

## BOOK REVIEW

***Plante exotice. Teoria și practica marxiștilor români***  
***(Exotic plants. The Theory and Practice of the Romanian Marxists)***

**by Alex Cistelean and Andrei State (eds.).**

**Cluj-Napoca: Tact Publishing House, 2015, 357 pages.**

***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**

**ÁGNES GAGYI<sup>1</sup>**

In 2015, two books appeared at Romanian publishing house Tact that engage with the history of 20th century Romanian Marxist thought: an edited volume on the theory and practice of Romanian Marxist theorists, coordinated by Alex Cistelean and Andrei State, and a book on the historical sociology of Henri H. Stahl by Ștefan Guga. In the local context, the project of intellectual engagement with Romanian Marxist thought is not a mere analytical effort. The exercise of the authors, as well as that of the publisher, is also a performative gesture aiming to disrupt what they see as a dominant post-1989 taken-for-granted in the social sciences: relating to Marxism through the condemnation of communism. It is a constitutive gesture to simultaneously establish intellectual predecessors and open up a debate on local applications of Marxist social theory within the small but growing intellectual new left in Romania.

I join the row of the books' commentators with a specific aim: to broaden the debate on the last aspect, which I see as a major stake in both books, yet tends to remain implicit both in the books' argumentation and in their reception. It is the stake of recuperating local Marxist thought not only as intellectual heritage or source of legitimation for the contemporary left, but as part of a broader effort to understand the region's development in terms of the global history of capitalism, an effort that also implies an engagement with the history of local social thought in terms of the epistemic conditions of such an understanding. The tension between the formally declared aim of a better, non-ideological description, and the performative gesture to recuperate local Marxist heritage invited comments that addressed either one or the other dimension.

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One of the strongest debates within leftist circles around the volume on Romanian Marxist thought addressed the lack of women authors and the issue of gender in general in the book, reacting to what was perceived as the book's intention to represent an agenda within the contemporary field. Călin Cotoi's review (Cotoi, 2015) pointed out that while Guga focuses on reconstructing Stahl's Marxist thought as different from the agenda of the Gusti School, the School's relation to contemporary Marxism and Stahl's own adherence to the School cannot be edited out from the understanding of Stahl's intellectual biography. This comment reacted primarily to the call for a better intellectual history, and not to the agenda of reconstructing the internal logic of Stahl's historical sociology as part of an intellectual effort for which Stahl's own work (and its fate) is a relevant input. In my understanding it is the latter that drives Guga's emphasis on differentiating between the approaches of Stahl and the Gusti School.

Beyond the above two aims, considering the heritage of local Marxist thought from the perspective of a contemporary Marxist understanding of the region has also been an aim declared by authors. At the Bucharest launch of the book, Florin Poenaru claimed that the main aim of the edited volume was not a history of ideas, but to show that a Marxist understanding of local society is possible, and to ask what it takes to think about the region as part of global capitalism. Ștefan Guga, both in his book and his chapter in the edited volume provides summaries of Stahl's historical sociology as an exemplary program for what local sociology could do.

As this third type of agenda remains largely implicit throughout the books, an engagement with it implies artificial reconstruction of a space of debate, based on the books as a whole, going beyond programmatic paragraphs that speak to this direction. In sticking to one level of argumentation from among the complex levels of arguments addressed at multiple audiences within the books, my comments will follow a line of coherence that is an artefact from the perspective of the books' actual structure. In that respect, the present commentary is less of a review of the books as they are, and more of a constructive effort for the solidification of the debate on a territory to which, in my view, both books contribute significantly.

### **Exotic Plants**

In their preface to the edited volume on Romanian Marxist theorists, Alex Cistelean and Andrei State set the scene for what I understand as the performative gesture of the book. They identify a paradox in the reception of Marxism in Romania: a communist period lacking Marxism, and a post-communist period when communism is analysed without Marxism, compounding the continued exclusion of Marxist theory from social analysis. The volume, they say, is to fill this

void, and demonstrate the existence of a heritage of veritable local Marxist theory. It is also to demonstrate the international integration of local Marxist theory, in contrast to its local marginalization. The argument of the preface, thus, focuses on the performative stake of the volume's gesture: to bring back Marxism into present discussions.

