

A TALE OF TWO VILLAGES. CEU Press, 2010

Introduction

The Argument

Political change in rural societies has always looked spectacular if observed from afar. Such an amount of coups and aborted revolutions, of grand reforms and brutal assassinations is dramatic enough to attract journalists and scholars both. At a closer observation, however, it generates an almost unbearable feeling of monotony. Coups change only the person of the dictator; assassinations prove sooner or later to have been futile. There are many events and little evolution; change occurs, but development does not. Come back a century later and you will find, in the words of one Balkan historian, a 'century of stagnation'ⁱ, regardless what century you choose. Cities might occasionally push ahead for reform; the rural areas always pull back to stagnation. And who rules the countryside, as Samuel Huntington famously put it, rules the countryⁱⁱ. Even regime change, despite managing to produce considerable suffering, does not modify the essential constraints under which every government will operate sooner or later. The future regime is contained in the past one, and like in T.S. Eliot's *Burnt Norton* all times seem unredeemable.

This book is a study of political change of the rural Eastern Europe. The main question it attempts to answer is to what extent a program of social change imposed through vigorously sustained methods, including coercion, can endure once coercion ends? Is even the strongest state in the world able to change the essentials of a peasant society in a sustainable way? This study attempts to answer such wide-ranging, generic questions by focusing on a specific period and region where exceptional circumstances have rendered such behavior eminently observable: two East-European villages under Communism. These are two villages with exceptional histories – and very different among themselves - which in the end seem to converge towards a similar outcome. As part of traditional 'peasant societies' they have undergone, over a mere eighty-year period, colossal processes of political and social modernization meant, in the view of their initiators, to bridge the colossal development gap separating their region from Western Europe. The size of this gap is suggested by a few comparative statistics: in 1930, Romania's per capita income was comparable to France's in 1789 or Britain's in 1648; in the early decades of the twentieth century, the sophistication and productivity of Romanian farming were at the level of French farming in the seventeenth century and of British farming in the eighteenth.ⁱⁱⁱ The political difficulties of this under-developed rural society were considerable, and the violent peasant revolt

of 1907 sent shockwaves to the chancelleries of Vienna and St. Petersburg. What distinguished the under-developed Romanian rural society from similar societies in other parts of the world was its relative proximity to the centers of European power. Its location at the periphery of Europe encouraged, more than in other regions, the persistent belief that this is a society with a European culture or at least a European vocation.

The study of rural Eastern Europe was seen as key to triggering its development a century ago. Seen from the West, it was a land problem; seen from the East, it was a peasant one, as David Mitranyi insightfully observed^{iv}. It has received far less attention after the fall of Communism, with a few notable exceptions.^v What is particularly missing is an exchange between political economists trying to explain the different performance of East European transition countries, political scientists working on voting behavior, policy scientists working on agriculture and anthropologists interested in social change in rural post-Communist Europe. The older scholarship on the region thrived on precisely this bridging among disciplines, indispensable if one wishes to do justice to the importance of the rural factor in the economical and political development of Eastern Europe^{vi}.

This strong correlation between democracy and peasantry was established by the historian Barrington Moore Jr. (1966), who saw in the creation of non-repressive, commercial farmer agriculture the foundation of democratic development. Traditionally, the remarkable resistance of peasant societies to change and progress has been explained by two different sets of causes. On the one hand, blame was laid on the peasant 'culture'. Peasants, as described by anthropologists in the twentieth century, are passive, collectivistic, envious, fatalistic and distrustful creatures, clearly not the material democrats are made of (Redfeld 1955; 1956; Foster 1965; 1967). Politicians held similar negative views on peasants; most modernizers, from the liberals to Vladimir Ilich Lenin, looked upon peasants as the ultimate obstacle to social and economic progress. The second conception, based mostly on studies from the Third World, drew on the need to explain why peasants did not rebel against oppressive regimes. The conclusions of such studies were kinder to peasants, who were seen more as non-consenting victims than voluntary contributors to the conservative order of things. In a Latin American context especially, the rural upper class was identified by scholars as the main political opponent of democracy (see, for example, O'Donnell, 1978). Oligarchs, usually landowners, were said to hold peasants captive, as their autonomy was too limited to allow the expression of their true political values. However, they resisted their captors through a variety of everyday resistance strategies^{vii}. Foot dragging, gossip and stealing were no longer, in this view, expressions of the peasant character, but manifestations of protest when no other forms were available. The values of the peasants are, therefore, not conservative: peasants vote for their conservative landlords only because they are given no real choice.

