

Working the Field: Rural Experts and the ‘Agrarian Question’ in the Romanian Principalities 1864-1914

Raluca Muşat

This paper deals with the birth of the ‘rural expert’ and the rise of a sociological way of seeing the countryside in the Romanian Principalities between the land reform of 1864 and the First World War. My main argument is that direct social investigation of the countryside contributed to the transformation of the ‘agrarian question’, as seen by those charged with studying it, from an economic into a social issue. To demonstrate this, I will concentrate on the development and evolution of two fieldwork practices – travel and writing – as they appear in the works of three Romanian rural specialists, relating them to the country’s socio-economic context. In particular, I set their work against the background of the 1864 land reform and the 1888-9 and 1907 peasant uprisings. Firstly, I use these examples to illustrate how scholars theorised and justified the way they travelled to and inside the countryside as part of their profession and to understand how changes in the means of transport and attitudes to travel affected their writings. Secondly, I relate this to the style of writing produced by these scholars with a view to exploring how the experience of the field was articulated in a particular style and form. I argue that the trajectory of these studies went from extensive travels and broad surveys of agricultural production to intensive local monographs that scrutinised all intimate aspects of peasant life, thus extending the scope of the research from the economic to the social in all its manifestations. Thirdly, I relate my findings to the agrarian question and discuss the way these scholars tackled it in their works.

I start with a short historical overview of the Romanian agrarian question (*chestiunea agrară*) from the mid-nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century, followed by a few theoretical clarifications about the role of social sciences in modern governance and the place of fieldwork as a method of producing knowledge about the peasantry. The main body of the paper will then discuss the rise of the rural expert through three examples: Ion Ionescu de la Brad, George Maior, and Vasile Gîdei, focusing on their travel experiences and the different styles of writing about the peasantry.

The Agrarian Question

The context in which the development of rural fieldwork occurred was one of modernisation and state building. The de facto unification of the two Romanian Principalities, Moldova and Wallachia, in 1859 marked the country’s official opening to European political and cultural models (and institutions). This was preceded by the area’s entry into the global economic market (the Treaty of Adrianople)¹ that had already led to radical socio-economic changes particularly in agricultural production. In a short period of time Romania moved from an agriculture based predominantly on

¹ Concluding the Russo-Turkish War, 1828-1829 between Russia and the Ottoman Empire, the Peace Treaty of Adrianople forced the Ottoman Empire to open navigation on the Danube and the Black Sea through the Dardanelles, thus liberating commerce for cereals, live stock and timber. This impacted on Romanian agriculture by transforming a predominantly small-scale animal raising country into an extensive cereal farming one that, by the First World War, became one of the greatest wheat and maize exporters in the world (Stahl 1980, 95).

small-scale animal husbandry to one based on extensive cereal farming, becoming one of the greatest exporters of corn and wheat in the world (Roberts 1951, 9). This shift, coupled with other cultural and political factors had a dramatic impact on the country's social structure, opening up a gulf between the rural lower classes and the landowners, as well as between the countryside and the city.

Two moments were decisive in the transformation of agrarian relations in Romania. Firstly, the 1864 land reform that sealed a new agricultural arrangement, and secondly, the 1907 peasant revolts that signaled the crisis of this socio-economic system. The land reform was initially meant to free the Romanian peasantry from its feudal burdens and transform them into efficient small agricultural producers through a substantial transfer of land. After great political struggles, the law formally abolished serfdom and gave an average of thirty per cent of the lands to the peasantry, with the landowners receiving compensation. Yet, in reality the boyars were the actual beneficiaries, with the reform pushing the peasantry into a new regime of dependency (Chirot 1976, 125).² As David Turnock suggests, the reform was 'a cynical device to hold the peasantry on their small plots and keep them available as labourers on the *latifundia*; in this way more wheat could be pushed onto the foreign world markets' (Turnock 1986, 18). Despite the apparent democratisation of the state, seemingly finalised by the crowning of Carol I as Prince of Romania in 1866 and by the adoption of a liberal constitution modeled on that of Belgium, the life of the peasantry deteriorated, entering what some scholars have called a 'new serfdom' (Anderson 1974, 390-1; Dobrogeanu-Gherea 1910; Stahl 1980). Romanian agriculture relied on the work, animals and tools of a semi-serf peasantry managed by *arendași* (estate managers) who ran the estates for the absentee boyars. The pressures of exporting for the global capitalist market did not lead to a modernisation of agricultural production and machinery. Instead, it made the Romanian peasants doubly dependent – not only on the boyar, but also on the price of grain on the European commodity markets (Chirot 1989; Stahl 1980).³ As time passed, the average plot size held by individual peasants decreased through inheritance, leading to even greater poverty in the countryside.

