

Inventing the Social in Romania, 1848–1914: Networks and Laboratories of Knowledge. By Călin Cotoi. Leiden: Brill, Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 2020. 278 pp.

*Inventing the Social in Romania* sets out to explore what most historical scholarship has overlooked so far, namely the articulation of the “social question” in modern Romania. Placing the analysis on the Eastern “semi-periphery” of European Empires, this work skillfully goes beyond the “colonizer and colonized” dichotomy and the supposition of the unidirectional flow of Western ideas of modernity, proposing instead a so-called “colonial continuum” and a “top-down and bottom-up” approach. Cotoi deploys an impressive interdisciplinary arsenal, working from perspectives that include social economy, the history of medicine, the history of science, and political history. In doing so, he maps out the staging of the “social question” by focusing on the interplay among numerous historical agencies, bringing together the transnational circulation of ideas and groups such as the “narodniks,” the anarchists, the Marxists, and public health specialists. Based on a mixed neo-Foucauldian methodology, the work follows the political and intellectual biography of individuals who “crisscross chapters and themes, and travel inside the book, mirroring, somehow, their real life intellectual, emotional, and geographical trajectories” (p.11). However, non-human agents of change, such as bacteria, are also central to the argument, and Cotoi also looks at statistics, medical and hygiene diplomas, and national exhibitions in order to understand the main pandemic of the nineteenth century: cholera.

Cotoi’s book is organized in three parts and eight chapters and begins with an analysis of the discursive role played by three important Romanian revolutionaries who debated the significance of the “specter of communism” and its alien character for the social realities of the Principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia. One of these voices was the French-trained agronomist Ion Ionescu de la Brad, who, after his involvement in the Tanzimat movement in the Ottoman Empire, became a vocal political figure in the Romanian process of peasant emancipation and land reform. The second and third chapters are built on the “empty signifier of communism” created by the political tensions between 1848 revolutionaries and conservative boyars over the neo-feudal meaning of property and labor. Cotoi then gives voice to what much of the Romanian and Western historiography found difficult to put together: the international networks of exiled Russian narodniks and anarchists. The first to arrive in Romania was the Russian narodnik physician Nicolae Codreanu, a member of the “going to the

people movement,” for which the solution to the “social question” was not only the abolition of private property, but the improvement of rural life through public health and social medicine. After failing to mobilize the local intelligentsia towards social revolution, the work shows how Codreanu’s atheistic funeral was appropriated by liberal elites and Orthodox Church officials to transform him, after his death, into a good Orthodox Romanian. One of his comrades, the “revolutionary globetrotter” Nicolae Russel, who later served as president of the Hawaiian Senate, offers an exemplary illustration of how these figures chose to mobilize locally and, at the same time, to contribute to an “autochtonization and even a nationalization of the social revolution” (p.71). Similarly, Zamfir Arbore, another contrabandist of illegal literature and intimate friend of Michael Bakunin, is identified as the only one who established a connection with the Romanian liberal nation-building elites. He then became the “chief of the municipal statistic service in Bucharest” and a “member of the first sociological research committee that investigated the state of the peasants in Romania” (pp.85–86).

In part two, Cotoi turns to non-human agencies. He argues that cholera was the defining disease of modern Romania, which “became [...] not only deadly but also productive, as midwife of social modernity in the Principalities” (p.235). The narrative highlights the multidirectionality of historical agents, in this case, disease from the East and medical expertise from the West. In chapter four, Cotoi deals with quarantine as a response to the advances of cholera, enforced for the first time in 1831 by the sanitary police led by Iacob Czihac and continued after the unification of the Romanian Principalities by Carol Davila. The fourth wave of cholera brought to the surface a sort of “community based prophylactic system,” put on paper in the sanitary reform treatises authored by Iacob Felix. Distancing himself from “communism,” Felix’s democratic revelation of “health for all” aimed to establish “a post-quarantinst social order” within “almost non-existent state sanitary structures.” The failure of these efforts in the rural regions was no surprise, as the “cameralist science” practiced by Felix did not take into consideration the social and political polarization between urban and rural regions (pp.108–10). Another solution came from Constantin Istrati, a Romanian trained physician who had been acquainted with the anarchist circles. His writings echoed the emerging narratives of racial degeneracy, which increasingly turned into “anti-peasant and orientalisng discourses” as well as “demographically based anti-Semitic arguments” (pp.120–21). Chapter five shifts the discussion to what Cotoi calls, in a Latourian fashion, “the colonization of

