CĂLIN COTOI, *Holera și „duhul comunismului". Inventarea socialului în România, 1831-1914* [Inventing the Social in Romania, 1848-1914: Networks and Laboratories of Knowledge] (Cluj-Napoca: Idea Print & Design, 2022)

Reacting to the effervescence of the '90s, the face of literary studies changes constantly, (still) following the old West-East trajectory. Whether it is the transition from national literature to the 'global turn' or the exploration of "world literatures", literary studies in general, and Modernist Studies in particular, have expanded not only their subject matter (across space and time), but, more significantly, their focus. This evolution entails the integration of ethics, religions, cultures, arts, and literatures as diverse textual forms, encompassing a wide array of interdisciplinary pursuits.

This pollination or "cross-field interchange", as Douglas Mao[1] puts it in the relation to the expansion of Modernist Studies in the last decades, can be seen in Călin's Cotoi study on modern Romania. After a first English edition of the present volume in 2020, *Inventing the Social in Romania, 1848-1914: Networks and Laboratories of Knowledg*e,[2] he reinforces the meanings of his writing in a Romanian version published in 2022.[3] As the author himself states, the Romanian version is not just a translation, but a rewriting of the previous text that integrates different adjustments, perspectives and questions made possible by a significant distance from the initial one. Also, the Romanian edition contains Sorin Antohi's preface, a critical text that justifies the necessity of such a sociological approach while describing the modern Romania; also, it sets Călin Cotoi's book on top of the research in the field.

In Călin Cotoi's work, the multicultural backdrop takes center stage as he explores premodern Romania situated at the crossroads of cultural influences from the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires, as well as Tsarist Russia. In all the associated fields of the humanities, the transnational view and the regional geography reset the dialogue between East-Central Europe and the West and focuses on the regional dynamic that can explain major phenomena in a local environment. Călin Cotoi seems aware that he needs to understand the invention of the social under the influence of a multicultural background in order to integrate the 19th century Romania into a larger debate about modernity.

The main goal of both editions stays the same – to shed light on the emergence/ invention of the social in the premodern Romania as an intersection between the political and

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[1] *The New Modernist Studies*, Douglas Mao (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

[2] Călin Cotoi, *Inventing the social in Romania, 1848-1914.Networks and laboratories of knowledge* (Paderborn: Brill/Ferdinand Schöningh, 2020).

[3] Călin Cotoi, *Holera și „duhul comunismului". Inventarea socialului în România, 1831-1914* (Cluj-Napoca: Idea Design & Print, 2022).

the practices of public. Cotoi understands the social following the paths of the French Theory and crediting the theories of the sociologist Jacques Donzelot. The research turns to a more authentical and interesting approach once the author adjusts the term to a "regional" geography defined from a transnational perspective, even though he admits that such an approach cannot fully explain the dynamic of "interstitial" spaces and the effects of multiple interferences in (East) European borderlines.

In the introduction, Călin Cotoi describes his text as a study of the "social", where "the focus is less on the adventures and mirroring of collective identities and more on the way in which the social was created locally, as another interstitial area."[4] He emphasises two main sources of the social and of the local modernity during the 19th century in Romania. The first one is the cholera, as a medical and social phenomenon, which creates a communication corridor between countries and cultures in their attempt to fight against the illness. The first cholera wave (at the beginning of 1830) is described here as an opportunity to identify the vulnerable areas to be "colonised" by some "projects of modernity".

The second wave, characterized as "the empty sign of communism" ("semnul gol al comunismului"), is depicted as a discursive framework rather than something deliberate, emerging in the aftermath of the 1848 Revolution: "Both cholera and communism constituted, in different ways, connected representations and «stagings» of local modernity. By representations, following Timothy Michell, I understand not just the making of images or meanings, but also «forms of social practice that set up in the social architecture of the world that seems an absolute distinction between image (or meaning, or plan), or structure) and reality, and thus a distinctive apprehension of the real». The immediacy of Moldavia and Wallachia, by the end of the nineteenth century, became informed by the abstract plans of nation-building reform and their modernizing apparatus."[5]

The structure of the book adheres to the objective outlined in the introduction, which is to trace the roots of the concept of the social by examining the geographical shifts within and beyond Romania over nearly a century. This examination spans from the early 19th century (1831) to the early 20th century (1914), with additional insights into the development of the social up to the interwar period).

