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**Between trade union internationalism and national
corporatism: forms and paths of workers`
organization in Romania (1921-1947)**

DOCTORAL THESIS
- Abstract -

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While in the Western scholarship the field of social history has experienced, in the last few decades, several shifts in its approach from a perspective now considered to be *old*, to what was known for a while as a *new* approach, and ultimately ended up exploring the global dimension of the theme, in Romania, this research field is still only vaguely outlined, looking rather out of fashion even before its onset. However, this situation has shown timid signs of change in the last few years, as several research endeavors have now taken shape. In fact, the current thesis also aspires at expanding the field, by orienting towards the recovery, through the lens of an institutional perspective, of the main strands and directions of workers' forms of organization that took shape in Romania between 1921 and 1947.

The current thesis encompasses the perspectives of various authors, such as Kenneth Jowitt¹, Cornel Ban² or Bogdan Murgescu³, and approaches the topic of workers' forms of organization through the concepts of dependency and development. In this sense, the term dependency illustrates the condition of the Romanian Principalities in connection with the Western societies starting with the second half of the 19th century, when, through the adoption of liberal institution and language, they sought to become intelligible and identifiable in their relation with the Western countries. Thus, as K. Jowitt argued, the

¹ Kenneth Jowitt, „The sociocultural bases of national dependency in peasant countries”, in Kenneth Jowitt (ed.), *Social change in Romania, 1860-1940: a debate on development in a European nation*, Research series (University of California, Berkeley. International and Area Studies) no. 36, Institute of International Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 1978.

² Cornel Ban, *Dependență și dezvoltare: economia politică a capitalismului românesc*[*Dependency and development: the political economy of Romanian capitalism*], Tact, Cluj-Napoca, 2014.

³ Bogdan Murgescu, *România și Europa: acumularea decalajelor economice (1500-2010)*[*Romania and Europa: The accumulation of economic gap (1500-2010)*], Polirom, Iași, 2010.

dependency was the product of a necessary, but premature adoption of a political format for which there was no well-defined social basis.

On the other hand, the concept of development refers to both the economic and social aspects. Following Cornel Ban's view, these characteristics target the mechanisms of Romania's slow-moving transition from a predominantly agricultural based economy towards one based on industry, but also the transition from a society lacking social rights (healthcare, education, workers' protection, etc.) towards one in which these rights began to be institutionalized and thus, universally accessed within the state's territory.

In this framework, our research of the main forms of workers' organization, captures, although not in a direct way, a series of dependency relations situated on various levels: on one hand, we are departing from the premise that the Romanian state was relating to the West and the international organizations (League of Nations, International Labor Organization) in the process of developing its own social policies. On the other hand, another dependency is identifiable in the case of workers' forms of organization in their relation with the policies adopted and implemented by the Romanian state, as the latter charted the general framework in which the former were allowed to function. Concomitantly, the same organisms, as long as the state allowed, guided their activities by the objectives and the tactics promoted by different international organisms in which the state was or was not engaged (ILO, International Federation of Trade Unions, Red International of Labor Unions, World Federation of Trade Unions).

Why a history of organization forms and not just a history of the workers' trade unionism? This option is based upon a series of realities which cannot be avoided. One of these is that of the social categories of interwar Romania. Although the nature and their outline were only vaguely shaped after more than a decade after the Union of

1918, Romania's level of economic development is the one that drew the general directions between an overwhelmingly agrarian sector and the much more timid ones of industry and commerce. Within these, the perspectives were rather diverse, as the big and small industrialists (or traders) were often situating themselves in opposing or parallel sides, as they were interacting at the same time with relatively new professional categories, those of the employees, portrayed by manual workers and private clerks. With such a diverse picture, it is understandable that the organization forms took various shapes, anchored more or less in the specific structures of the economic relations geared toward capitalism.

At the same time, the precarious nature of the available sources contributed to the repositioning of our analytical framework, in our attempt to transcend any ideological predispositions that could otherwise limit our perspective by focusing only on a specific form. Thus, the array upon which our analysis has developed is one stemming from the field of political science, namely one revealed a few decades ago by Gregory Luebbert about four ideal categories of organizing the labor force in the European sphere in the interwar period. The four typologies (pluralist, authoritarian, social-democratic and traditional dictatorship)⁴, allow us to integrate in a coherent analysis various forms of workers' organization and representation stemming from various angles and with different objectives, from the voluntary form of trade unions and their aspirations, to the all-encompassing system of chambers of labor controlled by the government, but also to the workers' guilds which were animated by political projects that sought to substitute the established forms.

⁴ See Gregory M. Luebbert, „Social Foundations of Political Order in Interwar Europe”, in *World Politics*, vol. 39, no. 4, July 1987, pp. 450-451.

