CURRENT REAPPRAISALS OF THE FOUNDER OF ROMANIAN SOCIALISM

By George Cioranescu

Summary: Romanian critic and political thinker Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea (1855-1920) is worth mentioning in any review of Romanian literature and sociopolitical thinking. Some of his merits were recognized even before the beginning of the communist regime: he was considered the founder of a materialistic literary criticism through which he pointed out the social significance of the work of some Romanian classics, such as Mihail Eminescu, Ion Luca Caragiale, George Cosbuc, and Alexandru Vlahuta; his second merit was to have been among the founders, leaders, and ideologists of Romanian social democracy. Despite his indisputable merits as a popularizer of Marxism and the moving spirit behind many Romanian social-cultural working class publications, Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea was condemned, by the Fifth RCP Congress in 1931, by communist leaders Lucretiu Patrascanu in 1945 and Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej in 1961, as an anti-Marxist and opportunist who evidently considered the working class as towing the line of the bourgeoisie that doomed it to passivity. Partly rehabilitated by Nicolae Ceausescu in 1966, Dobrogeanu-Gherea is at present being re-examined by the communist magazines Era Socialista and Viata Economica and considered as an original ideologist who "contributed to the development of universal and Romanian economic thinking" leading "further to the Marxist analysis of some economic categories, phenomena, and processes." It is particularly emphasized that he provided "an original Romanian contribution to the substantiation of the Marxist conception concerning the development of capitalism in agriculture" valid for the specific situations in the agrarian countries.

The ideologist and literary critic Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea appears to be on the way to becoming one of the most controversial figures in the history of the Romanian socialist movement. A new appraisal of his position has deservedly acknowledged him to be the founder of the Romanian school of Marxist thinking, and has even accorded him the position of a Marxist thinker who contested some of Marx's conclusions.
The stature of Dobrogeanu-Gherea in Romanian history has recently been reconsidered by two important Romanian periodicals that have taken up the subject simultaneously. (1) While some of Dobrogeanu-Gherea's merits have always been recognized, particularly his efforts to disseminate Marxist ideas and introduce a materialistic outlook in Romanian aesthetics, his role as a socialist doctrinaire has often been severely criticized from the point of view that his theories were basically Menshevik, and therefore exerted a baleful influence upon the development of the workers' movement in Romania.

Dobrogeanu-Gherea (2) was born in the Ukraine and in his youthful years was influenced by the Russian revolutionaries Herzen, Belinski, Chernyshevski, and Dobrolyubov. (3) In 1875, he was compelled to emigrate, and at 20 settled in Romania, where he helped spread the revolutionary literature published in Geneva, Paris, and London to his native Ukraine. Following contact with Russian revolutionaries who had emigrated to the West, Dobrogeanu-Gherea began to draw closer to Marxism and started organizing the first workers' circles in Romania. Through the magazines he edited or for which he wrote (4) and his studies, (5) Dobrogeanu-Gherea made a considerable contribution to the spreading of Marxism in Romania. (6)


(2) Dobrogeanu-Gherea was born Konstantin Katz, a Russian subject born into a Jewish family at Slaveanka in the Ukrainian province of Yekaterinoslav, now Dnepropetrovsk, on 31 May 1855. He died in 1920.

(3) Aleksandr Ivanovich Herzen (1812–1870); Vissarion Grigorievich Belinski (1811–1848); Nikolai Gavrilovich Chernyshevski (1829–1889); and Nikolai Aleksandrovich Dobrolyubov (1836–1861).

(4) Contemporanul, Revista Sociala, Emanciparea, Critica Sociala, Literatura si Stiinta, Lume Noua Literara si Stiintifica, etc.

