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Dimitrie Gusti and His School

The old German proverb is: 'Wer den Dichter will verstehen, muss in Dichters Lande gehen'. This applies, in some measure, to scholars as well. And so, to properly understand the Romanian sociologist Dimitrie Gusti, and to grasp the drama of his life, one ought to become acquainted, if only in brief, with the socio-political situation of Romania at the time of his scientific work.

Romania, like other Central and Eastern European countries, for example, Bulgaria, Croatia, Poland, Serbia or Hungary, had to wage an age long struggle for independence and national identity against, respectively, Austrian, Russian or Turkish imperialism. As a consequence, Romania has remained an agricultural and peasant country, characterised by strong class polarisation, a delay in the resolution of the agrarian question and rather backward in cultural and economic development. Everything that used to exert an impact on the stratum of Romanian intelligentsia in which the national emancipation tendencies were clashing with the dreams of greatness of the nation and the belief in the potential power and ethos of the people of folk culture.

Idealization of the rural community, and the rise of myths and even a kind of mythology especially in the case of 'young' nations having no long historical tradition, was becoming a typical phenomenon in those countries. And so, when comparing the intellectual level and output of their scholars with those in the West, it should be borne in mind that external conditions were much less conducive to the formers' work and activities. If they prove equal to, or even surpass their Western counterparts, the greater the credit due to them.

And so, should one bow lowly to Dimitrie Gusti?

He was a philosopher and sociologist whose works, upon invoking interest in the West, were translated into many European languages.

After the conclusion of the Second World War, Gusti rejected attractive offers from outstanding scientific centres in North America in order to join in the work on reconstruction of science in his own country. Elected President of the Romanian Academy of Sciences in 1947, he managed to draw

up a programme for scientific research adjusted to the new socio-political conditions.

In the project concerning sociological research, Gusti replaced the rural communities as the subject of surveys with worker/peasant and industrial settlements. Soon however, he was deprived by the Romanian Communist government of the possibility of continuing his scientific work. His dismissal and imposed silence were determined by doctrinal and political reasons — typical of the Communist system of the time. He was blamed for exalted idealisation of the peasantry for social agrarianism and for supporting royalist rule. He had conducted cross-disciplinary research on rural areas, carried out in more than 620 hamlets by teams of between 10–90 scholars who were specialists in various disciplines of science. Finally, he was charged with having held various state posts, e.g. that of Minister of Culture in the Royal Government of Romania.

The fact that he had then established numerous scientific and social institutions — a sociological museum, a skansen village museum in Bucharest, Foundation of Culture, Folk Culture Club at Czerniowce, and the Romanian Institute of Social Science etc., was of no account to the Communist authorities. Neither was the fact that he held a post as professor at the University of Jassy, and then of Bucharest and had introduced an integrated discipline, new in Romania, and namely sociology — ethics — politics and also innovatively run seminars.

Dimitrie Gusti was a scholar, an organiser of scientific work and a social and peasant activist at the same time. Close to the peasant nationalist movement, to social solidarity and agrarianism¹, he was not free from the tendency to a certain idealism regarding the countryside, or from a touch a populism and dislike of the town. This can be explained by the situation of Romania at that time. It was a peasant country with an enormous rate of illiteracy — 78% in 1899. On the other hand, the cream of the intelligentsia and the bourgeoisie still survived on the myth of the great Romania *Romania mare*, whose materialisation required a fundamental modernisation of the Romanian rural areas making — in Gusti's and in the opinion of other activists — the source and repository of the greatest national values.

Consequently, rejection by Gusti — in spite of his thorough philosophical education² — of the role of a scholar isolated in his ivory tower, was due to the situation of his country, to his personal patriotic feelings and last, but not least, to his temperament as an activist.

¹ Involved in the social movement 'Samanatorizmu' which assembled many outstanding writers, scholars and social leaders.

² He made his studies in Berlin, Leipzig and Paris, and was undoubtedly influenced by K. Bücher, representative of the German Historical School, philosopher and ethnopsychologist, and by French scholars, F. Le Play and E. Durkheim. See O. Badina and O. Neamțu, *Dimitrie Gusti*, Bucarest 1968.

As a philosopher, Dimitrie Gusti was an eclectic of 'synthetic and critical philosophy analysed by detailed sciences'³, but was also an original thinker — especially in the area of rural sociology. Though referring to the work of his predecessors — above all, A. V. Gidei — he created a universal concept of research in the form of paradigm putting a comprehensive construction on the rural reality. In the triad, sociology, ethics and politics, it was to the first of these that Gusti assigned the supreme role, in particular with regard to synthesis, and as an auxiliary, to ethics, in the sphere of aims and moral standing.

Put into the framework of external conditions: national and social objective values, economic, political and legal lead to phenomena and manifestations of a social nature. Giving up the establishment of the relationship between cause and effect, Gusti rests satisfied — in the case of paradigm — with the principal of 'sociological parallelism' with its three kinds singled out by him and he introduces the factor of 'social will' as an expression of the aspirations and goals prevailing in the surveyed local community⁴.

It was mainly the integral monographs that rendered Dimitrie Gusti famous. Handling social reality in harmony with the paradigm mentioned, made it possible, in Gusti's opinion, to avoid the chaotic 'altogetherness', obtain synthetic results and provide an ample source of data for working out the sociology of the nation. 'Sociology shall be either monographical or none at all', maintained Gusti, 'for it is only monographs which grasp reality at the very roots of national existence'⁵.

In this work at the University of Jassy, and then at that of Bucharest, Gusti used to connect sociology, politics and ethics making him a precursor of new branches of sociology: theory and practice of cultural policy, of social pedagogues related to it and of the sub-discipline — 'Action and research'⁶, that rose somewhat later in the United States and of community development nearby. The latter was put into practice by the research teams of the Bucharest school, combing their studies of economic actions, agricultural extension, demonstrations, lectures, organisation of economic centres, road building, grounding of schools etc., and those of socio-cultural and medical nature.

