

## BOOK REVIEW

***Dependență și dezvoltare. Economia politică a capitalismului românesc (Dependency and Development. The Political Economy of Romanian Capitalism)* by Cornel Ban. Cluj-Napoca: Tact Publishing House, 2014, 293 pages.**

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The book takes us through the past century and a half of Romanian history, analyzing in each of its seven chapters what Cornel Ban sees as distinct phases of the country's position in relation to the world economy: the early departure from a feudalistic organization in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that marked the actual constitution of the Romanian nation state and its position of *classical* and then *semiperipheral* dependency (Chapter One), the five decades of state socialism (Chapter Two) followed by the various stages of post-socialist capitalism (Chapters Three to Seven). Coherent with the Polanyian framework it stems from, the analysis simultaneously follows the indicators of a gradual transformation of an agrarian economy into one of complex industry and services, and the ones related to the extent and depth of social rights (health, education and labour protection).

The first chapter entitled "Between liberalism and mercantilism" starts by briefly analyzing the beginnings of the integration of the Romanian economy into the wider fluxes of Western European capitalism, at a time when the power of the Ottoman Empire severely declined. It then describes the successive strategies of the local elites, starting with a rather *classical* version of economic *liberalism* that was proved untenable on the long run by the global crisis of 1877(8), replaced by a *neomercantilism* with nationalistic roots that lasted roughly until the late 1930s when *authoritative corporatism* took its place. The period of Romanian history analyzed in this chapter is central to the mainstream nationalistic historiography, encapsulating many of the mythological moments of national history. Therefore, if the imagined readership for this book goes beyond the small circle of critical social scientists as it definitely should, putting forth a narrative emphasizing the

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shifting centres of global economic dependency and showing the class interests of the national elites and their projects of development becomes a welcome reinterpretation. In this sense, the biggest blow is perhaps the way in which the inter-war period is not portrayed as the peak of Romanian integration in the “Western civilization”.

Chapter Two, “The rise and fall of national-stalinist developmentalism (1949-1989)” is devoted to depicting the social and economic mechanisms of the communist regime and it is intended by the author as a “sober” analysis, in contrast to the highly ideologized references to this period that are central to the anti-communist establishment. The (in)famous massive industrialization project, as well as the decision to pay off the international debt that the Romanian state had accumulated after the oil crisis are described and rendered intelligible as part of wider global processes, rather than as insulated peculiarities. Consequently, the increasingly severe deprivation of the population in the second part of the period is presented as part of the wider trend of accumulating effects of austerity measures following the crisis and the foreign debt solutions that were found to it. While the crucial role of Ceausescu’s personal ideology is not underestimated, the narrative provided in this chapter has a refreshing quality of not isolating socialist regimes and treating them as if they had a different nature than the rest of the world economy.

Preceding the analysis of the four distinct stages that Ban identifies in the post-1989 history of Romania, Chapter Three explicitly deals with the fact that the end of the communist regimes left the region and each of the states within it in a rather open situation, from which a multitude of trajectories could have been sought and brought into existence. It is well known that one of the most powerful tools of rendering critique and opposition futile is presenting the status-quo as the only possibility and a natural consequence of a given set of conditions. Therefore, the effort of this chapter goes into deconstructing this necessity and showing the alternatives both in terms of the empirically existent variety between countries in the region and in terms of the coexisting visions of alternative futures within the various factions of the local elites. The analysis adds to the growing body of literature that looks at the various local outcomes as answers to open-ended questions that were asked by the structural constraints, in which alternatives can be easily imagined, and were actually imagined by different factions of the elite. The following chapters look at the translations, mutations and hybridizations that have happened in the next two decades and their structural conditions of possibility.

