

BOOK REVIEWS

ALEX DRACE-FRANCIS, *Istoria mămăligii. Povestea globală a unui preparat național* [the Romanian translation of *The Making of Mămăligă. Transimperial Recipes for a Romanian National Dish*] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2023)

Since the time of the establishment of the European nation states and even earlier, the Romanian people have been seen as a people of peasants who wear *opinci* [traditional peasant sandals] and eat *mămăligă* [maize porridge or polenta]. In other words, they were seen as *opinci-wearers* and *mămăligă-eaters*. In the 19th century, even the Romanian people started seeing themselves as a nation of peasants and indeed as *opinci-wearers* and *mămăligă-eaters*. Nonetheless, the Romanian historians, from the Romanticism to the present day, have not deigned to conduct truly in-depth studies on the peasant (who had been left at the mercy of other sciences), and that much less on the stigmatised aspects of the peasant's clothing habits or eating habits. The peasants remained what they have always been: history's eternally overlooked demographic. In the '50s, there was one ethnographer who fully dedicated efforts to the study of the *opinci*, namely Bobu Florea Florescu.¹ In the case of the *mămăligă*, however, things were a bit more difficult. Moreover, time and time again in the historiography on the subject of the Romanian people, someone from abroad had to be the one to write a history of the *mămăligă*. Alex Drace-Francis was thus the ray of luck that shined on us and on our *mămăligă*. He is a renowned Romanian studies scholar from the University of Amsterdam who has had previous such preoccupations: he is the author of a volume that treats the construction of the modern Romanian culture,² and of a synthesis study on the "invention" of the Romanian peasant,³ two works that cannot be overlooked by any historian who approaches the Romanian modernity.

¹ Florea Bobu Florescu, *Opincile la români* [The opinci of the Romanian people] (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Populare Române, 1957).

² Alex Drace-Francis, *The Making of Modern Romanian Culture* (London – New-York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2006), and its Romanian translation: *Geneza culturii române moderne: instituțiile scrisului și dezvoltarea identității naționale, 1700-1900* (Iași: Polirom, 2016).

³ Alex Drace-Francis, *The traditions of Invention* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2013).

The work under scrutiny was published in 2022 in English at the Central European University in Budapest;⁴ after that, the Humanitas publishing house managed to publish a version in Romanian in rather record time. What is truly remarkable about the present book is the way in which the author constructs this history of the *mămăligă*: Alex Drace-Francis' narration is not merely a history of maize cultivation in the Romanian Principalities, but it is rather a rewrite of the Romanian history from the angle of the agricultural practices of maize cultivation and of the preparation of the food-symbol that is the *mămăligă*. Maize and *mămăligă* are merely the open pathways into the historical, cultural and social universe of the Romanian people. Naturally, this approach is, I believe, based on the way in which the author has grown as a historian of ideas and culture – his research modus operandi employes a strong focus on the phenomenon under scrutiny and on the context in which the respective phenomenon emerges and evolves. All of Alex Drace-Francis's works are models for this type of approach. He focuses on the context to such a great extent that the reader could (erroneously) feel that the context itself has completely taken over the research endeavour. This aspect stands out given that we, Romanian historians – or better yet, so as to not offend anyone, *I, in particular* – do not typically give the context a role quite as royal: more or less encased (depending on each researcher's character and linguistic and intellectual capabilities) in our own small culture, we typically merely mention the wider context before focusing semi-exclusively on the phenomenon under direct scrutiny and thus, on ourselves. We write about ourselves and we seldom look into our neighbours' backyards. Nonetheless, Alex Drace-Francis originates from a place where *neighbours* are much more open towards one another. Thus, he does not need to glance over the fence into a neighbouring back yard, since he is capable and allowed to use the door and walk right in – not the front door, however (as he had done in his PhD dissertation), but rather through the back door, namely by approaching peasantry and poverty, symbolised by the *mămăligă*. In his endeavour, the author noted the Romanian historiography's reluctance in approaching this subject or, more precisely, its complete disregard for it. Why have the Romanian historians, or the Romanian social sciences in general, ignored the maize culture and the history of the *mămăligă*? The reason is obviously that it is not quite a point of national pride. *Mămăligă-eater* (alongside *hick*, for instance) has always been a term used by others pejoratively and it has become somewhat of a stigma. We always dreamed of being posh Europeans and, as such, the poor peasant, with his *mămăligă* and *opinci*, embarrassed us, made us uncomfortable and made us forget who we truly are. Here lies the all too sensitive field of positive and negative self-images studied by Sorin Mitu in the case of the Transylvanian Romanians from the first half of the 19th century in a book that has by now become a classic.⁵ In other words, the social sciences in Romania and history in

⁴ Alex Drace-Francis, *The Making of Mămăligă. Transimperial Recipes for a Romanian National Dish* (Budapest – Vienna – New York: CEU Press, 2022).