³ Badina op.cit., p. 12.

⁴ See: Z. T. Wierzbicki, *Dimitrie Gusti, Socjolog niepodległej Rumunii (Sociologist of Independent Romania)*, Toruń 1991, p. 53 and next.

⁵ D. Gusti, *La monographie et l'action monographique en Roumanie*. Conférences données à L'Université de Paris, Paris 1937; D. Gusti. Preface for: H. H. Stahl, *Nerej, un village d'une région archaïque*, vol. 1, Bucarest 1939, p.viii and next; M. Cernea, *Rural Community Studies in Romania* [in:] J. L. Durand-Drouhin, L.M. Szwengrub, I. Mihailescu, *Rural Community Studies in Europe*, Pergamon Press, Oxford 1981, pp. 191-254.

⁶ They had, however, different points of departure: Gusti did not programme himself to those changes of the mechanism which he had to analyse.

Generally speaking, The School can be characterised as follows:

1. It was that of an empirical and militant sociology which regarded as the source of knowledge, the cross-disciplinary research on the rural Romanian areas.

2. The main form of presentation of research findings was an integral technographic monograph based not only on routine and committed observation, interviews and questionnaire surveys and expert opinion, but also on auxiliary methods and techniques applied in other branches of science—statistics, psychology, physical anthropology, medicine, agriculture and forestry, climatology, geography, material culture etc.

3. Gusti's monographic method can be recognised as a variety of the approach specific of cultural anthropology, put into ethnographical, comparative and historical terms.

4. The new elements of the Schools's rural sociology were as follows: the cross disciplinary character of the research as such, and the recapitulation of its findings; combining the said elements with active social implications — community development, and, to some extent, action and research. No particular weight was being attached to functional interpretation of the respective phenomena of culture grasped as an entity.

5. Examination and classification of phenomena, its analysis, and interpretation were carried out in accordance with an established paradigm which pretended to the rank of a universal theory of social reality — with consideration therein — of the principle of 'psycho-physical parallelism' and specifically conceived 'voluntarism'. Having introduced the notion of environment (four frameworks of social reality) Gusti, in a certain sense, came close to the standpoint of neoecology.

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The method of cross disciplinary research was fruitful from a methodical point of view, but not easy to apply in the drawing up of synthetic conclusions what has turned out in the case of the monograph on the village of Nerej, by H.H. Stahl, an eminent disciple of Gusti ⁷.

Irrespective of the, perhaps, insufficient skill in employment of Gusti's paradigm — as admitted by Stahl — the method contributed, but in a slight degree, to:

1. Determination of mutual relationship between the frameworks, external conditions and social phenomena and processes.

2. Synthetic elaboration of the results and final conclusions.

3. Surmounting of the difficulties encountered in defining the role of sociologists in utilisation of the cross-disciplinary research findings and their interpretation in terms of sociology.

⁷ H. H. Stahl, *Nerej...*, op.cit., H. H. Stahl, *Technica monografici sociologice*, Bucarest 1934, pp. 174–179.

4. Determination in the paradigm of social will that is not easy or liable to collide with the pragmatic character of the research.

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A comparison is interesting between the works of the American sociologist R. Redfield⁸ and those of Gusti. Both of them were advocates of integral monograph, both were of the opinion that the type of monograph required a different approach than the studies of respective problems. Both found that research on local communities are of significance to society at large. However, whereas Gusti thought he had created one universal concept and method of sociological research, Redfield's view was that there did not exist one concept of integral community studies. He was for pluralism of research concepts, possibly alongside continuum. He thought they were connected with some central marshalling value, structural and functional, of ecological space, cultural motivation etc. Gusti's appeal to leave the 'ivory tower' and enter reality, however annoying at times, revealed the inner connections therein and simultaneously mapped out the only road which may be defined as 'extreme monographism'. That can hardly be recognised as valid, even if the paradigm adopted as the basis of the research. Moreover, irrespective of its notable didactic merits, it did not make an efficient instrument for structure of the research findings and their synthesis. The paradigm was rather a pattern orientating and marshalling research course and proceedings, classifying facts, than a theory.

What is also likely to raise doubts is the practical, utilitarian attitude manifest in the research of the Bucharest School. Gusti, and even more so his Marxist adversaries, were wrong in expecting science to be of direct assistance and use in prompt resolution of the practical problems of life. This was aptly expressed by Władysław Grabski, founder of Polish rural sociology, who said that science does not want to seek justification of its existence in the argument that is necessary to activists. Science is necessary to the human spirit in pursuit of the truth.

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As has already been stated, after the year 1948, Dimitrie Gusti disappeared from the scientific scene of Romania, to the great detriment of the social sciences of the country. He had become a *persona non grata*. Publication of his works was banned, brutally criticised and he was forced to remain silent, like his nearest followers — unless they managed to change their qualifications and views early enough. Gusti retreated to privacy. In strained circumstances, he spent his time perfecting concepts and writing

⁸ R. Redfield, *The Little Community. View Points for the Study of a Human Whole*, Chicago 1955; R. Redfield, *Tepoztlán, A Mexican Village*, Chicago 1930; R. Redfield, *Chan Kom, A Maya Village*, Washington 1934.

his memoirs: *Autosociologia unei vieți*. Nevertheless, he could very well have said: 'non omnis moriar'. In the sixties he was, posthumously, slowly regaining favour in the eyes of the ruling elite and, what is more important, of Romanian sociology. Today, no one denies that Dimitrie Gusti was the author of daring concepts and a highlight in the development of science in independent Romania.

