

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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Henri H. Stahl is widely perceived as one of the most prominent Romanian sociologists. Yet, for all of the ostensible congruence in evaluating his oeuvre, there is plenty of space for a book such as Ștefan Guga's, which engages substantially Stahl's intellectual production throughout his long career. In fact, this analysis is necessary to understand the extent to which "Stahl - the great sociologist" is a label that covers a multitude of positions towards his work, many of them oversimplifying, driven by an agenda and at times plainly misled.

Over the last couple of decades, Stahl has been recovered by sociologists and social historians in Romania primarily as a crucial member of the Gusti School and one of the key social researchers in the interwar period. While this is not inaccurate, it is also far from a fair representation of Stahl's contribution to sociology, considering the span of his career, the width of his research interests, the originality of his theoretical insights, and the relevance of his analyses for the global debates in the social sciences in the second half of the 20th century. Guga sets himself the task of overviewing the symbolic struggles around Stahl post-1989 before proceeding to a thorough investigation of his work and looking into its sources and its impact.

The book comprises six chapters, plus a preamble and a coda. It is at times cumbersome to navigate due to some less fortunate options in terms of organising the text: some sections are marked in a different font and it is not immediately obvious whether these are summaries of certain sections (they are not) or some sort of intermezzos. Large chunks of text are delegated to footnotes, many of them relevant, and sometimes essential to the argument.

Going by the title, the book promises an analysis of Stahl's historical sociology. The preamble and first part of the book, however, forcefully delve into the issue of Stahl's Marxism and the key stake of the book is introduced as making a case for Marxism as the cornerstone of Stahl's work, rather than a

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marginal or a utilitarian choice. I would venture that Guga ends up doing a lot more than extensively demonstrating how genuine and substantial Stahl's engagement with Marxism is. His book turns into a tour de force that on the one hand discusses a key chapter in the history of the social sciences in Romania and on the other hand articulates a comprehensive analysis of the controversies around the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Europe.

The first part of the book introduces Stahl as an object of the post-communist retro-utopia that aims to legitimate the project of contemporary sociology in Romania by forging tenuous connections with the interwar efforts of the Gusti School and conveniently skipping any links with the potentially morally tainted communist period. The first chapter, "Symbolic struggles, appropriations, and demarcations" shows how the biographical illusion is constructed in the case of Stahl, who comes to be viewed as the most competent disciple of Dimitrie Gusti or, at best, part of the collective voice of the Bucharest School of Sociology in the interwar period. As such, Guga notices in the conceptual frame of Bourdieu, Stahl comes to be deprived of the status of auctor and demoted to the position of Gusti's best lector. The result is that Stahl's work is read selectively, with his most original and theoretically meaningful work viewed as secondary to his methodological writings, which are instrumental to the popularization of the project of the Bucharest School of Sociology. Stahl's Marxist orientation becomes obliterated post-1989 firstly as a result of sociology being perceived as a domain that needs to be kept separated from ideology ever since the debates in the 60s, and secondly because Marxism comes to be rejected wholly due to its connections with the communist dogma.

The second chapter, "Marxist adventures", is dedicated to taking a closer look at Stahl's theoretical orientation towards Marxism. This is understood in the light of the lack of in-depth social theory in the Gusti School, theory that needed to be adequate to comprehend the empirical realities Stahl was interested in, such as the national question or the dramatic transformations of the rural world under capitalism. Guga shows Stahl has become a Marxist as a result of seeing (and practicing) sociology as a radically empirically oriented discipline – which is not to say lacking in theoretical depth. His view was informed and has developed in contact with some of the most prominent Marxist thinkers of the time and came to have close affinities with the Austromarxists. This part of Stahl's intellectual biography becomes crucial as Guga demonstrates the main features of his thought cannot be reduced to the interactions with the Gusti School, and stemmed from his engagement with Marxist thinking which predated his co-optation in Gusti's research team.