society by bacteriological laboratories,” hence following the work carried out by the Vienna trained bacteriologist Victor Babeş. Once established in Romania, Babeş pushed forward a scientifically organized state agenda based on the principle that “individual health could not be separated from the collective one, the health of one social class is conditioned by the other classes and the health of the inferior classes is, socially, the most important” (p.139). Moreover, his conflict with Iacob Felix also shaped the international meetings and medical conferences, still dominated by the debates on the uses and limits of quarantine and other methods of fighting cholera. However, the epidemic was eventually given a final blow by the immunologist Ioan Cantacuzino, after he oversaw a very successful vaccination campaign during the Balkan Wars (1913–1914).

In part three, Cotoi offers a close reading of the socialist “exotic plants” of Romania, further investigating the tensions between Marxism and anarchism, as well as the nationalization of the “social question” through the appearance of the famous poporanist political movement. The first author discussed is Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea, who, after distancing himself from anarchism, ended up applying Marxism to the “social question” through party politics. With several peasant uprisings in the background, Gherea put forward one of the most coherent descriptions of the social issue, known as “neoserfdom,” thus highlighting the feudal structures of the Romanian state and Romanian society. Chapter seven examines the disputes between Gherea and the liberal nationalist leader of poporanism, Constantin Stere. Cotoi notes that both individuals aimed to integrate the peasants into political society either “through the development of industrial, capitalist democracy” or through “rural democracy.” Out of this strange relationship, Cotoi argues that the political representation of the peasantry was eventually transferred to the nation, and so the “bicephalous monster emerged through the violent union between the people and the state” (pp.199–201). Finally, the last chapter highlights the role played by statistics within the nation state as the main instrument with which to address and control social problems. It then turns to the antiquarian obsession of registering “national progress,” which was displayed through the general exhibitions orchestrated by Constantin Istrati. Using the Romanian Association for the Advancement and Spread of Science, Istrati attempted to redefine both the national and the social in a self-Orientalizing way. Unsurprisingly, one year after the surge of patriotism was displayed at the General Exhibition in 1906, the largest and bloodiest peasant rebellion in modern Romania broke out, casting serious doubts on these individuals’ dream of progress and modernity. Cotoi’s

discussion ends with the rural monographic sociology established by Dimitrie Gusti during the interwar period, which was coupled with eugenics and served to “solve” issues of Greater Romania’s ethnic heterogeneity.

In terms of shortcomings, the work gives little to no attention to the debates on the abolition of Roma enslavement, which were crucial to debates about social modernization in the emerging Romanian state. At the same time, the framework following the populist political ascent of Constantin Stere gives the impression of a reformist and mediator role to the fin-de-siècle anarchist movement, which was not the case. During this period, the revolutionary narrative of the left was shaped by, among others, Panait Zosîn and Panait Muşoiu, whose printing activity not only challenged the racist sociology of Ludwig Gumplowicz adopted by Stere, but after establishing new transatlantic networks, continued to shelve the nation-state apparatus. Their eclectic writings reclaimed women’s and workers’ emancipation, outlined the horrors of the peasant revolt, and criticized the European expansion of colonialism. Henceforth, we still know little about the connections between Romanian anarchists and the local freethought movement or about the latter’s promotion of Neo-Malthusianism and eugenic discussions about free love, birth control and sexual education. Similarly, more attention could have been given to Romanian socialist feminists who played a crucial role in both Marxist and anarchist debates on the “social” in late nineteenth-century Romania.

Cotoi’s work stands out from the obsessive presentism of current Romanian historical scholarship, offering instead a much-needed new perspective on the social complexity of modern Romania, which served as a kind of laboratory for both Eastern and Western political and scientific ideas.

Cosmin Koszor-Codrea  
Oxford Brookes University  
cosmin.koszor.codrea-2015@brookes.ac.uk