If one is looking for methodological cues in the preface, some indications are woven between the arguments: the recuperation of Marxist theorists will involve the analysis of the relationship between their theory and their practice, and of their position within contemporary international debates. In the formal sequence of the argument, that methodological option follows from the logic of the performative effort – it will do what is necessary in order to make Marxism present, given the conditions that make it invisible in the contemporary field. The reader may suspect that the simultaneous attention to theory and practice or to national and international context may follow not only from strategic necessities in contemporary discursive struggles, but also from the internal logic of a Marxist methodology. Some remarks also suggest a positioning of the editors regarding method in historical research (e.g. delimitation from a decontextualized, factualist, moral approach in posthumous analyses of the communist period, see Cistelean and State, 2015:5-6). Such traces, however, remain implicit. The preface does not provide an explicit argumentation about the book's methodological and theoretical framework, as it would be defined from its own perspective, and not from the perspective of approaches in which Marxism is invisible. It does not speak about how the volume conceives of writing intellectual biography from a Marxist perspective, or of the stakes of the theoretical debates it describes. Certainly, such a conceptualization cannot be expected from a volume that primarily seeks to provide material for beginning such debates. In the present form of the preface, however, the focus on approaches that exclude Marxist perspectives seems to eclipse from discussion the book's own perspective on its own project.

As I see it, this effect follows not merely from the choice of editors to leave key questions unanswered in the preface, but is also inherent to the nature of the volume's effort to both speak and create the space for its speech. In what follows, I trace how the chapters' own analytical agendas communicate with each other from the perspective of a potential debate over Marxist analyses of local society, rather than evaluate the individual contributions.

The chapters by Andrei State and Costi Rogozanu keep closest to the volume's agenda in terms of the performative aim explicitly expressed in the introduction. State speaks about Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea, the author whose heritage suffered the least, as his work on neoserfdom stood at the centre of cross-ideological debates at the beginning of the century (Dobrogeanu-Gherea, 1920). Thus, State chooses simply to articulate the main threads in Gherea's work, place

them in the context of corresponding claims by Marx, Brenner or Chirot, and concludes that Gherea's work is a durable local contribution to Marxist sociology. Rogozanu speaks about a more problematic figure, Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu. Sentenced to death and killed in a show trial in 1954 under Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, and rehabilitated in 1968 by Ceaușescu, Pătrășcanu's biography remained a much discussed issue after 1989. Pătrășcanu is a classic case of the effect of effacement through communist and post-communist memory – as Rogozanu puts it, through his trial, his rehabilitation, and his post-1989 memory, the content of Pătrășcanu's work, too, was executed. To recuperate Pătrășcanu's work from under the multiple layers of political evaluations of his biography, Rogozanu discusses his books, journalism, speeches, and offers comparative biographical excerpts. The chapter provides not only an insight into Pătrășcanu's work, but also a sociological commentary on his reception, adding up to a historical essay on what it takes for a communist biography to be constituted in the second half of the 20th century in Romania.

In their co-authored chapter, Dan Cîrjan and Adrian Grama, writing about social democratic thinkers and politicians Șerban Voinea and Lotar Rădăceanu, propose a program that goes beyond the question of effacement in the recuperation of Marxist intellectual heritage. They advance a specific agenda for interpreting social democratic political thought, with implications to both the understanding of interwar social democracy, and to the methodological and political self-understanding of the interpreter. They forward the term "strategic Marxism" for the period's political thought, deeply ingrained in political strategy and practice. The key contribution of such a strategic practice of Marxism, they claim, is to be sought not so much in the theoretical context, but in its structuring effect of the contemporary workers' movement. Cîrjan and Grama maintain that the contribution of this type of Marxist thought is impossible to retrieve through an intellectual history of Marxism, detached from the social history of socialist parties, the workers' movement, and its political culture at the time. Without due attention to aspects of social history such as the institutionalization of Marxism in the social practice of the workers' movement, the transformations of waged work in the era, or the diversity of local workers' traditions, the history of Romanian Marxism risks to fall into the trap of idealism, reducing the history of local Marxism to a timeless dialogue between a handful of men – i.e. those addressed in the chapters of the volume.

This claim of the authors is a strong proposal not only for the method of historical recuperation, but also for a contemporary understanding of what a Marxist standpoint would be. Regarding the latter, the article's agenda is bound by the paradox that the contemporary position of the authors does not have the sort of contextual rootedness in an on-going social struggle which such a Marxist

thought rooted in praxis would require. That paradox, a general problem of contemporary social science taking a left position, is worth mentioning here because it points to the spot where the authors' preoccupation with their analytical agenda intersects with question of the performative agenda of the book in its contemporary context.