(5) "Karl Marx si economistii nostri" (Karl Marx and Our Economists), Revista Sociala, Jassy, I, No.5, 1894; "Ce vor socialistii romani. Expunerea socialismului stiintific si programul socialist" (What Do the Romanian Socialists Want? An Account of Scientific Socialism and of the Socialist Program) (Revista Sociala, Jassy, I, Nos.8, 9, 10, and 11, 1885–1886; "Conceptia materialista a istoriei" (Materialist Conception of History), Bucharest, 1892; "Anarhism so socialism" (Anarchism and Socialism), Munca, Jassy, 1894; "Din ideile fundamentale ale socialismului stiintific" (from The Basic Ideas of Scientific Socialism, Bucharest, 1906); Neobiobagia (Neo-Scientism), Bucharest, 1910; "Asupra socialismului in tarile inapoiate" (Socialism in Backward Countries), Postscript to the Romanian translation (Basele social-democratiei) of Karl Kautsky's book The Basis of Social Democracy, Bucharest, 1911; "Studii critic" (Literary Studies), Bucharest, 1890, 1891, 1897, 1925–1927, etc.

Dobrogeanu-Gherea's indisputable merits were nevertheless disputed -- first in 1925 by the RCP CC plenum and the Central Auditing Commission, which emphasized that Dobrogeanu-Gherea had erroneously maintained that the future of the workers' movement in Romania depended on the evolution of the Western workers' movement. Criticism of Dobrogeanu-Gherea resumed at the 1931 Fifth RCP Congress, which "demolished Dobrogeanu-Gherea's wrong theories," after analyzing the situation in our country, the character and prospects of the revolution in Romania, and of the role of the proletariat. (7) Dobrogeanu-Gherea's legalist tactics (he considered the 1907 peasant revolution harmful) also attracted severe criticism from the communist leader Lucretiu Patrascanu. (8) Criticism of Dobrogeanu-Gherea was resumed by Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, who reproached Dobrogeanu-Gherea for failing to evaluate correctly the state of Romania's economic development at the time when he was describing it as a backward country. In Gheorghiu-Dej's opinion, since the Romania of pre-World War I days had been a country in which capitalism was in full sway, the significance of the proletariat was therefore also growing. In other words, Dobrogeanu-Gherea had failed to confer upon the Romanian proletariat the Leninist role of a hegemonic power in the process of completing the bourgeois-democratic revolution; instead, he had adopted the Menshevik theory, according to which that role allegedly fell to the bourgeoisie. Gheorghiu-Dej went on to say that Dobrogeanu-Gherea had worked out anti-Marxist theories condemning the working class to passivity and ignoring the reserves of revolutionary energy in the peasants. (9)

The rehabilitation of Dobrogeanu-Gherea as a Marxist economist and socialist militant began only in 1966, at the celebration of the 45th anniversary of the founding of the RCP, when Nicolae Ceausescu said:

The theoretical achievements of Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea, one of the most prominent socialist thinkers of our country at that time, played a particularly significant role in helping to clear up the country's social issues. Despite its limitations and shortcomings, Dobrogeanu-Gherea's work occupies a most significant place in the history of the social sciences in Romania, in the dissemination of Marxist ideas, and in helping develop a revolutionary outlook among the proletariat. (10)

(7) Radu Pantazi, *Filozofia marxista in Romania* (Marxist Philosophy in Romania), Bucharest, 1963, p. 177.


(10) Nicolae Ceausescu, "The Romanian Communist Party -- Continuer of the Revolutionary and Democratic Struggle of the Romanian People, of the Traditions of the Workers' and Socialist Movement in Romania," in Romania pe drumul dezaviririi constructiei socialiste (Romania Along the Path of Completing Socialist Construction), Volume I (Bucharest, 1968), p. 345.
Following closely in Ceausescu's footsteps, contemporary Romanian historian Damian Hurezeanu, who had prepared a volume of Dobrogeanu-Gherea's sociopolitical works, said that Dobrogeanu-Gherea had been "an outstanding socialist thinker in Romania, despite the inconsistencies and limitations that mark his work." (11) Hurezeanu added that his collection of texts "represents only one step in the reconsideration of Dobrogeanu-Gherea's sociopolitical thinking" (p.64), indicating that the process of reviving the ideas expressed by the founder of socialism in Romania might continue.

