

The Gusti(an) Sociologists in the Interwar University. Studies¹
– Review –

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Keywords: Bucharest University, interwar period, Dimitrie Gusti and the Sociological School, University Office, access to education, gender relations.

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The volume *Gustian Sociologists in the Interwar University*, coordinated

by Zoltán Rostás, is structured in three chapters of substantial studies, authored by Ionuț Butoi, Dragoș Sdrobiș and Theodora-Eliza Văcărescu. The studies published in this volume have the merit of focusing on less known data about the university (mainly the University of Bucharest), establishing a necessary connection between this institution, the social and political mechanisms of the period and mentalities. Thus, with the perspectives that manage to offer to readers the clear image of the interwar period in Romania, without ignoring the international framework, the authors of this volume adopt a lucid, critical perspective on the subjects: the Monographic School of Bucharest, only partially known, the social history of university life, the Social Service and the higher education of women in the interwar period. The involvement of Gustian sociologists in reporting and finding solutions to improve life conditions, supporting the creation of the Student Offices and Cooperatives, the political and ideological manipulations of students and the means by which they were implemented, describe a case of major social crisis. In the same register, the gender relationships are interpreted, in a case study, through an analysis of women's weak representation in the University, with its subtext motivations. Overall, the volume manages to demystify the enshrined perspective on the interwar period, glorified and idealized in many discourses.

The *Introduction*, whose author is the coordinator of this volume, proposes a thematic circumscription, explaining the necessity of the research approaches herein presented and their purpose. Therefore, the activity of Professor Dimitrie Gusti and also the activity of the Sociology School founded by him, are still, in the author's opinion, not very well known. The studies included in this book approach themes that have not been exploited sufficiently until now, highlighting these new topics. In the text of the introduction, the roles played by the "University Office" and "Student Cooperative" in identifying the students' problems in the first decades of the interwar period are focused on in particular. The problems approached sensitively

¹ Zoltán Rostás, ed., *Universitatea interbelică a sociologilor gustieni. Studii* (The Gustian Sociologists in the Interwar University. Studies) (Bucharest: Editura Universității din București, 2014), 171 p.; the volume was published with the occasion of the 150th celebration of the University of Bucharest.

within these frameworks, were to be approached scientifically, with a final purpose. Practical and concrete solutions had to be found in order to improve the students' life and studying conditions. Moreover, following the perspectives promoted by Gusti and the Gustians, in a fine contextual analysis, the author proves how the conscience of the role of social and political sciences was built in those decades. An excerpt of a text, authored by Dimitrie Gusti and published in the February 1926 issue of *Revista Universitară (University Magazine)*, quoted in the *Introduction* on pages 10–11, is illustrative in this respect. Social and political sciences play an important role “not only because they illuminate the citizen on his duties and form the conscious leaders of public opinion, who seed healthy ideas but also for a special preparation of public careers. But a special preparation, both social and political, is vital not only for administrative careers but also for senior officers of ministries, for a diplomatic career (it requires scholar and fine observations of nations), for a consular career (consuls must obtain systematic and methodical information on societies and cultures) and even for a magistrate career”.¹

Gusti's role as Dean of the Faculty of Letters (1929–1932) and Minister of Instruction, Cults, and Arts (1932–1933) is also underlined in the *Introduction*.

Acting in these qualities, he was concerned about the “formation of a highly valuable sociological school, with modern teachers of another habitus and valuable scientific value”.² Gusti's favourite themes, aiming the university, are identified one at a time and analysed: organisation of the Sociology Seminar, organisation of the International Congress of Sociology in Bucharest, improving social conditions of students and other categories of people are Gusti's imperative goals, discussed as such by the coordinator of this volume. Based on the experience of monographic campaigns, Dimitrie Gusti implements a new vision on cultural work in the villages, insists on the necessity of setting forward a social service. This is another course of action, present in Gusti's vision, mentioned in the *Introduction* to this volume.

Ionuț Butoi's study, titled *O incursiune în istoria socială a vieții universitare interbelice. Între revoluția studențească și activism social (An Incursion into the Social History of Interwar University Life. Between Student Revolution and Social Activism)*, is the result of a thorough radiography of the period, mainly based on the study of the Yearbooks of the most important universities in the interwar Romania and of the CNSAS reports (old reports drawn up by the National Intelligence and, subsequently, taken over by the communist Securitate).

The analysis proposed by the author reveals the crisis situation that marked the society as a whole and thus the university, deeply engaged in the social mechanisms of the period. In this regard, several points of view raised by the intellectuals of that period are relevant and they are identified and interpreted in this context by the author of this study: “Europe's economic disaster is deeply felt in its universities. All suffer from a lack of personnel and material, especially since the number of students increased (D. Călugăreanu, 1923, in the Yearbook of the University of Cluj, academic year 1921–1922, Cluj, 1923, pages 2–3)³ or “the

¹ Zoltán Rostás, ed., *Universitatea interbelică a sociologilor gustieni. Studii*, 10–11.