By the late nineteenth century the term 'agrarian question' was widely used to describe the crisis and the heated debates about the need to reform the system (Turnock 1986, 23). The catalysts of this *prise de conscience* were the 1888-9 and the 1907 peasant revolts (Chirot and Ragin 1975, 428-444; Eidelberg 1974).⁴ These large-scale bloody uprisings brought a violent and enraged peasant to the centre of

² 'The terms of the reform ended the corveé and tithe obligations and finally established full private property rights over land. Former corveé peasants (*clăcați*) received title over their houses or garden plots and to varying amounts of farming land, according to the number of oxen they had' (Chirot 1976, 125).

³ Chirot and Stahl have shown that Ottoman domination meant that feudal relations were never fully instituted in the Romanian states. The peasantry was never totally enserfed either by the local boyars (because they did not have ownership of the land) or by the Ottomans directly (as they did not have direct control on the ground). Instead, the rural population was controlled by local boyars who had to supply Istanbul with the tithe collected from the agricultural producers (Chirot 1976; Stahl 1980).

⁴ After smaller local uprisings in 1888-9, the peasant masses joined in a great rebellion that spread rapidly, menacing landowners and estate managers (*arendași*) across the country. As the revolt grew in proportion, the Conservative government in Bucharest resigned giving way for the Liberals to step in. The new government sent the army into the villages who bloodily put down the rebellion (Eidelberg 1974, Chirot and Ragin 1975).

intellectual debates, leading to a wave of investigations of and positions relative to the causes of the revolts and the measures to be taken in the future. It was not until the First World War that King Ferdinand promised the long-awaited further redistribution of land to his peasant troops. After a long debate and several draft versions, the reform was passed in 1921, in a form that, yet again, was not in the peasants' best interest. These two historical moments, combined with other shifts in the academic world, in the villages and in the economic markets, brought the rural into the centre of public attention and facilitated the birth of specialised knowledge about the countryside through the sustained investigation of the peasantry by scholars of different disciplines.

Social Sciences, the State and the Agrarian Question

The agrarian question is essential to the understanding of the rise of social sciences in the Romanian Principalities. Eric Wolf has usefully suggested that the terms 'society' and 'social' only appear within and refer to a certain world order, a particular political system of thought, and to a specific state of economic development (Wolf 1988, 759).⁵ Thus, the Romanian concern with 'the social' is bound to the particular context of a modernising agrarian state and to the debates over the future of the peasantry that constituted the agrarian question. This context included a major contradiction: although the Romanian state created a regime of neo-serfdom in the countryside and continued to rule through old-style coercive practices, modern ideas about governance made their entry into the public sphere - in particular after the 1848 revolutions. Many of these ideas came with intellectuals trained abroad who either joined in the state apparatuses and administration or formed a public sphere from which they criticised the state. Either way, they became the producers of a great deal of specific knowledge about the country's population, the majority of which was formed by the peasantry: in 1899, 81 per cent of the Romanian population was rural (Chirot and Ragin 1975, 432). Thus, unlike in Western countries where academic disciplines such as statistics, demography, sociology and other social sciences came out of the need for states to know their subjects in order to govern them efficiently (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982, 137), in Romania, the academic interest in social issues and especially in the countryside appeared out of the negotiation between the façade of modern state politics, the reality of neo-serfdom and the pressure of the new intellectual elites that criticised the state and tried to propose models for change. In what follows, I will analyse the writing and research practices of three scholars who, unlike many of their contemporaries, engaged with the agrarian question and proposed direct fieldwork-based investigation of the countryside as the most reliable way to know and reform Romanian agriculture and its peasant population. My argument is that the socio-political context coupled with their experience of the field transformed the way these scholars looked at the countryside and the agrarian question from an economic to a social gaze.

