

## THE VIEW OF AN AMERICAN HISTORIAN ON ROMANIAN SOCIOLOGY

Michael M Cernea

Over the past half century, Professor Mihai Pop has contributed to the development of Romanian social anthropology, sociology and ethnography, both as a field researcher himself and as an able organizer of research teams and institutions. In addition, he has continuously endeavored, sometimes under adverse circumstances, to expand the communication between Romanian and American social scientists. I feel it therefore appropriate, as an homage to his dedicated efforts, to recall in this brief paper one little-known episode in the relationship between social sciences in the US and Romania.

This episode refers to a report on the status of the social sciences in the Balkans written some fifty years ago by an American historian, Professor Robert J. Kerner, *The Social Sciences in the Balkans and Turkey*, and published by the University of California Press in 1930. I “discovered” this report myself in 1980, while I spent a sabbatical year as a Fellow at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Social Sciences in Wassenaar.

Indeed, while reading Kerner’s book today, one is surprised to realize how some of the traditional constraints and limitations on social science in Romania are still present, and even aggravated and multiplied by more recent developments. Certainly, the current suffocation of Romanian sociology and its unhappy subservience to political impositions is not rooted in the situation of the 20s and 30s, but rather in profound present-day political, ideological and economic causes. But the historical record does help illuminate the plight of Romanian sociologists across time and social systems. This makes a reexamination of Kerner’s book quite interesting.

The historians of Romanian sociology (cf. Constantinescu, Badina and Gall, 1974) have meticulously collected and commented upon various analyses and descriptions of “The Romanian Sociological School” which were made by a number of American scholars in the late 1930’s. These early articles (cf. Mosley, n.d.) described how the empirical investigations in Romanian villages carried out by this school took off on a large scale. They are currently regarded as evidence of an early international recognition of the development of Romanian

sociology. Kerner's book, however, has not been "re-discovered", and apparently still remains virtually unknown in Romania. Yet this book offers a significant and detailed testimony of how an American scholar perceived the state of the art, the constraints and the needs of Romanian sociology half a century ago.

It is quite possible that Kerner was, in fact, the first to call the attention of the American sociological community to the sociological activities carried out in Romania by Dimitrie Gusti's "sociological school". Moreover, at the end of his comparative survey of social sciences in five countries (Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, Turkey and Yugoslavia), Kerner's assessment was that sociology was better developed in Romania than anywhere else among the countries studied.

In 1929, Robert J Kerner (see end note) undertook a study trip in the Balkans and in Turkey to carry out a survey of the resources for study and research in the social sciences in these countries. His personal belief was that, in the future, social scientists "would play the decisive role in consolidating these national states and in enabling them to take their proper place among the nations of Europe" (p. 9). With that guiding idea, he proceeded to visit the universities, to confer with the leading professors in the social sciences, and to meet with administrative officials, all in order "to make an attempt to understand what is being done to encourage research in the social sciences" (p. 10). In his study, the social sciences were understood to include Anthropology, Ethnology, Geography, History, Sociology, Political Science, Economics and Psychology. Kerner believed that the very existence of the Balkan nations of Europe would "depend upon the future development of knowledge in these fields in ever wider circles of each nation and upon the assistance that social scientists may be able to give in the solution of the difficult problems which face these Balkan nations" (p. 13).

The section on Romania in Kerner's book describes in detail the sociological curricula and activities in the country's main academic centers, their progress and the difficulties they were struggling with. At that time there were under 30,000 students in attendance at all Romanian universities. Kerner did not fail to notice the overcrowded classes or the fact that "the professors are paid very low salaries, preventing them from buying books and making trips of investigation during vacations, and forcing them... to seek additional employment as lecturers in other institutions or as advisers of the government, or to enter politics" (pp. 66-67).

At the University of Bucharest, Kerner came to know the internationally reputed Romanian sociologist Dimitrie Gusti and considered him "the guiding spirit in the Social Sciences at the University", reporting in detail on his multi-faceted activities. About Petre



Andrei, the other leading Romanian sociologist at that time, who taught at the University of Jassy, Kerner observed that he was “well read in the Anglo-Saxon literature in his field”. The account continues with detailed and accurate observations about the Universities of Cluj, Oradea Mare and Cernauti (the capital city of the Bucovina region, then belonging to Romania). “Taking it all in all,” Kerner summed up, “the impression one has of these institutions is that they do excellent undergraduate work for the licentiate, but that probably only the last year of that and the work for the doctorate should be regarded as advanced and research work” (p. 58).

Carefully assessing the resources for social science teaching and research, Kerner inevitably recognized a perennial problem of Romanian sociologists: the lack of funds for foreign books. “There is lacking, especially, a good library covering the field of sociology... Very little can be bought in high-priced currencies with one hundred or two hundred dollars”, wrote Kerner fifty years ago (1930: 60-61). Today, this message is echoed word for word in the repeated complaints of Romanian sociologists lacking adequate access to needed Western scientific books and prevented by currency difficulties or by the official censorship from getting the books or journals that they need. Nevertheless, Kerner found that, by the large, “the library facilities of Romania are better organized and more evenly distributed than those of any other Balkan country” (p. 59), a professional judgment which also reflects significantly on the quality of the libraries in the latter countries.