Îrjan and Grama comply with their own analytical agenda as they provide a reconstitution of the political and social context of Voinea and Rădăceanu's arguments. However, what they actually find is that the strategic thought of the two remains uninformed by a sociological knowledge of the masses they address, and leads to a theoretically overcomplicated and politically ascetic gesture that could be summarized as calling the workers' movement to defend capitalists from the workers themselves (in the conviction that only the development of capitalist democracy could produce the necessary strength and maturity of the workers' movement). Îrjan and Grama evaluate that stance as mistaken: asociological, productivist and orientalist. They conclude that politically, Voinea and Rădăceanu cannot be recuperated. What remains implicit is the ground of that political and theoretical evaluation. While in certain academic and activist circles, productivism and orientalism are notions of criticism, the article does not specify which thread of criticism the authors align with, or which sections of audience they address by quoting that criticism as self-evident. Compared to the various audiences addressed in other parts of the volume, that is a specific targeting which raises the question of the contemporary connection between analysis and the normative viewpoint of a social struggle.

Within the book, that question marks out a space where the substantive debate on the main stakes of a Marxist understanding of local social development could happen. Substantively, all authors discussed deal with the questions of how local development relates to paradigmatic descriptions of capitalist modernization, as well as the political consequences of that relationship. Modifications of Marxist paradigms of development from the perspective of non-core social experience, as well as the political and epistemic conditions of such modifications, are issues of key importance within that space of debate. Why local social democrats were asociological, productivist or orientalist are questions at the root of that problematic, regarding Romania's historical position within capitalist development, and the conditions of epistemic and political responses to it. While Îrjan and Grama rightly argue for the importance of social historical contextualization of social democratic thought, when they move beyond analysis to evaluate that thought from the perspective of a Marxist view on local history and theory, they enter a ground that cannot but be set by an explicit re-actualization of that debate. It is the ground of a collective effort that gives a written text its social meaning – just as Îrjan and Grama argue in their claims against reductive intellectual history.

The chapters by Florin Poenaru and Alex Cistelean make the book's claim to recuperate effaced Marxist thought into their method of interpreting intellectual biographies. Poenaru writes about Miron Constantinescu, a communist intellectual who occupied key political positions after 1944, was marginalized from political positions to academic ones after 1957 due to clashes with Gheorghiu-Dej, and rehabilitated in 1968 by Ceaușescu, regaining some political positions. Regarding the question of recuperating Constantinescu's intellectual heritage, Poenaru proposes a specific perspective. He claims that Constantinescu's social thought came to be ignored not because of its content or because of his political adherence to the communist party. Rather, says Poenaru, it was the central principle of his thought that made it essentially inconceivable for later approaches which did not share that principle: the idea that sociology is a tool of cognition and of social transformation at the same time. As such, sociology is conceived as standing at the centre of class struggle, not only in the sense of a tool of empirical cognition and expert governance in the service of the party, but also in the philosophical sense of a Leninist or Althusserian "avant-garde of the avant-garde", where the conceptualization of class struggle in the light of socialist political theory is conceived as prior to revolutionary subjectivation (Poenaru, 2015: 259).

Poenaru claims that the incoherence between Constantinescu's theoretical sociology, and the empirical expert work carried out under his leadership in the service of the apparatus lies in the contradiction between that principle of sociological avant-garde and the fact that the communist party Constantinescu adhered to as the manifestation of revolutionary subjectivation was, in fact, governing not a socialist revolution, but an authoritarian integration into the capitalist world. Poenaru points out that while in Constantinescu's theory class struggle remains a central concept, the issue of class struggle is eliminated from empirical research, and transformed into a statistical measurement of social stratification based on profession, which was in line with the Stalinist dogma of no class conflict in socialism, and also similar to the empirism of American sociology of the 1960s and 1970s. Poenaru sees that contradiction as a specific consequence of the tight party adherence of Romanian sociology under Constantinescu's academic leadership, which did not allow for critical stances similar to contemporary class-based critiques of really existing socialism in Yugoslavia, Poland or Hungary.

