

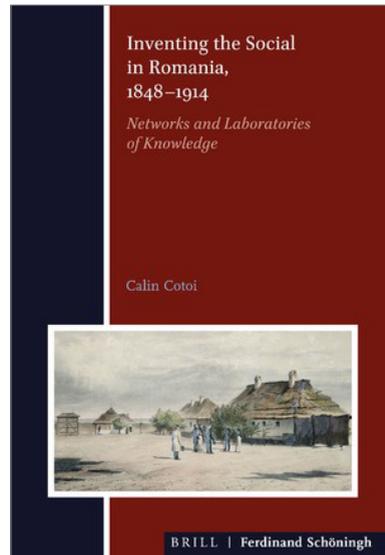
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Social Modernity in the Borderlands: Epidemics, Revolutionary Politics and Scientific Representations

Review of:

Călin Cotoi, *Inventing the Social in Romania, 1848–1914. Networks and Laboratories of Knowledge*, Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh/Brill, 2020.

In the last few years, the complex history of the early Romanian socialist movement has witnessed new, emerging interests. This includes the rediscovery and reassessment of some of its minor expressions, generally dismissed as irrelevant or overlooked by most researchers. One of the reasons behind this oversight was the essentialist interpretation of other socialist currents—anarchism, social-democracy, populism, syndicalism, etc.—and of their overall historical significance, put forward before 1989. These socialist tendencies were understood as mere precursors to the communist party, imperfect stages of a linear development that culminated with its coming into power. This rudimentary understanding was not, however, critically examined after 1989, as one might expect. Instead, the strong anti-communist reaction that followed fuelled a renewed disdain for these histories, generally interpreted through the same narrow, reductive lens.



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Călin Cotoi's book proposes a radically different approach, as it acknowledges, first and foremost, the important role played by various revolutionaries and *fin-de-siècle* socialists in shaping the local modernization landscape and vocabulary. In fact, it is precisely the interest for the "life of some obscure social-revolutionaries, anarchists, physicians, public health specialists and reformers" (1) that subsequently grew into a wider research exploring the emergence of social modernity at the borderlands of Europe, in Romania. The complicated life (and political) trajectories of these anarchists and revolutionaries, cutting across various national, professional and ideological borders, are illustrative for the ways in which different projects were adapted to the local context. They reveal, as Călin Cotoi points out, the fragmentary, precarious and conflicting process of modernization.

Following different local articulations of the "social"—a term that emerged at a time when the first modernization plans were being formulated—Călin Cotoi succeeds in drawing a broad picture of its complicated historical and ideological trajectory. As a "hybrid artefact" (4), the social was staged both as a problem to be solved through hygienic and social reforms, and as a totalizing project, a representation of progress put together by experts and reformers. This mobile and multifaceted characteristic makes it an elusive object of study, and, at the same time, a subtle and complex methodological "fishing net, bringing to light otherwise marginal fragments of life and thought, both from a national and transnational perspective" (4).

In order to capture all these fragments in a meaningful and comprehensive way, the study deploys a multitude of interpretational strategies and lenses: from biographies and intellectual history to political history and the history of medicine, as well as social economy. It is a mixed and "interstitial" approach, matching the hybridity of emergent modernity at the periphery of Europe. These were "messy" and uneven territories, caught in between empires and various modernization projects, conversing and competing from within and from without.

There are two key components that shaped the local "invention of the social" in Cotoi's opinion. First, the 1830s cholera epidemic, which subsequently spread to Western Europe, as the old imperial quarantine posts, from the Carpathians to the Adriatic, proved inefficient. Cholera, in turn, opened the Danubian Principalities to modernizing interventions. Medical and social experts, physicians and scientists rushed in and tried to introduce new sanitary models, statistics and public hygiene notions. Secondly, it was the "empty sign of communism," or the spectre of social revolution, that structured the discursive field around modernization, opening up a hybrid discursive space, where conflicting and "heterogeneous fragments of modernity" (10) could be simultaneously played out and explored.

The book has three parts and is organized chronologically and thematically. Each part focuses on one modernization thread, while also following the intellectual, political and life trajectories of some of its representative characters.