In post-Communist Europe, too, the two sets of explanations have their champions. Clearly, the post-Communist agrarian social and class structures are different from both the traditional “junker” and “farmer” models which inspired this thesis originally. Large-scale mechanized, but collectivized, landholding, and the uncertain transformation of property relations after the fall of the old regime, have produced rural social structures which diverge considerably from Latin American models. The situation in post-Communist Europe also varies from country to country, with Poland, which was largely not collectivized, remaining rather an exception. Everywhere else decollectivization seems to have produced similar patterns everywhere: a return to family plots and subsistence farming, a ‘peasantization’ of urbanites who become unemployed and resort to agriculture on their recuperated plots (Leonard and Kanef 2002), and a drastic fall in production as household consumption, not commerce, becomes the main use for crops. Peasants may have resisted collectivization strongly in the times of Stalin (Fitzpatrick 1996), but after 1989 many resisted decollectivization and proved reluctant to accept markets. They long for subsidies and are rather opposed to the liberalization of land markets. A small percentage of farmers, owners of larger plots, who are more market-oriented, is gradually emerging, but is nowhere higher than 5%, Poland excepted. Land markets were slow to appear everywhere, due to logistic difficulties in restituting property, such as the absence of cadastral evidence. For the rest, differences prevail over similarities, with large state farms still important in Russia, medium-sized holdings much more numerous in the Baltics than in Central or South-Eastern Europe, and little to no property reform in Central Asia (see Wegren 1988).

Similarities can also be found when examining political behavior. Scholars working on voting behavior in post-Communist Europe have long pointed out that peasants tend, as a general rule, to vote for the wrong people. If a dictator is at hand, such as Serbia’s Slobodan Milošević, they vote for him; if a candidate runs for an extra-constitutional mandate, like Romania’s Ion Iliescu^{viii}, they do not care; if a Communist party is still around, it will more likely get their vote against any reformist party (Mungiu 1996; Wegren 1998; Gordy 1998). Peasants are also unlikely democrats, though old age and poverty, not some inherent peasant features, may be responsible for this (Rose, Misher and Haerpfer 1998). In short, there is evidence which shows that peasants in post-Communist Europe behave in similar ways to peasants elsewhere, and that differences among countries may be due to the varying size of the peasant population, a legacy from pre-Communist times. The opposite explanation, pointing to the informal institutional arrangements of the countryside as supportive of a pattern of abuse of peasants by predatory elites was far less popular, though some anthropologists (Humphrey 2000) and some political scientists (Jowitt 1993) did encourage researchers to look beyond the ‘land’ question. By and large, the reinvention of politics in the countryside has remained largely unexplored, and the little attention devoted to rural post-Communist Europe was absorbed by studies on land reform and agriculture.

One notable exception is a study by Kurtz and Barnes (2002). The authors examine whether those states in which the agricultural sector is larger experience, all other things being equal, a more difficult time establishing open politics. The measure of agrarian dominance they use is the rural proportion of the population, as a rough indication of the size of the political base that might plausibly fall under the domination of the agrarian upper-class (or its functional equivalent). They found out that large rural sectors had a negative impact on efforts to liberalize politics, despite the peculiarities of the social organization of most Communist agrarian systems. This result holds even when controlling for the level of socio-economic development. 'It is also important to notice that this effect is not due to the correlation between GDP and size of agricultural labor force, because the former is a poor predictor of democracy on its own. The causal mechanism here seems clear. Post-Communist agrarian elites have strong interests in retaining an authoritarian governance system, and they have inherited extensive organizational structures for quelling dissent and/or distributing benefits'^{xix}. The only country deviating from this pattern is Poland.