Poenaru's argument has a certain dialectical neatness, as his effort to recuperate Constantinescu's intellectual views from being obliterated and replaced by the memory of political opportunism only culminates in the claim that Constantinescu's choices were in fact guided by a solid Leninist type of Marxist theory, yet this was completely inadequate to the reality of actual capitalist integration. Poenaru connects that paradox in Constantinescu's biography to the general tragedy of faithful communists in really existing socialisms. However, this

explanation seems to be based solely on the contradiction between the content of a Marxist theory and a non-Marxist historical reality. That contradiction does not explain the more immediate details of the historical conditions of Constantinescu's sociology – for example, the difference between the historical conditions of the legitimating function of stratification sociology in Romania, and the use of the same methods for a dissident argumentation in Poland or Hungary. In Poenaru's account, the divergence between theoretical Marxism and American-type empiricism in subservience to the party correspond to the contradiction between the rhetoric of socialist ideology and the historical truth of capitalist adherence. Yet, both the usage of empiricist methods and the routes towards capitalist integration seem to provide a more complex picture in the region, a picture that disturbs the basic contradiction in the dialectical explanation Poenaru offers. Beyond the rhetorical strength of the argument for the explanative power of theory in Constantinescu's case seems to lie an implicit potential that the article also touches upon: that of a substantial debate on the nature of capitalist integration and institutional-epistemic conditions of intellectual reflection in the region's socialist history.

Writing on Pavel Câmpeanu, Alex Cistelean sees the worth of Câmpeanu's contribution to Marxist theory in his elegant and concise dialectical thought in historical analysis. From the perspective of that contribution, Cistelean is interested in Câmpeanu's trilogy on the Stalinist social order (Casals, 1980; Câmpeanu, 1986, 1988, 1990), and does not deal with his work as a sociologist of mass communication as a director of the Office of Studies and Polls of the National Radio and Television.

In a nutshell, Câmpeanu's trilogy on Stalinism follows the logic of a desynchronization within what, in a stagist conception of Marxist theory of history, should be successive stages in historical development. Câmpeanu starts from the assumption that in the second half of the 19th century the imperialist phase of capitalism disturbs normal historical development, bringing about a necessity for revolution in regions which have not reached yet the full development of a bourgeois society. The October Revolution turns the historical logic of that situation of tension upside down: it imposes relations of production ahead of their time (socialist) upon forces of production behind their time (feudal-agrarian). Stalinism emerges as the consequence of the contradiction within that situation: the structural incoherence of post-revolutionary social structure will invite the constant intervention of a power centre for the sake of stabilization. The crisis of Stalinism follows from the effects of that contradiction: it cannot be solved by reforms within the system, as it is the effect of objective conditions of historical development overcoming subjective effort.

Cistelean praises Câmpeanu's trilogy as an exemplary case of Marxist dialectical thought, which conceives of history as a dynamic and structured totality, where the logic of change is driven by the inherent tension between its

elements. There seems to be a point where Cistelean's understanding of Câmpeanu's work seems to coincide with his own historical-methodological agenda and understanding of Stalinism: in Câmpeanu's dialectics, Cistelean says, it is the syncretic nature of Stalinism (following from its role to perpetuate a historical anachronism), that "dictates" the method of investigation (Cistelean, 2015: 299). Yet, Cistelean also adds some critical remarks. He finds that Câmpeanu uses a historical model of Stalinism, but contrasts it to an ideal, a historical concept of capitalism. He also notes that Câmpeanu's explanation of the internal logic of Stalinism could not foresee, or even detect, the dissolution of that structure due to external forces. As Cistelean puts it: Câmpeanu's focus on internal interdependence made his theoretical system extremely vulnerable in the face of geopolitical changes. Cistelean states that his critiques do not aim to refute the basic logic of Câmpeanu's dialectic, but rather ask for its further development, with regard to both communism and what came next.

It seems, however, that if we extract the elements criticized by Cistelean from Câmpeanu's model, the model's neat dialectic form falls apart, as it loses its external (capitalist) pillar for the symmetric comparisons it makes within what it conceives of as two versions of the realization of the same rules of historical development. When Cistelean criticizes Câmpeanu for contrasting the historical model of Stalinism to an ahistorical model of capitalism, he seems to follow not so much the logic of Câmpeanu's model, as that of a potential conversation with postsocialist liberal interlocutors. In that discussion, he places the emphasis on refuting the idea that on the opposite side of an imperfect socialism, there is the possibility of a perfect capitalism. Cistelean quotes arguments from the Marxist tradition on how capitalism produces the internal heterogeneity of centre and peripheries, from Rosa Luxemburg and Trotsky's uneven and combined development to postcolonial thinkers and world-systems analysis. From a substantive point of view, however, those arguments are in contradiction with Câmpeanu's models of both capitalism and socialism.