Chapter Four, “The first steps of Romanian capitalism (1990-1992)” focuses on the struggles of the new local elite, which was poorly inserted in the Western networks, to come up with an understanding of development that

would make state-led development compatible with political liberalization and a market economy. “Neo-developmentalism” is the hybrid resulted from these efforts, visible in the first two years of post-socialism in its liberal variant. The turning point to a new stage in the paradigm of development that was implemented in Romania and the beginning of Chapter Five (“Populist neo-developmentalism (1992-1996)”) is president Ion Iliescu’s second mandate that started in 1992. This period is characterized as a new version of neo-developmentalism, which takes an explicit stand in favor of subsuming both communist elites’ and “foreign” interests to those of “the people”. The chapter looks both at the content of the imaginaries of development of the elites in this period and at the shifting alliances and fragmentations within it, presenting us with a convincing narrative of the conditions of possibility and success of the implementation of such visions.

The next two chapters start from what the author identifies as an analytical challenge: how come the relative hostility towards neoclassical economy that characterized the first stages of post-socialist capitalism has proved to be in the end a fertile soil for neoliberal thinking and acting? In Chapter Six, “Neoliberal revolution comes to Romania”, Ban builds a convincing argument within a policy translation framework, in which the international political actors have selected and empowered both financially and ideologically those factions that had visions (and interests) convergent with the neoliberal ones and divergent from neo-developmental ones. The coalition between international organizations, Western governments, universities, think tanks and local factions of elite is convincingly suggested and substantiated. What is left unaddressed both theoretically and empirically are the ways in which the neoliberal ideology has gained the support of other class positions, which were not the direct focus of the interest-alignment efforts of these agencies, and whose class interests were not convergent to the implications of the neoliberal vision.

Chapter Seven, “The great recalibration of world neoliberalism” deals with the period after the world crisis of 2008 and takes notice exactly of the lack of a substantive opposition to the package of measures that were visibly hindering both the interests of traditional working class and those of its new faction, represented by the “middle classes” employed in the service sector or in the foreign investment led industrial one. Ban interprets the post-2008 global situation in which not only Keynesian public policies were not introduced, but the neoliberal versions have intensified as an example of the ideology’s great adaptability and capacity to incorporate different realities. The question of the mechanisms of translation that result in adherence to this vision on the part of a variety of class positions arises even more acutely than in the case of the previous chapter.

Cornel Ban's "Dependency and development" is undoubtedly a major addition to social sciences' understanding of the complex social and economic transformations of a particular national context - Romania in this case. It is a lucid and coherent discussion of the shifting position of a national economy within global fluxes of capital and it addresses uncomfortable yet crucial questions of the possibilities open for a certain locality to improve its position. The Polanyian framework the analysis operates within provides the background for capturing and exploring the tensions between opposing tendencies and their dynamic. The Romanian case proves to be a strategic one for the author's agenda of understanding the heterogeneity of visions of development, their world-wide connections and traceable histories, translation from one context to the other and robustness in incorporating indeterminate realities.

Without sacrificing precision or theoretical sophistication, this book has a great potential of having an impact outside the narrow social scientific circles. Cornel Ban's book is a highly timely and welcome addition to the small yet growing body of literature that problematizes the ideological agenda behind anti-communism and pro-neoliberalism. In this sense, it touches upon some of the (still) great taboos of Romanian history and offers alternative readings that are convincing for the critical social scientists but also thought provoking for those who take neoliberal ideology and anti-communist dogma as a description of reality rather than an ideological construction of it. Therefore, the fact that the book is published in Romanian, about Romania and about both the recent and the distant past is in itself important. Placing together in a history of local capitalism the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the interwar period, state socialism and post-1989 experimentations represents for most of the potential readers of this book a highly non-conventional description of history and current events. The very inclusion of the communist period in a continuous history of the country both at an economic and political level, and not as an incomprehensible pause or detour is an atypical (while increasingly frequent) take on the subject. The Preface announces the personal biographical roots of this intellectual project and the analysis that follows does not fail to meet the goals of offering a framework for critique, for seeing alternatives where they are and have been, as well as for thinking out new ones.