Turning to research activities *per se*, Kerner’s assessment was that “in sociology the leading work is done by the Romanian Institute of Social Science, whose director is Professor Dimitrie Gusti” and, further, that the quarterly journal published by the Institute (*Arhiva de Stiinta si Reforma Sociala*) was a “first-class sociological review” (p. 65). At that time, large-scale, empirical sociological studies were already underway in several village communities (at Nerej in 1927, at Fundul Moldovei in 1928 and Dragus in 1929). And, indeed, the Romanian sociological journals had started publishing extremely interesting research reports. But Kerner was not oblivious to the severe constraints on expanding these studies: “The Institute is in dire need of funds and for that reason its library is limited... It is likewise unable to encourage research in any particular problems because of the same lack of funds. Here is a worthy enterprise which should be assisted” (pp. 65-66).

Analyzing the drawbacks and their causes that he perceived, Kerner noted two other important factors besides the lack of government financial support. First, he pointed out the inadequate communication between Romanian sociologists and social scientists in other countries (difficulties of research travel beyond the frontiers, insufficient access to foreign



publications and libraries, etc.). Second, he described what he perceived as an exceptional individualism among social scientists “which makes cooperative work even inside any one of the sciences impossible” (p. 67). Kerner felt that there was no clear awareness among professors of the potential rewards of combined efforts for the purpose of common professional goals and research.

Small as the funds were, and limited as the human resources were, it was likely, Kerner thought, that more could have been done were it not for “the stark individualism of the professors in each field, even as against colleagues in the same subject... There is no conception, apparently, of the fact that many problems in the social sciences cannot be solved by one investigator alone, but require cooperation, and no realization, seemingly, of the stimulus and assistance afforded by the comradeship of other fellow-social scientist” (p. 135). This was true, Kerner believed, for the entire area he surveyed and he suggested that “the future awaits men who will take the leadership” which is necessary to bring about such changes in the social science community.

Kerner summed up his review on the five countries that he considered by stating that “in Romania sociology is better developed than anywhere else in the Balkans, but even here it is considered a branch of philosophy and is taught usually by professors who teach also some branch of philosophy” (p. 67). This was a very insightful appraisal. Kerner could not have foreseen how long it would take Romanian sociologists to insist upon the distinctiveness of sociology as a science and to obtain “independence” from the suffocating embrace of philosophy.

Although this trend began long before World War II, sociology’s independence in Romania was slow to come by. In the mid and late 1930s, empirical research had expanded considerably and those years can probably be regarded as the golden period of pre-war Romanian sociology. Since the end of World War II, however, sociology has had only a very short-lived period as an acceptable academic discipline.

In 1948, the new political system, using heavy-handed administrative methods, simply expelled sociology from all university curricula. Sociology was officially labeled a “bourgeois non-science”. Not only was it banished from teaching as an academic subject in universities, but research funds for sociological research were cut off and its legitimacy as a scholarly activity denied. This was much more, and much worse, than Kerner could ever have imagined when he wrote about sociology in Romania as a “branch of philosophy”, or about “apathy” and “medieval barriers”. The country’s new political system was determined to replace sociology with a self-serving ideology which described social reality as it “should be”,



rather than as it factually was. The regime did not shy away from any means of reaching its goal. It imprisoned and even lynched members of the old sociological school and imposed tight censorship on attempts by a new generation of researchers to revive genuine sociological endeavors. Somehow this situation changed around the mid 1960s (the cause of this revival deserve a special research analysis), but this period of relative tolerance by officials was a rather short-lived intermezzo.

Around mid-1970, the situation deteriorated sharply. Romanian sociology was again deprived of resources, stripped of the institutional gains it had briefly made and increasingly forbidden to call a spade a spade. Tight controls prevented the study of politically sensitive issues and sociologists were prevented from reporting truthfully on their findings. Its best researchers were threatened, dislocated academically, isolated from their professional peers in other countries and continually trampled under enormous ideological, political and administrative pressure.

This situation is, of course, far worse than Kerner could have anticipated and it lends itself to a different kind of analysis, beyond the scope of this article. Let us therefore return to Kerner's significant overall conclusions identifying what were then the "greatest needs" to insure the progress of social sciences in the entire area he studied:

"1. Better salaries for the professors...

2. The professors should be given opportunities to *travel beyond the frontiers for purposes of research* and the most necessary *recent works* and *periodicals* should be procured for them.

3. The academies and learned societies might *take stock of the situation in a concerted manner*. But before this can happen medieval barriers must be broken down and new ideas and new men must appear on the scene. It may well be that all this may best be accomplished by the creation of national research councils for the social sciences in each of the countries mentioned after the pattern worked out in the United States. In this way alone will the apathy, which generally exists, disappear, and courage will spring up to proceed along lines where progress is possible" (p. 136).

Thus, Robert J. Kerner pointed out a number of the social structural causes of the limitations faced by Romanian sociology half a century ago. This is the most comprehensive description and analysis of Romanian sociology by a foreign scholar in the period from the 20's to the 30's.

It would be a fascinating challenge for any student of the sociology of science to examine comparatively, after fifty years, the position and prognosis of Romanian sociology

within a changed societal context, in particular, in light of Kerner's insights, criticism and pointed recommendations.

### References

1. Constantinescu M., Ov. Badina and E. Gall - 1974, *Gandirea Sociologica din România* (Sociological Thinking in Romania), Bucharest: Meridiane Publishing House.
2. Kerner, Robert Joseph - 1930, *The Social Sciences in the Balkans and Turkey*, Berkeley: University Of California Press.
3. Mosely, Phillip - n.d., "Un American in Satul Sant" (An American in Sant Village), *Arhiva de Stiinta si Reforma Sociala*.

### Note

1. Robert J. Kerner had a distinguished career as a historian, initially at the University of Missouri and then at the University of California, where he became Sather Professor of History. Among his several books are: *Slavic Europe: A Selected Bibliography* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1918); *The Urge to the Sea: The Course of Russian History* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1942 and 1946).