If the rural factor is tested in models based on public opinion data, such as the World Values Survey pooled sample for East-Central Europe, residence in rural areas does remain a negative determinant of democratic orientation, controlling for age, education and religion^x. Residents of rural areas in the ten new EU member countries, Romania and Bulgaria included, show a lower appreciation of democracy than their urban counterparts. At the same time, it is crucial to note that they do not have a higher appetite for authoritarianism either: rural residents do not endorse rule by strong leaders over rule by parliaments more than the urbanites do. They are significantly more traditionalistic and attend church services more often, they are more egalitarian, as shown by their disapproval of large income gaps, and they believe that the state should play a large role in society.

The meanings of concepts such as 'peasant society' and 'peasantry' are not similar in contemporary social science to the historical one granted by East European intellectuals of the 20th century. Social science sees peasantry as a fundamental social category, only incidentally linked to a specific space or a particular historical period. Twentieth-century Romanian thinkers predominantly equated peasantry with Romanianness, anchored within a particular national specificity. There is a considerable difference between this vision of the village as the site of 'Romanianness' as defined, for instance, by Romanian inter-war philosophers Lucian Blaga^{xi} and Mircea Vulcănescu^{xii}, and the village as described by foreign travelers or seen by Romanian rulers, from the Hohenzollern modernizing monarchs to either Agrarian or Communist politicians.

The former is an idealized, exceptional village, wherein external influences can at most shatter the illusion of an anhistoric, perfect balance; the latter is a real-life village, where impoverished people suffer and are deprived of basic resources, a place which can only be saved by a comprehensive, externally induced transformation. The former is incomparable, whereas the project aimed at turning the latter into a better living place is based precisely on its comparability to villages from developed countries and on the hope that development can be replicated through a set of prescribed steps. In its turn, anthropologists do not envisage the village merely as a self-sufficient community inhabited by people who earn their living by practicing agriculture, but as a partial society with a partial culture: a rural society with a peasant culture within a larger society^{xiii}. The word peasant “points to a human type. It required the city to bring it into existence. There were no peasants before the first cities. And those surviving primitive peoples who do not live in terms of the city are not peasants”^{xiv}. Kroeber’s anthropological study of 1948 offered the earliest, brief and essentialized description of this society^{xv}, when he wrote that it differed from tribal society insofar as it lacked the latter’s political autonomy, isolation and self-sufficiency, and it could only be defined in relation to the city, which provided a market for its farming produce. Peasant society, therefore, is one ‘half’ of the whole, and cannot be understood in its own terms, without reference to the city. Peasant society is part of ‘a larger social unit (usually a nation) which is vertically and horizontally structured. The peasant component of this larger unit bears a symbiotic spatial-temporal relationship to the more complex component, which is formed by the upper classes of the pre-industrial urban center^{xvi}’. Peasants are therefore seen as a peripheral, but essential part of civilizations, producing the food that makes urban life possible, supporting (and subject to) the specialized classes of political and religious rulers and the other members of the educated elite. It is this elite which carries what Redfield called ‘The Great Tradition’, giving continuity and substance to the sequences of advanced culture, and which lies in contradiction to the ‘Little Tradition’ – which characterizes villagers themselves.

Most historical accounts which have contributed to a definition of peasantry focus on the mediaeval West European village, but that can be fairly compared to the South-Eastern European village in the modern age. We can, therefore, only speak of peasants if we locate them in a wider context, more specifically when “the cultivator is integrated in a society with a state – that is, when the cultivator becomes subject to the demands and sanctions of power-holders outside his social stratum^{xvii}. *Thus, the basic feature characterizing peasantry is its lack of power, its minimal control over circumstances governing its life.*”^{xviii} The peasants’ poverty and also – or especially – their lack of involvement in making decisions which affect their own lives thus form part of the anthropological definition of the peasantry.