While keeping away from a plain exposition of the social legislation during that time, our work has grounded one of its research pillars on the various legislative measures that sought to regulate employee (both manual workers and private clerks) organization and representation over time. Our take focuses on the main legislative provisions in as much as they can be integrated from a political, social and economic standpoint in their adoption and implementation. Concomitantly, although we acknowledge the guiding role of various laws that got under the scope of our research, we cannot overlook the fact that some of these did not find their practical implementation in the period, just as we cannot deny the existence of informal forms of association, which were not necessary designed to be integrated in specific legislative templates.

The temporal delineation of our research for the period of 1921-1947 is first of all motivated by the objectives of our endeavor. Although 1921 does not even remotely mark the birth of trade unions on Romanian territory, it does however, constitute a stepping stone in its evolution, through the prism of the first legislative measure that sought to regulate a *modus operandi* not only between the grievances of organized employees and their employers, but also with the state. In this respect, after the recognition of Greater Romania, the answers that were formulated to address the legislative unification (and not only) of the historical provinces, but also the desire to harmonize the trade unionism tradition from various territories all constitute essential aspects that influenced the evolution of these organizations in the interwar period.

Our period of interest was marked by multiple regimes in which the political parties had an oscillating influence on the legislative and social development of Romania, which was anchored in the Genevese system for most of the first interwar decade. In this context, the trade union organizations were a part of the Romanian

society that had to offer answers and solutions to the discontents and the problems generated by political and economic developments (such as the Great Depression of 1929-1933). In this sense, they found themselves justifying their existence when faced with other movements addressing the employees (e.g. Legionary Workers Corps), but also had to maintain an organizational coherence in their interaction with new institutions controlled or promoted by the state (Chambers of Labor, Labor Courts, Guilds).

For these reasons, the analysis of the workers' forms of organization and their place in the Romanian society is placed on the backdrop of the dynamics between the trade union internationalism and national corporatism, with the latter being perceived as the product of various attempts to offer solutions and mechanisms approved by the state in handling the relations between work and capital. Thus, our work refers to the term corporatism in its broadest sense, as long as it refers to the origins and the historical experience of this phenomenon up until World War II.

While in the case of trade unions we refer to these as to endeavors that sought, following different tactics, to blend the general principle of class struggle with the legislative compliance of various forms of expression, in the other cases we relate to them as to various attempts at integrating professional categories in the mechanisms and political projects of governments, animated by corporatist ideas, all placed in a strictly national context.

The current research covers the period up until the proclamation of the Popular Republic of Romania, a milestone which although does not fully explain the dynamic between trade unionist and corporatist institutional forms, it nevertheless marks the establishment of an organizational and legislative matrix that ensured the primacy of trade unionism, upon which the whole mechanism

devoted to all professional categories consolidated for more than four decades that followed.

Our work does not intend to substitute, or even more so, to disregard local history initiatives or case in point studies. In fact, in as much as the archival sources will hopefully become available with time, these kinds of researches are rather imperative. In this sense, our thesis proposes a new interpretative framework, with a general character, to support the justification of such endeavors.

Structure

In order to formulate and sketch the answers to the questions guiding our undertaking, our thesis consists of five parts. A first foray was the attempt to define and frame the trade unionist and corporatist phenomena at international level, by focusing on the role played by the idea of generally applicable social policies agreed by new mechanisms of interest representation of the employees, employers and of the governments in the new political, economic and social realities following the World War I. These clarifications were thus necessary not only for the interpretative framework of our thesis, but also for the justification of our understanding of the terms used.

The second part of our work was dedicated to the context in which the whole dynamic of trade unionism-corporatism took place. Whether we refer to the level of economic development and the associated social and professional categories, or to the main features of the social legislation that provided the framework of labor relations, all these aspects cannot be dissociated from the provisions of political representation or certain inherent restrictions in spite of declared liberties. Steering away from sterile expositions of the superstructure, we deemed appropriate the introduction of several interventions to reveal certain realities in which these ideas and projects had to ultimately find their practical implementation. Thus, this part was focused on drawing the Romanian social and legislative context after

the First World War and on highlighting the main measures that were adopted in terms of social policies towards closing the development gap between Romania and the Western World, a path on which the Romanian Principalities embarked on from the second part of the 19th century.

The third section was oriented towards the preeminent form of organization and representation, that of trade unions. As shown in our thesis, despite certain common doctrinal roots, trade union activities were marked by an accentuated fragmentation, a characteristic which was influenced by exogenous and endogenous factors. The demarcation of the main paths of trade union activities and their defining elements was made in relation to local, national and international activities, thus capturing their status as voluntary formations that constantly updated their objectives in their interaction with state authorities but also with other forms of worker organization that were active at European level.