Very briefly, the Romanian version has three major sections organised by the main islands of modernity identified in this interstitial space – the first one is the anarchism and the debates around socialism that anticipate and predict the 1848 Revolution, the second one is the cholera and its effects in a rural country and the development of the sanitary system and the third brings to light the "empty mark of communism" towards the Marxism ("Poporanism" and "Narodnik" as local expressions of it), the Ortodoxism and the progress of science. Alexandru Golescu, Nicolae Codreanu, Zamfir Arbore, Victor Babeș, Constantin Dobrogeanu Gherea or Constantin Stere are seen by Cotoi as central personalities contributing to the

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[4] Ibid., 7. The intersitital space is defined here as a neutral, intermediate area, recreated by multiple interference between local and regional factors.
[5] Ibid., 3.

depiction of modern Romania and the emergence of the concept of the social. Each section concludes with a final chapter that synthesizes the previously presented arguments.

In the first section of the volume, Călin Cotoi focuses on the invention of the social around the 1848 Revolution. The revolution uses communism as a discursive structure to bring together liberals and conservatives fighting against a common enemy – the "communism" – having positive effects for the debates about evolution and progress and very useful during any negotiations with the people. Furthermore, the anarchists coming from Russia to Romanian countries (both Wallachia and Moldavia) articulate a transnational network supporting the communication between spaces and ideologies: "A large transnational revolutionary network functioned and reproduced itself in the periphery of Russia and Europe, by creating new dialogue partners and making alliances with heterogeneous local forces. Its members changed names, became, contextually, national(ist), worked as physicians, engineers, statisticians, ethnographers, publicists, and state administrators, and took part, sometimes without even knowing it, in the local invention of the social."[6]

This shift in perspective is quite intriguing: the revolutionary spirit does not solely emanate, as previously believed, from the West via the Romanian exiles. Instead, it has diverse and more locally rooted origins, which the author suggests account for the emergence of the revolutionary ethos in Romania. Facing the danger of communism made visible especially through the Russian anarchists, Romania embraces Revolution as a solution against regression and ruralism, as a corridor towards liberalism and the West.

The study's second section delves into the examination of cholera's influence as a social phenomenon, pushing the advancements of the "modern" world into the background. The century of progress and the advent of modernity in the West now confront a grave pandemic originating from the less developed Eastern regions. The regional geography permits the perspective of viewing Romania as a crucial sanitary buffer zone between the East and the West. This favourable localisation makes visible, at the same time, the absence of a sanitary system, the lack of hygiene in rural environments, and the prior need to reset (or, more correctly, to invent) the medical system to protect Europe against the expansion of the virus: "Modern Romania emerged as a quarantinist outpost, at the borderlands between the Russian, the Ottoman and the Habsburg empires, at the moment when classical quarantine policies were radically questioned by cholera's advance."[7]

Assisted by experts, including doctors and hygienists from Russia and the Habsburg Empire, Romania establishes its own healthcare system and formulates expansion strategies. Călin Cotoi highlights a significant conflict between Romania and Western countries in the course of professionalization initiated by Romania: while Europe supports medical education, it grants qualifications and diplomas recognized exclusively within Romania, limiting their validity for practice abroad. This scenario accentuates the transformation of the individual body into a social entity.

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[6] Ibid., 43.
[7] Ibid., 99.

The concluding section of the book delves into the clash between the social reality and nationalist representation. Russian Narodism discovers in Romania a fertile ground for its articulation as a social and political ideology that mirrors the populace's demands. It also shapes a discursive framework for subsequent discussions on Marxism, Poporanism, and social authority. As central figures of the social-democrats and national-Narodnik, Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea and Constantin Stere "created directly, but mostly indirectly, a conceptual vocabulary that accommodated the articulation of the national and social", without being able to solve the issues debated. Transforming peasants into nationalists is the strategy (mostly discursively supported) that contributed decisively to the social progress of a modern liberal country.

However, the problem of the people develops further, after the intervention of Constantin Istrati who talks about the racial degradation and intensifies the debates around the national and the social. Expanding the process of modernization outside Romania's borders, Călin Cotoi describes the international contexts that made the country visible in Europe, against the lack of infrastructure. In an attempt to "export Romania", the communication with the world is based on art and science: "Romania was projected as real by local and transnational attempts to represent it, first as part of the general-European history of social progress with the «empty sign of communism» playing an important balancing role, and then, more and more, through inbuilt, scientifically legitimized mechanisms for recording and creating reality."[8]

Presented as a sociological approach, *Inventing the Social in Romania, 1848-1914: Networks and Laboratories of Knowledge* is far more than that: a very well documented study about modern Romania that explains politically or culturally the evolution of a state. Bringing together the transnational view and various methods of investigation, the narrative unfolds as a tale of a discursive creation – "the social" – serving as a catalyst for discussions both within and beyond boundaries. Communism, employed as a semantic tactic, the people as tools of the ideology, and the cholera outbreak as a pretext for reconfiguring the domestic healthcare system, all form integral elements within the "interstitial" realm of modern Romania.

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[8] Ibid., 241.