time, conduced to villages being in different positions within the class struggle and thus being differently positioned in regard to the capitalist penetration of the Romanian provinces. Considering the primitive collective ownership village as primordial and determinant for the Romanian social history, Stahl challenged the dominant theory in Romanian historiography of state formation of the "dismounting ruler", and, more important, he provided a more accurate representation than the dominant one (including Gherea's) on the capitalist penetration here, making visible a much earlier and longer process of capitalism primitive accumulation, which took place during the struggle of the boyars and the feudal state to break down the collective social organisations of the peasants, to dispossess them of their land, and to impose the legal frame of individual property. Shedding light on these specific relations and struggles between peasants and the nobility regarding land ownership, and the consequential revelation that Romanian feudalism was different from Western feudalism, provided Stahl with important arguments for entering the international debates (particularly those developed within Marxism, which Guga synthesised in great detail) on the subject of transition from feudalism to capitalism, and to bring a relevant contribution. If, as Guga revealed, Stahl entered tardy in the well-known Dobb-Sweezy debate regarding the causes of the transition to capitalism (with a synthesis of "The Collective Ownership Villages" published in 1969 in French), his elaboration on the "second serfdom" in the Romanian countries was the source for empirical and theoretical arguments that Wallerstein brought in later, in his dispute with Robert Brenner regarding the amplitude of the extension of capitalism beginning with the 16th century. In respect with this moment in Stahl's thinking, Guga observed that if Stahl were in agreement with Wallerstein's idea that when capitalism settled, it had already influenced a differently developed Eastern Europe, he would have remained ambiguous and hesitant (like Gherea in this case) in abandoning the nation as the main unit of analysis. In fact this is the main critical stance that Guga addressed to Stahl's overall project of a materialist historical sociology: if, as a result of the Marxists international debate, Stahl elaborated on a Romanian specific mode of production (the tributary system, to which Guga dedicates chapter five), Stahl still never took, like Eric Wolf or Samir Amin, the step towards a larger frame, that would have located the tributary mode of production within larger economic and political fields or "civilizations", and in relations with other regional or global modes of

production. However, a certain orientation in this direction had been made by Stahl during his last years of life.

In the last chapter of his book, "The Structuralist turn and the last critique", Guga discusses and speculates on Stahl's unfinished project of a comparative analysis of Central and Eastern European feudalism, most likely framed within the same structuralist perspective that informed the elaboration on the tributary mode of production, and which would have probably been conceived more like a typology of particular ("national") forms of feudalism that can be analytically separated on the basis of their similarities and differences. If this project could not be accomplished, because of Stahl's age and because of the scandal that followed the publication of "Critical Essays", he still succeeded to write a very acid book ("Confusing Problems in the Romanian Social History") in which he harshly criticises the (false) materialism of Romanian historiography. Guga once again made clear that this criticism was not an anti-Marxism stance, as the post-socialist interpreters would be ready to believe, but a commitment for researching the past through a scientific historical sociology, on which the Marxist debates brought a major contribution, against (the dominant) teleological history guided by the search of events, with a strict chronological orientation and concerned mostly by cultural and political facts.

In spite of its unassuming title, apparently dedicated to reviving the heritage of an important sociologist, Ștefan Guga's book is not a neutral and comfortable one. And it was certainly not conceived to be so. It is not comfortable for Romanian mainstream sociology, which, from the interwar period to the present day, rarely stood on its feet on the international arena, instead always being content with a subordinate position in respect to theory, and being prone to borrowing particularly the most conservative theories. It is also not comfortable for Romanian mainstream historiography, which made a great injustice to itself by ignoring a figure like Stahl's. It would also be totally misleading to see Guga's book as the book of an eccentric young intellectual, who writes from the margins of the system to unsettle the sociological "bourgeoisie" by revealing Stahl's Marxism in an era and a country where associating Marx and Marxism with the defunct communist regime is *de rigueur*. As I sketched above, by selecting a few fragments from Zoltán Rostás book, one doesn't need to write a 380 page book in order to demonstrate that Stahl was Marxist. Guga doesn't follow this easy path, because this was not the point to prove (and the first two chapters would have been sufficient in this respect, anyway). The point was to prove (which the author did through the dense analysis of the second half of the book) that an indigenous empirical and theoretical contribution to the international sociology was and still is possible, and that Marxism as sociology is not something that can simply be ignored, but rather the paradigm in which some of the most important sociological debates took place

in the last century, and still take place today. And finally, Guga made obvious that what is wrong with the post-socialist re-appropriation of Stahl through (only) the Gusti School is that this recuperation shadows the higher stakes of Stahl's work, which reached for aims beyond the School's program.