Whereas earlier scholars had agreed that "Dobrogeanu-Gherea's erroneous ideas were manifest in his very first works," (12) more recent reviewers of Dobrogeanu-Gherea's work, such as V. Iota, maintain that he had shown real propensity as a creative theoretician from his very first efforts, giving as an example the study "Karl Marx and Our Economists" (13), where Dobrogeanu-Gherea did not confine himself to popularizing the ideas contained in Volume I of Marx's Das Kapital; he tried to delve deeper into Marxist analysis of some economic processes, developments, and categories such as: capitalist social production and economic crises, ground rent and agricultural relations, the social contradictions of capitalism, the problem of competition and the equalization of profit, classification of the main trends and schools of economic thinking, etc. It is worth emphasizing that these matters were tackled by Marx more thoroughly only in Volumes II to IV, which were published after Dobrogeanu-Gherea's study had appeared. V. Iota wound up by saying that "Dobrogeanu-Gherea went beyond the above-mentioned authors /Adam Smith, Ricardo, de Sismondi, Proudhon, and Lassals/, sometimes coming very close to what were then Marx's still unpublished conclusions."

To Dobrogeanu-Gherea was also ascribed the merit of supporting Romania's industrialization. It is admitted that other Romanian thinkers who were his contemporaries, such as Mihail Kogalniceanu (1817-1891), Petre S. Aurelian (1833-1909), and Alexandru D. Xenopol (1847-1920), had also worked for industrialization as having "merits that can be neither contested nor underestimated"; but, unlike the bourgeois thinkers, Dobrogeanu-Gherea spoke out in favor of "big enterprise industry, for big factory production based on the latest conquests of science and technology, for this is the only path toward

(11) Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea, Scrieri social-politice (Sociopolitical Writings, (Bucharest, 1968), p. 11.


(13) "Karl Marx si economistii nostri," Revista Sociala, Jassy I, April 1884, pp. 6-20.
rapid progress, an essential if both labor productivity and the national income are to be increased. . . ." The way in which Dobrogeanu-Gherea's views on industrialization are presented reminds one more of the current concerns of the regime than of Dobrogeanu-Gherea's own opinions -- at least, whenever emphasis is laid on the fact that industrialization strengthens national independence, makes optimal use of a country's natural resources, and increases the range of exported products.

Nevertheless, it is in his ideas on agriculture that Dobrogeanu-Gherea had been most attacked and is nowadays being rehabilitated. In Dobrogeanu-Gherea's opinion, the peasant issue had to be settled by the bourgeoisie through a reform that would introduce capitalist relations into the farming sector to substitute for those of a feudal type which, he said, characterized Romanian country life. Dobrogeanu-Gherea's theory was opposed by the Soviet scholar Timov (14) who maintained that Dobrogeanu-Gherea's was a liberal, antiproletarian concept that reflected neither the interests of the workers nor those of the poor peasants, and expected to get from the boyars privileges to mitigate social conditions in the countryside. Timov added that this was a treacherous theory that denied the peasantry its revolutionary role. (15) This line of argumentation was taken up by Gheorghiu-Dej who, in turn, said that Dobrogeanu-Gherea was condenning the working class to passivity. Nowadays, however, it is felt that the theory of neo-serfdom "should be reevaluated in a more rigorously scientific manner," since the criticism originally made of it has proved unfounded. Far from denying the existence of capitalist relations in Romanian farm life, Dobrogeanu-Gherea correctly understood what the development of agriculture along capitalist lines really meant. (16) Dobrogeanu-Gherea did not fall into the error of underestimating bourgeois relations and overestimating feudal ones; he correctly appraised them, starting from the nature of the relations of labor and land allotment in the agricultural field, and his demonstrations "correctly reflected the essence of the agricultural conditions existing in Romania at that time." In other words, the "rotten" theory of neo-serfdom is now considered to be "indisputably the best argued, most profound, and engaging pleasing, constituting an original Romanian contribution to the substantiation of the Marxist outlook on the development of capitalism in agriculture." (17) Iota's praise of Dobrogeanu-Gherea's major work, Neo-Serfdom, fundamentally contradicts the negative evaluation to be found in the current edition of The Romanian Encyclopedic Dictionary. The latter source states that Neo-Serfdom has erroneously interpreted data on Romania's socioeconomic

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(14) Solomon Samuilovich Timov, Agrarnye voprosy i krest'ianskoe dvizhenie v Rumynii: Anti-neoioobaga (The Agrarian Question and Peasant Holdings in Romania: Anti-Neo-Serfdom), (Moscow, 1929).