The stagist conception of the necessary conditions for revolution has been one of the most contested ideas in the history of Marxist thought and politics, from Bernstein's intervention and the Bolshevik-Menshevik debates to renewing discussions over the Marxist interpretation of transition between social formations, including the interpretation of really existing socialisms. Within the space of those debates, a stance that presupposes an impact of developed capitalist countries on less developed ones only in the moment of imperialism is a very curious one. Beyond Cistelean's own citations from the debates, the volume *Exotic Plants* comprises various substantive arguments about the integration of Romanian modernization into wider relations of the capitalist world, from Gherea's early intervention on interpreting 19th century feudalism with respect to capitalist



penetration, to Poenaru's allusion to the role of Western economic integration in Ceaușescu's politics, or the evaluation of Stahl's long-term historical sociology in the light of Marxist understandings of the capitalist world-system by Guga. Câmpeanu's argument seems to fall outside the space of those debates, and rather provide a comparison of the two systems as closed ideal-types, where the dialectical elegance of the argumentation rests on a reification of an ideal, mechanistic concept of history, debated within the Marxist tradition for decades at the moment of his contribution. In this sense, Câmpeanu's model resembles rather the dualistic comparisons between capitalism and socialism in the classic canon of Cold War epistemics. His contrasting description of crisis in Stalinism vs. in capitalism, a *tour de force* demonstrating how the theoretical idea of syncretism is able to grasp a row of empirical characteristics in both systems, resembles what David Stark (1986) termed the method of mirrored opposition: a method contrasting symmetric ideal-types of two independent, closed systems. Cistelean quotes Szelényi's evaluation of Câmpeanu as the main critical theorist of Eastern Europe in the 1980s – yet that evaluation does not necessarily refer to Marxism as critical theory. Regarding Szelényi's own concept of social criticism of that time, he emphasizes that instead of a Marxist critique, he was looking for an immanent critique of socialism, close to Foucault's method, combined with a cross-systemic comparison of ideal-types (Szelényi, 2002).

Câmpeanu's relationship to Marxist understandings raises questions not only of ideology or theory, but also of basic ontological presuppositions in the analysis of Romanian history. Among the tasks the chapter undertakes on multiple levels, that question remains in the background. However, from the perspective of a possible wider debate on Marxist understandings of the region, it seems to be an extremely productive one, as a treatment of the differences of methodological presuppositions and historical findings between Câmpeanu and other authors discussed in the volume could certainly set the stage for a debate over contemporary perspectives on those issues.

Ștefan Guga's chapter on Henri H. Stahl is the most explicit one in the volume in terms of the author's own relationship to the intellectual heritage under analysis. This might have to do with Stahl's work being the most voluminous and intellectually complex among the ones discussed in the volume, and also the fact that Guga's contribution is set against the background of a larger research and a monograph on Stahl published in the same year as the edited volume. Guga's chapter first places Stahl within the history of Romanian and international Marxist thought, and then summarizes Stahl's method of historical sociology as a possible model of a Marxist sociology. Regarding Stahl's contribution to Romanian Marxist debates, he points out Stahl's modification of Gherea's theory, claiming that Romanian social structure has been affected by the integration into the historical development of capitalism not in the 19th century, but from the 16th century on.

On the level of international debates, Guga points out how Stahl's research on the historical sociology of Romanian social development integrates into the debates over transition from feudalism to capitalism, the question of modes of production and their interrelationship, and the concept of the world-system as a differentiated, but interconnected whole. In terms of Stahl's movement background, Guga emphasizes that in the interwar period the direction of Stahl's questioning (on the conditions of transition from feudalism to capitalism in Romanian villages, first started as a field research within the institutional framework of the Gusti School) was driven by experience and political interest, while his later studies which integrated him in the Marxist debates of the 1960s and 1970s were conducted within the confines of academic Marxism. Finally, Guga summarizes what he sees as Stahl's Marxist sociological method for a structured understanding of history, comprising economic, political and other aspects in a broad perspective over the totality of social interaction. That totality is understood as a complex, structured and differentiated whole, dynamized by the tensions generated by the unequal development of its substructures. It is a concept of social dynamics which, in research, necessitates a synchronic and diachronic comparative perspective, and constant attention to the researcher's own position within those dynamics.