In the case of under-developed societies such as Romania with its limited number of urban centers – or with weak urban centers – the question remains if the society as a whole could be considered rural. This distinction between a Little Tradition, embedded in the rural way of life,

with practices which remain unchanged for centuries, and a Great Tradition, i.e. a national culture, created outside the countryside is difficult to make in the context of Balkan societies which were still overwhelmingly rural at the beginning of the twentieth century and had only a scarce elite. The twentieth-century Romanian thinkers who equated the Little Tradition with the national Romanian culture largely ignored the similarities between peasant cultures across nations, but they appreciated correctly the absence of a consistent “Great Tradition” in a country like theirs, which had only in 1877 acquired its full independence from the Ottoman Empire.

All these anthropological definitions might **have retained a flavor of modernization and political development theories from the 1960s and 1970s**. Meanwhile, the world has evolved on all counts: poverty has decreased dramatically and the number of democracies is the highest ever encountered. Extensive modernization on all continents has certainly left fewer peasants in the world at large than they used to be. But peasants did not disappear. In many countries they seem to be particularly resilient.

The present book examines the political condition of the peasant throughout this process of ‘managed’ modernization, which Communist regimes carried to its last extreme. Managed modernization is not a natural process, such as the one which led to the emergence of West-European civilization as we know it today. That was a process essentially based on technological and industrial development. By contrast, managed modernization is *the attempt by domestic elites to replicate such historical developments with the declared aim of emulating and reaching the levels of Western development in their nations*. In other words, we refer to an *induced* process of social and political change, which, in various forms, pre-dated by fifty years the forced imposition of Communism and continued afterwards. This process was invariably a *reaction* to the economic success of Western societies: without the existence of this success model, it is certain that these elites would not have attempted to follow in the perceived footsteps of Western institutional development. They were guided by the hope that these would lead to economic and social development in their own society.

Political modernization is generally considered to be a two-tiered process. At one level, the aim is to create the nation’s citizens by increasing literacy amongst peasants, thus replacing local dialects with the national language and fostering the emergence of a national consciousness. A second objective is the extension of full political rights – i.e. franchise – to the entire national body, starting with universal manhood suffrage in the first instance. Social-economic and political modernization can be simultaneous or successive processes. As a rule, the West-European model presupposes the primacy of economic processes over the political. Technological developments, industrialization, a high rate of urbanization, and generalized market relations preceded – and even required – political liberalization in the West. The English

and French revolutions were largely determined by the need to bring in line the social and the political rights of social groups which found themselves politically excluded, in spite of their relative autonomy and affluence. However, as Andrew Janos observed^{xix}, in the case of Romania and in under-developed countries generally speaking, this process works in reverse. Political modernization occurs prior to developments in other areas. Peasants are herded from the Little Tradition straight to the ballot box and into the arms of professional demagogues and the tussle of electoral propaganda. They are enrolled in adult evening classes to be educated by enthusiastic teams of city-dwellers mobilized by the modernizing regime, such as the teams of sociologist Dimitrie Gusti, who taught them **everything from basic hygiene to Romantic poetry**. But economic and social development does not guarantee enough autonomy and affluence for the new citizens to become informed contributors to the political system and endorse its legitimacy. Instead, they are more often than not transformed into docile masses manipulated by unprincipled elites.

The processes of political modernization are fundamentally distorted under Communism. Literacy programs are supported on a massive scale, as well as indoctrination in social and national values, but this is where the resemblance with modernization elsewhere stops. Communism imposes one single political choice, thereby annulling rights conferred by citizenship: those who do not accept this particular choice are liable to lose all other rights, including the right to life or freedom. Communist regimes also pursued social and economic development, the goal that inter-war reformers had been following with methods ranging from state intervention (e.g. debt conversion or subsidies for agriculture) to enlisting volunteers for the 'enlightenment' of backward rural populations, but on a much wider scale and using more brutal methods. Their social intervention attempted to eliminate not only the class relations of pre-Communist Romania, but also basic features of historical under-development, which had much older roots. They targeted the lower urbanization, the absence of industry and, consequently, of a proletariat, as well as the comparative under-development in most areas of life (when compared to the West), from economy to culture, all issues which had haunted also Romania's pre-Communist modernizers. The attempt to use 'wholesale methods' to sort out centuries-old deficiencies in a short time, in the belief that societies can compress developmental stages while largely following a universal model, characterized not only the communists, but also radical Romanian reformers from Mihail Kogălniceanu^{xx} to the Peasant Party. Their intervention in the key area of the growth of the farming population occurred very late, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, when the basic set-up of large-scale landholdings coupled with extensive farming – very different from West-European practices, but typical of the East – had already been established. Although motivated essentially by the aim to create more equitable social arrangements and by the conviction that modernization, especially political modernization, was not possible otherwise, the