² Idem, 11

³ Quote on page 17.

dysfunctionality of promoting new capacities, which are kept outside the University or at its limits”.¹

In this extremely thorough and documented framework, the role of Gusti's projects to improve student life, to solve acute social problems, that characterized the interwar period is emphasized: the creation of Student Offices and Cooperatives, the launch of social surveys on the conditions of university life, the setup of a science of university, which would gather accurate data regarding the student population movement; the promotion of the publication *Călăuza studentului* (The Student Guide). Student life, as a whole, is reproduced as it was in that time of tensions, conflicts, atomisation (with its organizations: The National Union of Christian Students, ASCR, IMCA), with the ideologies and religions they promoted.

The study authored by Dragoș Sdrobiș, titled *Părăsirea Boemei și încarnarea Utopiei. Studențimea interbelică, Dimitrie Gusti și Serviciul Social Obligatoriu* (La Boheme Abandoned, Utopia Incarnated: Interwar Students, Dimitrie Gusti and the Mandatory Social Service), aims at explaining, at first, the causes leading to the political radicalization of intellectuals, referring to the interwar period in Romania. I appreciated the way in which the two terms, La Boheme and Utopia, were presented, at a theoretical, conceptual level, both diachronically and synchronically (regarding the interwar period), as both terms are essential to the research approach proposed by the author. Furthermore, the way in which the “rural utopia” arises due to Dimitrie Gusti's great vision, but also due to his easy access to resources – is also in the author's attention and systematic observation. The social service function is the author's main concern, as he tries and succeeds to decipher the mechanisms that made its creation possible in that period: subtle manipulations of decision-making bodies and entities, Carol II on the one hand, and Corneliu Zelea Codreanu on the other hand, the way in which the Social Service was instrumented also in order to combat “the trend” of the legionary movement, the impact it had on young people.

The ideological and political tensions, the ways in which youth, as essential stake, was to be won by one side or by the other, are contextualised brilliantly. In this context, the way in which the “royal teams” had to contribute to the “organization of a model village as every Romanian village should be”² is analysed, firstly by studying the 15,201 villages with 14 million inhabitants. Therefore, the “royal student teams had to be formed in order to meet the village in all its complexity.”³ They were designed on several levels, in order to correspond to the intervention in what was called “culture of health” (here the students in medicine and sports were responsible), culture of labour (students in agronomy, veterinary medicine and household masters), culture of soul and mind (students in theology and sociology etc.). An entire science lay behind these teams. The Social Service unquestionably had scientific and social intervention plans, very well configured at

¹ Octav Onicescu, quote on page 19.

² *Universitatea interbelică a sociologilor gustieni. Studii*, 99; quote from *Îndrumător al muncii culturale la sate* (Bucharest: Fundația Culturală Regală Principele Carol), 13.

³ *Ibid.*, 100

its establishment. All these represent particular subjects that are discussed by Dragos Sdrobiș, the author of this study, focused on social and political context.

The approach proposed by Theodora-Eliza Văcărescu, *Educația femeilor în provinciile locuite de români și în România, între anii 1880 și 1930. Studiu de caz. Universitatea din București* (Women Education in the Provinces Inhabited by Romanians and in Romania, between 1880 and 1930. Case Study, University of Bucharest) provides an analysis from the gender relations perspective of the way in which education functioned in Romania, especially in the University of Bucharest. The interpretation of the low presence of women in universities (due to their limited access to education), was also built contextually. The mechanisms regarding the marginalization or even exclusion of women from this educational area are identified. Also, the analysis focuses on the way in which these mechanisms led to a low self-esteem in women, to their mistrust in their own ability of bringing their contribution to the “production of knowledge”. All these aspects are discussed in the above mentioned study, starting from the interpretation of empirical data, gathered from sociological surveys of the period and from different statistical assessments. Also, the gender stereotypes of that period are analysed, based on a systematic documentation. I found interesting the explanations about women’s option for certain domains, when they had access to education; the choice of these fields is the result of social pressures, instrumented in order to extend the role women had within the family, in private, in public and is also the result of internalizing a certain gender role; the distrust in their contribution to scientific knowledge, according to the statistics referred to on page 157, is interpreted in the same register. In turn, the “care” for preserving women’s “morality” is explained in the same frames: according to statistics, 75% of women students lived with their parents, relatives, in boarding schools during the studies, where they were closely monitored; only 6.3% of them rent a room independently (the data were provided by a survey, conceived and applied by students, in the Sociology Seminar, at the time).¹

The volume, as a whole, reconstructs in a realistic and vivid manner a social context, that of the interwar period, especially in its first decades, and an atmosphere, which is usually more difficult to obtain just using documents, source analysis and even interpretation. The authors demonstrate consistently and almost equally a remarkable empathic ability, an insight into the spirit of the period, by decrypting the functioning and social representation mechanisms specific to the period under analysis, a deep understanding of that time’s political context.

Also, the studies as a whole highlight the role played by the social sciences in the university and in the public sphere, in society, during the period under analysis. Another merit of this book is that it clarifies the relationship between social sciences, at an epistemological level and the social action and intervention in the heyday of the Gusti School. A contextualized analysis of the relationship between social sciences, ideology and religion is also present in the volume but is rather implicit, giving an indirect warning on the possible danger of the specialists’ manipulation by different power agents, by dominant narratives, in different times.

¹ Ibid.,153.