The opening chapter is dedicated to the 1848 revolutionaries and their attempts to translate the “social question” into the local political vocabulary. Sympathetic to radical ideas and familiarized with European political and intellectual *milieus*, Romanian revolutionaries seemed however reluctant to adopt socialist theories when it came to the local context. They recognized communism as a somewhat inevitable (and necessary) historical horizon. Nevertheless, they denied its adaptation to local realities. Ion Ionescu de la Brad, a proponent of extensive land reforms, or Alecu Golescu, one of the revolutionaries exiled in Paris, tried to occupy a mediating position between the conservative boyars and the peasants, using the “empty sign of communism”—or the “threat” of social revolution—as a discursive device. This allowed them to articulate revolutionary politics (and rhetoric) with the promise of social progress and “national” reconciliation. They practiced, as Cotoi suggestively notes, a sort of “disembodied local socialism” (196), never fully embracing it as such, never unambiguously repudiating it either. While they facilitated the emergence of a political space where social modernity could be represented and discussed, the 1848 revolutionaries also contributed to the “taming” of the social, to its co-option into nation-building projects that the liberal elites subsequently became an important part of. This paradoxical position is illustrated by C. A. Rosetti’s political and life trajectory, presented at the end of the first chapter. A prominent figure in the revolutionary movement and, later, an important liberal politician, he “remained, nevertheless, loyal to the Romantic, essentialized notion of Revolution” (41) and an eccentric figure. During the 1870s Rosetti became increasingly sympathetic to socialist ideas. As a minister, he even intervened to protect Nicolae Codreanu and Zamfir Arbure—two Bessarabian anarchists—from the Russian secret police. The episode is recounted in the following chapter, dedicated to the exiled revolutionaries from Russia.

During the 1870s, many anarchists and narodniks, who were fleeing the repression against the revolutionary movement, passed through Romania on their way to Western Europe. Some of them—such as Nicolae Codreanu, Zamfir Arbure or Nicolae Russel—found asylum in the country and continued their political activities. Romania soon became an important passage point for the smuggling of subversive literature into Russia, and part of a wider, transnational network, that linked revolutionaries from all over Europe. Anarchists, however, occupied a precarious, almost “uninhabitable political position” (70), caught between their anti-authoritarian ideals and a political context almost entirely shaped by the national and state-building processes. They also had to face growing hostility from the local political elites, although their anti-imperialist and revolutionary rhetoric was not completely devoid of certain national undertones, especially in Arbure’s and Codreanu’s case. The elites’ suspicion against the “nihilists” seemed stronger than their shared aversion towards tsarist Russia. Trying to “embody the left wing of social progress, and re-shape the empty slot of communism” (44) was a difficult task in a country where social modernity was lacking, and where the “social question” was almost entirely unknown, as Codreanu noted.

On the other hand, while rather isolated, Codreanu, Arbure and Russel were instrumental in popularizing socialist and scientific literature, mainly among medical students. They played an important role in the emergence of numerous study circles and publishing collectives in cities like Iassy and Bucharest. These groups soon morphed into a wider, cultural and political movement, explicitly embracing socialist ideals and a rebellious outlook, aimed at challenging dominant discourses. The early socialist movement was thus shaped by the anarchists' anti-authoritarian views, by their reluctance towards bourgeois politics and an assiduous devotion to science and "the people."

All in all, Cotoi's analysis of the complex role played by narodniks and anarchists in the emergence "of a progressive local social" (89) is compelling. Although their efforts to define the social from a revolutionary and anarchist point of view eventually failed, their complicated, yet transformative dialogues with scientists, students, physicians and political elites "helped shape the epistemic framework for subsequent projects of (...) social modernization, especially of social and public health, but also of social economy, statistics, ethnography and demography" (89).