(15) Mihail Roller, Scrieri istorice si social-politice (Historical and Social-political Works). (Bucharest, 1957), pp. 95-96.


(17) V. Iota, op.cit., Part II.
development by "metaphysically separating the superstructure from the economic base" and by formulating a downright "anti-Marxist" conception.

Dobrogeanu-Gherea's views had been labeled anti-Marxist because their author had adopted some views of the conservative-minded Titu Maiorescu (1840-1917) who felt that bourgeois sociopolitical forms, borrowed from the West and corresponding neither to Romania's native conditions nor to its stage of evolution, had been introduced in Romania. But Marxism maintained exactly the contrary; it advocated that forms must adjust to substance, that sociopolitical forms must follow changes in methods of production and allocation of economic wealth. Therefore, Dobrogeanu-Gherea admitted that, in Romania, there was both a certain (feudal) base and a superstructure distinct from that base (in this specific case, a bourgeois one), and this was considered to be "an anti-Marxist, idealistic, and metaphysical thesis." (18)

In the end, however, Dobrogeanu-Gherea was absolved of these charges, too, when it was decided that his statements referred not to the social issue of the entire country, but specifically to the agricultural problem, "even if some portions of his work could be interpreted in a broader sense." (19) So far as an analysis of the agricultural situation in Romania goes, current reviewers of Dobrogeanu-Gherea's theories not only agree that these theories are now considered right, but even maintain that they contain the "exceptional merit" of having brought the peasant issue to the attention of the European socialist parties. Starting from an analysis of Marx's model, based on the social structure existing in his day in Great Britain -- a model considered dogmatic and generalized -- socialist circles denied the peasantry both a positive role in political activeness and as the main ally of the proletariat. Dobrogeanu-Gherea, however, was bold enough to rethink these doctrinal postulates in a creative manner and pass them "through a selective filter," thus granting the peasantry "a particularly significant role." In doing so, "Dobrogeanu-Gherea took social reality into account, not trying to adopt the program of a socialist party from some other European country, but working out his own original program that would reflect Romania's own sociopolitical development." (20)

The prevailing agricultural character of the Romanian economy singled Romanian socialism out in the concert of European socialism. The Romanian socialists, headed by Dobrogeanu-Gherea, decided to

(18) Radu Pantazi, op.cit., p. 175.
(19) V. Iota, op.cit., Part II.
(20) Z. Ornea, op.cit.
present their experiences for discussion at socialist international tribunals, the Second International Congress in Brussels (1891), where a report on the matter was presented, and the Zurich Congress (1893). At that time, Dobrogeanu-Gherea maintained that the answer found on the agricultural issue would prove decisive for the future of the socialist movement in agricultural countries, of which there were many including Russia. He added that the agricultural issue should also concern the socialist parties in the industrially developed countries. Finally, the Romanian socialist ideologist also maintained that, in order to settle this question of doctrine, Marx's and Engels's texts had to be studied anew, so that new doctrinal and tactical understanding, valid for the specific situation of agricultural countries, could be worked out. In working out a socialist agriculture doctrine, "the Romanian fighters found themselves left to their own devices and thus obliged to blaze a new trail to socialism." (21)

In reviewing this continuing tendency to over- and underestimate Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea, one can only say that the pioneer of Marxism in Romania and founder of Romanian scientific socialism deserves "ni cet excès d'honneur, ni cette indignité."

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(21) Ibid.