'enlightened' intervention in the agrarian question led, via a series of reforms, to quasi-total failure.^{xxi} The only success of these reforms was the ultimate emergence of a group – a mere minority among the peasantry initially, to become larger in the 1940s and 1950s – of an economically emancipated peasantry with the potential for becoming a class of rural farmers and entrepreneurs. For ideological reasons, it was precisely this class – the only group to resemble an autonomous middle class in a developed society – which was ultimately singled out for annihilation by the Communist regime as the main obstacle in the way of communizing the Romanian village. The regime then proceeded to launch modernization proper, starting with investment programs initially (such as electrification, for instance), and continuing later with more ambitious and complex ones, such as the systematization of villages in the 1980s, which had a social objective as well as an administrative one.

The contemporary traveler going from Tirana to Moscow and on to China, is bound to recognize everywhere, despite some local specificities, the same typical landscape of the Communist village, the joint product of social engineering and territorial planning. Such typical features are more pronounced, and the villages consequently more like each other, in areas where under-development was more entrenched, irrespective of whether the inhabitants were, or still are, Orthodox Christian, Catholic or Confucian. It is quite clear that *the degree of transformation of a given society by Communism depends on its prior stage of development. Using modernization as a pretext whenever it was a plausible option, Communism was more invasive and distorted social organization more profoundly in under-developed than in more advanced societies.* In Central Europe, especially in the Czech lands and in Bohemia, where the degree of urbanization was comparable to Western Europe, the Communist regime was constrained to build on pre-existing foundations and tolerate in the midst of its own project the remains of earlier history; in the rural areas and backward towns of Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Russia or China, where stone had rarely been used for building, the traces of the past were totally effaced, to be replaced by brand-new villages, built on the tried-and-tested, unique Soviet model. In this process, the old manors of the former land-owners were symbolically converted into head offices of collective farms (also called cooperatives or kolkhozes). In Romania, only the churches were left standing, but further east, even these were often demolished or converted.

The account presented in this volume uses the methods of political, sociological and ethnographic anthropology to offer a suggestive picture of this unprecedented exercise in social engineering. My aim has been less to offer circumstantial explanations for situations specific to Romania than to present *a model of coerced transformation and its consequences on individual and collective behavior.* How can societies defend themselves against violence and abuse from the state? Is it possible to put an end to the cycle of dependency? How many of the lasting effects

of coercive transformations were planned and how many resulted without the involvement of a structuring will? My chief field work has been an ethnographic study of two Romanian communes, Nucșoara-Argeș, notorious for its inhabitants' resistance to the imposition of Communism, and Scornicești-Olt, a commune famous for being the birthplace of Nicolae Ceaușescu, Romania's Communist dictator from 1964 to 1989. These study sites were not selected for their fame; rather the reasons conducive to their fame also determined their selection for our research. Nucșoara, the headquarters of one of the fiercest groups of anti-Communist partisans, was repressed with unparalleled violence. A mountain village, it remained un-collectivized. Scornicești, an impoverished village in the plains, was not only collectivized, but, as a great favor, systematized and industrialized, a real guinea pig for the Communist regime's successive agrarian policies. Together, the village in the mountains and the village in the plains encompassed a wide spectrum of the variation needed for the study, from individual property to collective property, and from maximum repression by the state to maximum investment. But despite the variation in conditions and state interventions between the two villages, their politics at the time of their selection was absolutely similar. They both voted for the post-Communist party, they did not tolerate any political dissent in the village and they were missing the former Communist regime.