There is, however, one arguable aspect in Cotoi's presentation, namely his assertion that the wave of arrests and expulsions of anarchists started in 1881 put an abrupt end to their influence during this period in Romania. "[A]narchism," he notes, "disappeared through the absorption of its remaining members into the 'reformatory nebula' of the *fin-de-siècle*, which continued the line of popularization of science—especially natural sciences, physics, chemistry, biology, Darwinism and theories of evolution" (79). Codreanu's tragic death in 1878, Russel's expulsion and Arbure's quasi-withdrawal from political activity did not mean, however, the end of anarchism in Romania, as the author suggests. During the 1880s and 1890s, for instance, local groups and individuals inspired by the "anarchist idea" continued to translate and circulate anarchist literature, to publish socialist journals, and to reorganize. They also maintained close ties with other revolutionaries in Europe. Whereas some of the former self-declared anarchists later embraced Marxism and social-democracy, anti-authoritarian ideas and practices did not just vanish. For example, Panait Mușoiu's five decades-long publishing and militant activity grew precisely from this *fin-de-siècle* political and cultural atmosphere, deeply infused with revolutionary and anarchist ideas.

The second part follows the medical and institutional "staging of the social," introducing cholera, a non-human historical agent instrumental, argues Cotoi, in the creation of Romania as a modern state. The emergence of a modern administrative system in the Danubian Principalities is linked to the various strategies put in place in order to contain the cholera outbreaks of the 1830s. The "modernization wave" (14) that followed radically transformed the local institutional landscape. Experts, scientists and physicians from France, the Habsburg Empire and Russia travelled to the "borderlands," and articulated the "social" through scientific, administrative and sanitary interventions. One of the first steps in this

direction was the adoption of new and more complex sanitary practices, looking beyond the (old and inefficient) quarantinist model. That meant first and foremost, notes Cotoi, the production of knowledge, expertise and physicians at a national level. One of the main characters presented in this part, Carol Davila, a French-born physician, worked to establish a legitimate national-sanitary professional body, connected to the European knowledge networks and institutions. At the same time, Felix Iacob, a physician born in the Habsburg Empire, and “Davila’s right-hand man” (14), proposed the creation of a public health system for all. In his view, sanitary measures could not be detached from social conditions and especially from material inequalities, echoing in a sense Nicolae Codreanu’s attempts to answer the social question through social medicine. Felix Iacob advocated for the creation of a democratic and inclusive medical system, in a bid to bridge the differences between the rural and urban population, between the destitute peasants and the wealthy elites. His failure to bring together, into a unified sanitary and national body, the two “divergent” worlds opened up a new discursive space where rural “backwardness” and poverty was no longer interpreted as a public health or social issue, but framed as “degeneracy” or “racial” corruption. This discursive shift also reflected the physicians’ resentment over the perceived failure of democratized medicine. At the same time, Constantin Istrati, a leading physician of the time, contrasted the peasants’ situation with the vitality of “foreign elements,” especially Jewish people, infusing “the social question” with anti-semitic and xenophobic tropes.

The “health for all” democratic model was soon to be replaced by a new medical and epidemiological framework, advocated by Vienna trained bacteriologist Victor Babeș. He proposed the reorientation of medicine around the “laboratory” and the “hard” science of microorganisms, thus separating medical interventions from social reforms and social sciences. This scientific reform also marked the emergence of an increasingly autonomous social space, related to, yet different from the public health and hygienic domains. At the turn of the century, the promise of progress through social revolution was replaced by the professionalization of medicine, and by the emergence of a new “national environment,” managed by state administrators and public health specialists.

In part three, Cotoi discusses two *fin-de-siècle* reframings of the “empty sign of communism” and the correspondent “nationalization” of the social question—one from a Marxist perspective, represented by Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea, a social and literary critic who became the main proponent of Marxism and social-democracy of the period; and the other proposed by Constantin Stere, who advanced the idea of *poporanism*, a form of rural democracy mediated (and tutored) by the nation-state. Both had been part of the revolutionary movement in Russia and had a narodnik background. Populism (or “narodnicism”) provided the general framework for their attempts to theorize the relation between the state, people, nation and modernization. In a sense, this allowed them to better navigate the contradictions inherent to their position, as they faced the same dilemma as

anarchists. How can one work towards social emancipation and embrace revolutionary politics, in a country where the “social question” is almost undistinguishable from the “peasant question,” understood within a state and nation-building framework? Populism—with its idealization of the peasant commune and its alternative understanding of progress as the possibility of a non-capitalist modernization of society—offered them the capacity to “cope” with different (and hybrid) interpretations of social modernity, better adapted to the local context and political vocabulary. The theoretical debate between Marxists and “poporacists” was inconclusive. Nevertheless, its importance, argues Cotoi, “resided in the imagining of a Romanian national idea from within socialism” (202), as both Gherea and Stere helped create “a conceptual vocabulary that accommodated the articulation of the social and the national” (203).