In this summary, Guga merges his own program for a locally relevant Marxist sociology with his analysis of Stahl's work and its integration in the main Marxist debates on history. That merger effaces the traces of the fine-tuned work he does in the monograph to draw out those principles from Stahl's writing, together with the traces of the context of Marxist thinking referred in that process (e.g. Althusser's influence on the method of Guga's own reconstruction of the generative principle of Stahl's work, and on the explicit conceptual formulation of that principle). By covering those traces, the chapter's choice to summarize the conclusions of the book in a concise and explicit form has the effect of sealing down the edges of its own argument in face of a potential debate within the volume about the stakes and methods of reading Marxist texts across the different chapters. Even so, because of the range of Stahl's own substantive arguments and because of Guga's explicit programmatic positioning, this chapter provides probably the largest surface for a collective dialogue over the relevance of the authors discussed by the volume for a contemporary Marxist perspective.

### **The Historical Sociology of Henri H. Stahl**

Ștefan Guga's book on Stahl is built around the core argument that Stahl's main intellectual project is a historical sociology, understood as a Marxist theoretical and methodological engagement with the historical formation of local social structure as part of the uneven history of capitalism. In terms of the audiences,

fields and stakes of the argumentation of the book, that core claim has three aspects. First, it refutes Stahl's assigned position in post-socialist Romanian sociology as a methodological expert of the Gusti school, together with what Guga sees as the effacement of his true Marxist intellectual interest through biographical suggestions of political dependence and censorship during the socialist period. Second, Guga provides a minute reconstruction of Stahl's intellectual project as Marxist historical sociology, based on the whole of Stahl's oeuvre, together with the reconstruction of its embeddedness in Marxist debates throughout the decades of Stahl's long biography. Third, the refutation of Stahl's misinterpretations, the criticism of what Guga sees as inadequate methods of writing intellectual biography, and the reconstruction of what he deems the relevant core of Stahl's work, dovetail into a third aspect: that of Guga's own perspective on what is a relevant contemporary perspective on sociology, and how, in that respect, a history of sociology should be done. Those three aspects of argumentation are bound together within the book's self-presentation as an insertion of Marxist sociology into the contemporary field of sociology. The emphasis on that gesture results in a situation similar to the one *Exotic Plants* struggles with: that the book's argument needs to start from what it would deem irrelevant later, and build up its treatment of its topics against their own grain. That effect engenders a complex interpenetration of the three aspects in the structure of the argumentation, something that I will, again, artificially sort out in order to target the focus of the present discussion.

In terms of his own reconstruction of Stahl's work, Guga claims that there is a coherent engagement in Stahl's work with the transformation of the Romanian village and its larger context from the perspective of history as the transformation of social organization. From his early work on the penetration of capitalism in Romanian villages, Stahl proceeds to construct a model of the historical development of the social, political and economic organization on the territory of the Romanian Principalities, reaching from the withdrawal of the Roman troops, through the fiscal regime of exploitation set by nomadic conquerors, to the occupation of those exploitative functions by local aristocracy, and the apparition of exploitation through production for the market by aristocratic households from the 16th century on.

Arguments dealing with the book's stake to refute the way Stahl is remembered interweave with Guga's substantive arguments on Stahl's work and its context all through the book. Guga demonstrates that Stahl's main interest is in historical sociology, not in the sociographic method. He points out that Stahl's treatment of the Asian mode of production, and his divergence with Miron Constantinescu on the interpretation of feudalism followed not from the political pressures of the time, but from the genuine interests of his thought, in line with the international debates of the time on those topics. Similarly, Guga points out

that Stahl criticized both the official version of dialectical materialism and the uncritical import of Western frameworks, from the perspective of what he conceived of as historical sociology.

From the point of view of local debates, Stahl modifies Gherea's argument on neoserfdom, claiming that the effects of capitalist penetration appear in the Principalities not in the 19th century, but from the 16th on, and that what Gherea terms neoserfdom does not correspond to a second instance of serfdom, but to a new type of relations of production. At the centre of that modification stands Stahl's problematization of applying the notion of feudalism to local forms of social organization in the Middle Ages. It is here that empirical research on local history intersects with the stakes of conceptualizing not only social formations as stages of history, but also the notion of history itself. Guga demonstrates at length that within that problematic, Stahl's research integrates into the Marxist debates of both the interwar period, when the question of transition from feudalism to capitalism had an immediate political stake, and the later waves of academic Marxist debates in the 1960s and 1970s. He points out a chain of references between Gherea's conceptualization of social organization in Romania as part of the larger social organism of the historical era of capitalism (Guga, 2015: 221), Stahl's idea of "historical era", made up of societies at different levels of development within the same "area of contact", subordinated to the laws imposed by the most advanced ones (Guga, 2015: 218), and Wallerstein's conceptualization of the world-system as a unit integrating various social forms (Guga, 2015: 217).