The field research was conducted in the summer and fall of 2001. However, in order to be able to generalize my findings I also resorted to a larger survey, be representative of the entire Romanian population, of the rural population and of the population of the Argeș and Olt counties separately (and every other county). This mega-survey was conducted among 37,474 respondents by professional pollster CURS (the Romanian Centre for Urban and National Sociology) in October 2000 (Appendix 1) on the basis of a questionnaire designed by me. I also quote occasionally from other national representative polls that I have designed and carried out during my work as National Coordinator for the UNDP early warning system program.

This book is structured as follows: section two is an overview of the basic features of the two locations, from geography and social structure to their exceptional history. Further on, I analyze one by one four *strategies of domination* identified as essential in the creation of a dependent peasantry: the manipulation of property (section three), of social conflict (section four), of access to collective resources (section five) and of lifestyle (section six). In section seven I examine the impact of these Communist strategies on the Romanian village, and especially on its social structure and political behavior, as well as the resulting model, which I have called a *model of neo-dependency*. In the last, eighth section, I survey the agrarian policies of transition Romania before and after accession to the European Union in order to assess the future of the village and of the peasantry.

Social engineering on a gigantic scale, as practiced under Communism, is a rare occurrence, and optimists might think that such exercises belong to the past. This does not mean

that mechanisms comparable to those described by me in this book cannot be reproduced in another circumstance where a predatory elite gains access to similar resources, even though it may be in a more restricted space, and with fewer lasting effects. The causes of evil are, of course, the concern of theologians, not of social scientists. But the latter nevertheless have learned from fascist and Communist experiences, and particularly from the Holocaust, that evil happens, and that we must have some theory to explain its causes and effects. Societies can survive violence, but the cost of survival is often underestimated by victims and observers alike. Besides its modest contribution to social science, this book is also meant to bring to light a tragic and original collective experience which is worth the public knowledge – even if its survivors themselves would prefer to forget it.

ⁱ Palairot, *The Balkan economies*, 2003

ⁱⁱ Huntington, *Political order in changing societies*. 1956, p 292

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. Clark, *The Conditions of Economic Progress*, 1940, p. 41, 83.

^{iv} Mitranyi, *The Land and the Peasant*, 1930

^v The works of Verdery, Kideckel, Chirot, Klingman are notable in this respect.

^{vi} For the older tradition see Mitranyi 1930; 1951; Stahl 1998; Roberts 1951

^{vii} Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 1984

^{viii} Ion ILIESCU enjoyed two terms as the first post-Communist president of Romania between 1989 and 1996; he was reelected for yet another mandate between 2000 and 2004.

^{ix} Kutz and Barnes, *Political...*, 2002

^x Mungiu-Pippidi, *Politica dupa Comunism*, 2002

^{xi} Lucian BLAGA (1895-1961), Romanian poet and philosopher. In his *Trilogy of Culture* he presents rural Romania as the shelter of the true 'ethnic being'. He makes a distinction between two tiers of culture. On one side were the towns, the sites of political power and of interaction with the foreigners. On the other was the alternative village culture, perpetuated in unbroken continuity with the past and therefore the depository of true Romanianness. Blaga was persecuted in Stalinist times, but during the national Communist regime of Nicolae Ceausescu his work was largely rehabilitated.

In the inter-war period, this school of thought, which constructed an imaginary village into a site of the national ethnic spirit, co-existed with a powerful intellectual movement which had emerged around the 'sociological school' of Dimitrie GUSTI (1880-1955). For Gusti, the village was a socio-economic field which, with its modes of domination and exploitation, was the product of history. For this school, research into the rural world was a science steeped in a comparative-interdisciplinary approach the practical objective of which was to modernize villages. Henri H. STAHL (1901-1991) was the pre-eminent representative of this modernizing project.

^{xiii} Kroeber, in Foster, 48:284

^{xiv} Redfeld, *Peasant Society and Culture*, 1956.A

^{xv} Kroeber, quoted in Foster 1967, p. 2

^{xvi} Foster 1953:163

^{xvii} Wolff 1966 11

^{xviii} Foster, *Peasant Society*, 1967, p. 8.

^{xix} Janos, in Jowitt 1993.

^{xx} Mihai KOGĂLNICEANU (1817-1891) was a man of letters and major statesman, a promoter of the first land reform in Romania.

^{xxi} Roberts, *Romania*, 1951.