The second part of the book is devoted to a thorough analysis of Stahl's thinking, starting with the chapter on "A project of historical sociology", which delves into the project of researching Vrancea's villages in a period of rampant transformation as a result of the intrusion of reckless capitalism in the form of

forest exploitation companies. Stahl himself was a militant for the cause of the peasants and thought there was urgent need for intervention in the area. At the time of his research, villagers fell between the cracks as a result of the recklessness of timber exploitation companies and insufficient regulation by the state. Stahl's suggested solution was state intervention, meant to save the locals from the companies benefitting from fuzzy regulation. Theoretically, he attempted to understand the vulnerability of Vrancea's villages in the light of the dissolution of the collective ownership system (*devălmășie*) with the advance of capitalism. One of the main issues in understanding the transformation was that historical documents were lacking in Eastern Europe as compared to its Western part due to the late formation of nation states. Stahl's ambition was to attempt to know the historical reality through "social archaeology" – a method of reconstituting the history of the villages through analysing the remnants of the past forms of organisation of social life still surviving in the present. It was an exercise akin to that of Bloch's *Annales* School, the affinities with which Stahl duly acknowledged. The research themes Stahl eventually articulated departing from the puzzle that was the villages in Vrancea were the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the dissolution of the pre-capitalist forms of social life, state formation and state transformation. These were all in perfect alignment with the interests of the western social scientists in the same period. Guga sets himself the task to demonstrate that Stahl's discussion of historical sociology and historical materialism crystallizes in dialogue with the western intellectuals, and not by emulating them. As a result of these preoccupations and as an output of his collaboration with the other members of the Bucharest School of Sociology, Stahl finally produced the monograph of the village Nerej. However, a few years later he admitted his intellectual agenda was compromised by using Gusti's system of "frames and actions", which did not allow for the coherent articulation of his theoretical argument.

By the fourth and fifth chapters, "From capitalism to feudalism" and "The tributary system", Guga's analysis is fully geared toward integrating Stahl's work in the global discussions about the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Stahl looks at the process of class formation in this part of Europe, claiming that feudal relations in Eastern Europe were fundamentally different from those in Western Europe. Villages such as those in Vrancea were strategic sites that made visible the fact that rural collective property pre-existed medieval state formation, and therefore the formation of the nobility class. The second serfdom discussed by Western scholars was no more than a belated (first) serfdom in the case of the Romanian territories, where the boyars came to amass power later on. As such, the Romanian case is relevant for the larger debate about the transition from feudalism to capitalism, since it rewrites the assumptions about the primitive commune and property relations in Europe. Guga offers an overview of the Dobb-Sweezy debate before looking at how Stahl positioned himself and participated in this debate, by providing an abridged version of his work on the villages with

collective ownership systems. Later on, in the 70s, Stahl's arguments were used by the participants in the Brenner debate, and in particular by Brenner's Marxist critics, such as Wallerstein.

In the last chapter of the book, "The structuralist turn and the last critique", Guga turns to Stahl's unfinished project of a comparative research of Central and Eastern European feudalism. The study, which never came to fruition, was conceived in close dialogue with Marxist thinkers, and in particular with Althusser. Based on Stahl's thinking, Guga speculates as to the main lines of argument that he might have mobilized in this study and underlines his commitment for the project of historical sociology.

Guga's analysis is occasionally marred by possible overgeneralizations. Part of his critique hinges on the readers accepting his definition of the ideological lens through which Stahl is read by Romanian contemporaries. While he does illustrate this with the position of several authors (Bădina, Sandu, Larionescu, Momoc, Juravle etc.) and I agree there are many more, it is quite a leap to assume that this is the view Romanian sociologists generally take, since there is no estimate whatsoever of the proportion of sociologists who engage with Stahl's work substantially and refuse to put him into neat oversimplified or distortive boxes. What we know for certain is just that those who engage in explicitly writing about interwar Romanian sociology are likely to do it in the key described in the first couple of chapters. Guga also risks becoming quite the contrarian when criticizing the new generation of social scientists for borrowing and unjudiciously importing theories from the West. I am in full agreement with him that the autocolonization that transpires from many analyses in the last two decades or so is worrisome, but feel hesitant about throwing the baby with the bathwater. It is not the imports we need to tackle, especially if we are of the view that now, as in Stahl's time, there is no "inside" and "outside" when it comes to genuine theoretical debates relevant at a global scale, but rather them being not fit for the purpose or fetishized by virtue of their Western origin. After all, taking this argument to its ultimate conclusion in this context, Marxism itself is a Western import to the analysis of social realities in Eastern Europe. Finally, the image of the Romanian social sciences grappling for several decades in a "quagmire of autism and irrelevance" (p.17) is compelling, but excessive. In the end, it comes down to how we perceive the field of Romanian sociology at the moment, in a context in which the voices that can be heard, to take just an example, belong on the one hand to those oversimplifying and instrumentalizing Stahl and on the other hand to Ștefan Guga himself.

This is a book that, if all goes well, will leave in its wake scores of readers eager to (re)visit Stahl's writings and give him due credit in key matters of historical sociology. One can only look forward to Guga's continuation of his plan to critically understand the historical and sociological dynamic of the Romanian social sciences.