⁵ Sorin Mitu, *Geneza identității naționale la românii ardeleni* (Bucharest: Ed. Humanitas, 1997). English version: Sorin Mitu, *National Identity of Romanians in Transylvania* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2001).

particular have not, until very recently, studied the maize culture and the culture of the *mămăligă* because they generally avoided the subjects that could threaten our positive self-image, in the same manner as they avoided the subjects of the local antisemitism and the Holocaust, or even the population's adherence to communism. Sensitive subjects have thus typically been obscured. Therefore, Alex Drace-Francis came from afar and did not, by any means, shy away from placing both the maize and our daily *mămăligă* right in front of us, despite them reminding us of poverty. He also noted an extremely interesting aspect, namely that the *mămăligă* is a highly used cultural export product, despite it having been ignored by the Romanian researchers. It has been part of the "menus" of all of the international exhibitions, which Romania has attended since the second half of the 19th century until today. In other words, paradoxically, at home, we tend to *sweep the mămăligă under the rug*, but we display it lavishly on the dinner table when foreigners come over or when we go abroad. Strange, is it not? It is, in fact, not – because the *mămăligă* is part of the image of the peasant as imagined by the local elites. Moreover, just like the peasant himself, depending on the momentary convenience, the *mămăligă* is either backwardness, primitivism, poverty, underdevelopment, or a national symbol drenched in exoticism and oriental flavours of identity. The *mămăligă* and the peasant share the same substance, as do their representations; it cannot be taken separately from the peasant.

There are great advantages to the fact that the research subject is approached globally (as I call it) and transimperially (as the author calls it). We are thus shown that neither we nor our *mămăligă* are as unique as we had hoped. Moreover, in the beginning, maize was, to us, a culture of poverty that made its way across the country, on village outskirts and forest edges,⁶ a culture that is important to the peasantry because, in today's terms, it was not subjectable to taxation. In this sense, at that time, it was not a form of tithe and it presented no interest to the Turks. As was the case with the domestic pigs, which was said to have been preferred by the pre-modern peasants due to the fact that they could not be used for trading or extortion by the Ottomans. Undoubtedly, the popularity of the pig and of the maize in the peasant household was at least in part due to this initial fiscal immunity.

At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, Romania ascended to the global market, from its initial peripheral position. Nonetheless, the *mămăligă* and the maize became an outright nightmare for the peasants. Thus, in turn, the *mămăligă* also blew up in the faces of the members of the ruling class, in the form of the two peasant revolts of 1888 and 1907. Nonetheless, this was a fairly global phenomenon and it was nothing more than the local manifestation of what Michel Adas regarded as one of the cruellest contradictions of the colonial era, namely the unfortunate combination between the population increase and the political centralisation.⁷ This is why the peasants, shepherds and

⁶ Romanian translation of the original text: "o cultură a săracilor care-și făcuse loc în țară pe la margini de sate și poale de păduri," in Alex Drace-Francis, *Istoria mămăligii. Povestea globală a unui preparat național* (Bucharest: Ed. Humanitas, 2023), 40.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 114.

other marginal populations could no longer simply avoid the central power. They outright clashed with it, in a period in which the state's technological and organisational abilities greatly surpassed those of the population.⁸ This is a very correct assessment, which brings to mind the peasants' own words – collected by Ovid Densusianu in 1905 – about their lives of yesteryear and their longing for their past freedom to exploit the resources of the estates on which they dwelled. For instance, Sandu Dina Duță from Mofleni-Dolj, who was only 52 years old (born in 1854) nostalgically recalls the (economically) good old days: “*Times wuz better unner the Turks. Jus’ 12 days a year and the tithe was fer maize, nothin’ more. I slept alongside the oxen in the groves all the way to St. George until it grew back an’ nobody asked where I was coming from an’ where I was headed. I used to brang firewood with a barrow an’ still nobody asked me a damn thang. I could scythe fer hay an’ plough wherever I pleased. The state’s swallowed us whole now, we can’t move an inch.*”⁹ As mentioned above, this globalised side of the story of the *mămăligă* and the maize, as narrated by Alex Drace-Francis, shatters the illusion of our uniqueness and shoves us into the greater wide world, along with all of our more or less specific welfares and tragedies.