When examining Stahl's thought *vis-à-vis* the context of subsequent waves of Marxist debates on feudalism/capitalism, the Asian mode of production, or the articulation of modes of production, Guga's argument does not focus on theoretical or empirical details of debates or historical context. Rather, the guiding line of his analysis seems to remain the general question of what could be (and what becomes, through the debates he follows) a synthetic perspective on history and social organization in a Marxist perspective. I see that focus as an element of the third aspect of the book: Guga's own perspective on doing sociology. That perspective seems to fall closest to the arguments he describes when he concludes Althusser's conceptualization of history.

From Althusser's structuralist systematization of a Marxist conception of the historical organization of society, Guga highlights the definition of social formation as a complex and hierarchical whole, comprising various modes of production, united by their subordination to a dominant mode of production. That concept of social organization provides a perspective on historical time different from that of a continuous timeline consisting of periods of linear time which could be identified with some sort of essential characteristic of an epoch. Rather, Althusser proposes a differential notion of historical time, understood as a complex whole

compounded by the interrelationship of different histories of relatively autonomous sub-structures. That notion of historical time has sweeping consequences from the perspective of the major issues in Marxist (and non-Marxist) debates on Romanian history, in that it places the questions of development, underdevelopment, backwardness etc. within one coherent framework, where „developed” and „backward” elements appear as part of the same interconnected, yet differentiated social formation. It is a heuristic contribution that, once taken seriously, changes the whole field of debate over the main questions that local authors discussed in *Exotic Plants* and Guga’s book address.

Within the discursive space set up by the two books, that perspective on history does not become a focal point to the extent of its potential. In Guga’s own argument, it remains implicit. The emphasis on the analytical consequences of the idea can be felt in its presentation, but Guga does not emphasize its consequences to a larger contemporary debate. Rather, he proceeds with the historical narrative to the decline of the structuralist school in the debates of the 1970s, and Stahl’s position within that process.

In the conclusion, the three aspects of the book’s argumentation come together in a dense flight of argument where Guga speaks of Stahl’s contribution both in the sense of reinstating its rightful interpretation against the faulty, and of pointing out its characteristics in line with Guga’s own agenda of a good sociology. In addition, Guga defines the place of the book within the program he proposes for a history of sociology for the Romanian context. Here, again, the conclusions from the three aspects of the argument are woven upon each other so tightly that it becomes difficult to see them separately.

Guga proposes a program that would examine the conditions of production of sociological knowledge, an effort that could not only avoid, but also explain the effects that led, among others, to the effacement of Stahl’s work. Guga designates the place of the book as a contribution to that effort. That definition concludes the book in terms of what it does within the contemporary field of sociology: recuperating Stahl’s heritage. Yet the same definition rests upon the principles Guga developed in the book through explaining Stahl’s writing. The history of sociology he proposes would investigate the conditions of sociological knowledge production in a situation that he defines (for the period after 1965) as one of dual dependence of socialist satellite countries, a definition coined by József Böröcz (1992) within the same tradition that Guga mobilizes in his explanation of Stahl: that of a Marxist understanding of local reality as part of a complex historical whole. The conclusion defines the book as a history of sociology; yet the epistemological base of that history is the perspective which is brought to light by its own act of history-writing.

In light of the capacity Guga mobilizes in the book for presenting and applying that perspective, one might ask what would have happened, had he inverted the logic of argumentation, and simply written a book about the relevance of Stahl's heritage to a contemporary Marxist perspective. Part of the struggle and achievement of the book seems to lie in the fact that the logic of argumentation could not be inverted: it is a circular structure, designed to sustain itself as a contribution to a field that does not contain the main stakes of its own argument. From the perspective of a potential for a contemporary debate on doing Marxist sociology, that character of the book's effort sometimes has the effect of relegating key elements of its argument to the implicit, or scattering them across other levels of argumentation. In spite of that, Guga's book contains a solid proposal over what the assumptions, principles and tasks of a local Marxist sociology could be, and as such, could serve as a cornerstone for further debates.

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