The last chapter shows how scientific strategies and models—statistics, national exhibitions, collections, representation—were central to the state and nation-building processes as modernizing projects. The land and the people—the nation—became “real” through displays, inventories and exhibitions, attempting to represent the multiplicity of the “social.”

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the national idea had largely replaced the “empty sign of communism,” the discursive device that had initially structured the emergence of the “social.” The social question was tamed through various strategies, and integrated—through representation and “scientifically legitimized mechanisms for recording and creating reality” (241)—into the nation-state project. The Romanian General Exhibition, held in 1906 and organized by Constantin Istrati, tried to highlight the progress made by Romania, representing it as a modern and industrious European nation. In anticipation of the exhibition, Constantin Istrati published a series of texts in which he tried to define national identity. One of the main aims of the exhibition was precisely to define „Romanianness”—culturally, ethnically, historically—by collecting, recording, organizing and displaying the available data and national artefacts. Nation, statehood and science were, thus, brought together, as parts of a coherent and successful modernizing project. A few months later „the largest and bloodiest peasant rebellion of modern Romania broke out” (224). This uprising disproved the triumphant image projected by the exhibition and „breached for a moment the mechanisms of national representation” (226). It signalled once again the recurring crisis of representation at the core of modernization and „the incapacity of the nation-building elites to enlist the largest part of the population in the frameworks of national progress.” (165). In fact, as Călin Cotoi convincingly argues, the local process of modernization could be seen as a series of successive failures, stemming primarily from the failure to reconcile, within a state and nation-building framework, the deep contradictions traversing a fragmented and unequal social reality. It brought to light the “ambiguous success” of trying to “tame” the social question through the promise of progress, political representation, national unity, science, etc., while employing the idea of social revolution as a mere “empty signifier.”

Finally, Călin Cotoi's well-documented and nuanced analysis succeeds in offering an in-depth and compelling overview of the emergence of social modernity in Romania, a complex process bringing together revolutionaries, scientists, adventurers, political figures, popular uprisings and transnational knowledge networks, but also non-human agents, such as bacteria, viruses or epidemics. At first, this multiplicity, also reflected in the way the "story" is delivered, might seem disconcerting. There is no dominant narrative, no privileged standpoint, only a collection of different stories and threads, connected by intersecting life trajectories, events and recurrent themes. The "social" and its invention appear as non-linear, dynamic processes, or, in Proudhon's terms, "resultants," collective unities defined by the multiple elements and forces that gave them life, rather than by a common "origin" or by a structuring principle. In this sense, Cotoi's book is an excellent example of what an anarchist approach to (or understanding of) history might look like.

Another important aspect is the emphasis on the role played by anarchists in shaping the modern political and cultural landscape. There are only few studies dedicated to anarchist figures and the circulation of anti-authoritarian texts and ideas in Romania. In their majority, these studies tend to be rather limited in scope, attempting mainly to retrieve and document these marginal figures and "traces," without engaging in broader analysis. Inspired by Benedict Anderson's work on *fin-de-siècle* anti-colonial movements and transnational anarchist networks, Călin Cotoi tries to bring to light the life and political trajectories of three exiled anarchists, also uncovering the complex network of personal and ideological connections that they were a part of, as well as the different intellectual, political and social landscapes that they travelled through. Very well documented, these historical recuperations go beyond the simple recounting of significant biographical facts—they shed a new (and somewhat unexpected) light on familiar historical, political or cultural territories, thus opening up a multitude of new possibilities for inquiry and interpretation.

Cotoi's book is important not only for its methodological, historical or literary merits, but also because it invites (and inspires) further research in the broader direction of anarchist studies, a research domain until recently overlooked in Romania.

All in all, *Inventing the Social* is an essential text for anyone who wants to understand the emergence of social modernity in Romania and its historical, intellectual and political nuances, as well as an excellently written book in which academic arguments, historical accounts and theoretical insights are skilfully presented and compellingly delivered.