However, the author is also intensely aware of our beloved “national specificity,” which we have been debating ever since the first Romanian peasant ever picked up a quill. In the book’s introduction, Alex Drace-Francis ensures the readers of his attention to detail – a promise that is indeed fulfilled, given the fact that the book is sawn from an abundance of local details inserted into the greater canvas of global history. Since the Pandora’s Box of national specificities has thus been opened, a natural question arises: in the end, what exactly is specifically Romanian in the story of the *mămăligă* and the maize? Or rather, what have the Romanian people done more than other maize farmers from West Africa, Asia or southern USA? After having read Alex Drace-Francis’ book, I believe that the answer resides in the forms taken by the cultural insertions of the maize. The Romanian people cultivated it on a massive scale for almost three centuries and consumed it in an equally massive amount, but, then again, so did many other peoples. The Romanians, however, also considered it a good “food for thought,” as Claude Lévi-Strauss would say, more than other peoples would. It is remarkable that, in the Romanian case, the maize and the *mămăligă* are both national symbols and social stigma. The richness of these cultural insertions facilitated the writing of the present rigorously documented book. In this sense, one could, in all seriousness, say that the Romanians have indeed been a people of *mămăligă-eaters* more than others have.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Original text: “Mai bine ierea pă vremea turcului, făceam 12 zile pe an și dam dijmă la porumb; încolo nimic. Durmiam cu boii pă livez pînă-n Sfântu Ghiorghe și până să făcea la loc și nu mă-ntreba nimini de unde vin și unde mă duc. Aduceam lemne cu targa și așa că nu ma-ntreba nimini. Aveam de cosam fân ș-aram pe unde vream. Ne-a cuprins statu de peste tot, n-avem nici o mișcare,” in Ioan-Aurel Candrea, Ovid Densusianu, Theodor Dimitrie Speranția, *Graiul nostru. Texte din toate părțile locuite de români* [Our speech. Texts gathered from all places inhabited by Romanians], vol. I, *România* [Romania] (Bucharest: Ateliere Grafice Socec & Co, 1906-1907), 49. If not marked otherwise, the English translations of the Romanian texts were translated by the translator of the present review.

The author takes his endeavour one step further from the mere historical excursion into the period between the 16th century and the present day. In a manner similarly employed in his previous works, he also compiles a dossier of the *mămăligă*'s cultural occurrences: in the high literature, in the popular literature, in artworks or in film. The aim was thus to cover the subject from every possible angle and the result speaks volumes. No stone is left unturned, unscrutinised or unexploited. Despite the appearances, this relatively small volume stores a highly impressive amount of readings that cover a wide array of research directions that meet in the focal point of the subject under scrutiny. I have always been impressed by how much Alex Drace-Francis has read about Romania and its people, without having had the luxury of a physical proximity to our libraries and archives. I am both in awe of and humbled by the bibliographies listed in his works, given that they actually contain titles with which I probably should have been more familiar but that were, at the time, unknown to me.

In the end, we must also take note of the book's style. Alex Drace-Francis' work is not only a scholarly and ingenious approach to the history of the *mămăligă* in the Romanian Principalities. It is also an exceptionally well written book. Even the volume's summary, at the quickest of glances, clearly shows that the information is accompanied by light-hearted humour, subtle wordplays and the occasional irony. Regarding the chronological levels of the narration, one could note that they are subjected to an ingenious merger of past and present. The book begins in the contemporaneity of Mihai, the child from the documentary *Mămăliga te așteaptă* [the literal translation would be "The *mămăligă* awaits/is waiting for you", but English title was *The Land Is Waiting*]. It further goes into the transimperial history of maize in the 16th century and the story ends with the 1999 novel written by the Swiss writer of Romanian origin Aglaia Veteranyi, titled *De ce fierbe copilul în mămăligă* [translated into English by Vincent Kling, published in 2012 as *Why the Child is Cooking in the Polenta*¹⁰]. The story thus begins in film and ends in literature... with a historical filling in the middle. Alex Drace-Francis is undoubtedly not only an excellent historian but a very good writer. For historians, this is a rare and fortunate combination that transforms his books into manifestations of his passion for reading. *Istoria mămăligii* is thus precisely the type of book that is too captivating to put down.

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¹⁰ Aglaja Veteranyi, *Why the child is cooking in the polenta*, trans. Vincent Kling (Dalkey Archive Press, Champaign, Ill., 2012).