The fourth chapter was dedicated to the activities from the corporatist sphere, whose characteristics changed throughout the interwar period. Stemming from parliamentary projects of labor representation, the chambers of labor became entities that had the difficult task of bringing together the interests of employees (manual workers, private clerks) with those of the craftsmen, in a context where the trade unionists aspired towards workers' primacy in representing labor's interests. Thus, the thirties were marked by the way in which various forms of organization and representation competed in attracting and organizing various professional categories, but also in handling the discontent arising from the labor relations. In this sense, we addressed forms of workers' organization supported by either competing political initiatives (the Legionary Movement), or the state, through a more or less poignant governmental control, such as the Chambers of Labor or the Guilds, all these up until the effects

of the outbreak of the Second World War categorially made their mark.

The last part of our thesis targeted the process of reorganization of the trade union movement in the Romanian sphere after the *coup d'état* on August 23rd 1944, which took place under both the auspices of political convulsions in the national sphere, but also under the influence of pre-existing tendencies in the international trade union interactions, based not in as much on a doctrinal or practical consensus, but rather vouched by the existence of a common enemy. In our analysis, we oriented towards issues concerning the internal changes withing the movement, but also on the alterations of the general registry in which these organisms were to carry out their activities.

Conclusions

The main objective of our thesis was to expose the dynamics between trade union and corporatist initiatives in terms of organizing and representing workers between 1921 and 1947 in Romania. The orientation towards corporatism, as a form of organizing the society which opposed the trade unionist visions, helped us capture in a diachronic manner, a series of mutations generated by the broader and long-lasting process of shifting from a preindustrial to an industrial economy. At the same time, the changes that occurred at the level of lawmaking and enforcing the labor relations were anchored in broader processes that took place at European level.

The idea of generally applicable international labor standards had to be accommodated at national level with the economic realities. Given that Romania experienced a slow transition process from a preindustrial economy to one with slightly more visible industrial notes, the country reached a 7 % industrial workforce out of the total population in 1938, while only 25% of the total workforce was integrated outside the agricultural sector. This was the broad picture in

which social policies and labor regulations required, at least theoretically, a tripartite accord between the state, employees and employers. Nevertheless, given that the categories of industrial and commercial workers remained relatively small, their power to impose their grievances was limited, even though their representatives were preoccupied with overlooking the respect of the labor legislation which was gradually developed through the interwar period.

Thus, a series of internal factors, such as the difficult relation with the revolutionary approach, or the relatively small number of workers, as well as a series of external factors, such as the legislative limits and the coercive framework in which the ongoing meetings were to take place, made it so that the trade union organizations and their leaders played only a reactive role, rather than an active one in the edification of social policies.

For this reason, reformist trade union leaders supported the corporatist idea of establishing Chambers of Labor, thus walking on the path of *class collaboration*, in order to promote their interest. Following the Austrian example which served as inspiration, trade union actions towards these state-controlled organizations were animated by the perspective of improving the organizational capabilities and `conquest` of certain positions which would otherwise be difficult to obtain.

Later on, justifiable both on doctrinal and tactical terms, the decision of reformist trade union leaders to take part in the new political context of 1938, was intended as a way of continuing and improving interest representation of those professional categories which were only marginally integrated in the process of public policy making. However, the support of endeavors with a strong corporatist tone led to a symbolic representation in the superior organisms of decision making, while the transformation of trade unions into guilds

led to the annulment of the horizontal based forms of workers organizations and their integration into new vertical structures.

Afterwards, the trade union organization in the fall of 1944 found itself in a position of unprecedented freedom, with the number of declared members overshadowing any membership statistics from the interwar period. Carried out initially without any specific law to regulate the establishment of such organizations, the trade union activity encompassed all professional categories, while the actions sought to be handled by a united trade union commission, approved by both social democrat and communist promoters. In this sense, the collaboration between the reformist and revolutionary side was not accidental, as it took place on the backdrop of several mutations that occurred at an international level, where the movements sought, although for only a brief moment, a common endeavor that would represent labor's interests in the postwar world organization (W.F.T.U).

Nevertheless, from an internal standpoint, the trade union leaders that rose to prominence after 1944 were not the established ones from the interwar period, as the latter ones were marginalized by both their former party and the communist sympathizers. This attitude foreshadowed the discreditation of the old leaders for their decision of joining the political project after 1938. If at the level of superstructure, the waters cleared rapidly, things were more complex at local level, as the trade union elections from 1945 to 1947 illustrated the divergent interests of the regular members, but also the stratagems deployed on these occasions for the seizure of trade union organizations by communist sympathizers, and their positioning on the path set by the party.

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