Many of the different positions towards the countryside have been studied in depth (e.g. the *poporanism*, *sămănătorism*, *țărâanism* movements), but little or no attention has been given to the research methods that underlie these positions.⁶ Contemporary

⁵ Eric Wolf writes that 'it is important, therefore, to recognize that the concept of Society has a history, a historical function within a determinate context, in a particular part of the world' (Wolf 1988, 759).

⁶ For works on *sămănătorism* see Ornea 1971 and Hitchins 1994, 292-334; for *poporanism* see Alexandrescu 1999, 91-124. On sociology in the field see Stahl 2001 and Bădina 1966.

to the rise of Western social sciences and social work practices, the Romanian scholars mentioned in this paper went to the countryside, spoke to people, stayed in their homes and wrote accounts of their travels that incorporated and made sense of these experiences within a scientific framework. The authors discussed here illustrate the rise of a specific style of writing about the peasantry in Romania – the village monograph – and its variants from the regional to the national survey to the intensive study of a specific site.

In what follows, I will deal with the subtle changes in the mode of travel and in the writing of three Romanian social scientists: Ion Ionescu de la Brad, George Maior and Vasile Gîdei. They do not represent clear phases in the evolution of social research, but presences in a changing rural ‘field’ that actively demanded description and interpretation.

In the difficult task of selecting the most relevant examples for this paper, my main criterion was the use of direct means of investigation, which ruled out all other writers who preferred to use secondary sources in discussing the agrarian question. Related to this, I looked for a description of the fieldwork experience itself, preferably complete with an assessment of the methods used. Thus, Ionescu de la Brad, the pioneer of field research and of the rural monograph in Romania, was a simple choice. His work was also a generous source on methodology, travel and the experience of fieldwork in 1860s Romania. Unlike him, Maior is a less known and less researched scholar who was overshadowed by his more famous contemporary, P.S. Aurelian. I chose Maior because, unlike Aurelian,⁷ he conducted fieldwork and thus provided much greater insight into what it meant to undertake such research. Thus, in his *România agricolă*, Maior offers an overall account of the Romanian countryside that preserves the emotions of travel writing and discusses at length the experiences of his direct study. Finally, A.V. Gîdei was chosen to represent a trend of village monograph writing that first appeared in the early 1900s, in response to the state initiative of improving knowledge about the peasantry. Amongst many others, Gîdei stood out for producing a set-questionnaire for his research that was used as a model by other writers for all their own village monographs. His work allowed me to see behind the scenes of his research and to compare his questions to the end-result of the investigation.

Ion Ionescu de la Brad - the Pioneer of Field Research

Pioneering the use of statistics coupled with direct observation, Ion Ionescu de la Brad made one of the first scientific attempts to research the social changes that affected the Romanian peasantry and agriculture before and after the 1864 land reform. Financed by the Moldovan prince Mihai Sturza, he studied agronomy in France, where he honed his research techniques (Stahl 2001, 163-8). Throughout his entire life, Ionescu travelled extensively. Born in Moldova, he was forced to cross into Wallachia to escape possible arrest by the Russians after the 1848 revolution. Later he fled to Transylvania, but was afterwards exiled to Constantinople (Ionescu-Sisești 1943, ix-x). This mobility helped him adapt to different people and places, and trained his gaze for scientific travel. On his return to Wallachia, Ionescu was co-opted into the discussions about land reform and later became an agricultural inspector, a position that allowed him to travel to and study the countryside.

Before studying Romanian agriculture, Ionescu travelled within the Ottoman Empire. In the introduction to his *Excursiune agricolă în Dobrogea 1850* written for

⁷ See Aurelian, 1880.

the *Journal de Constantinople* during his exile in the Ottoman capital, Ionescu noted:

There are different ways to travel; I tried them all. The first trip, to the Vosgs, while I was studying agriculture in Roville, lasted 10 days and it was very difficult, as I walked carrying a rucksack on my back. (...) The best agricultural trips are conducted in this way, since, following the example of all famous agronomists, travel is the best way to study and improve agriculture. Thus, the French have never hesitated to designate inspectors who journey through France and even abroad and produce reports for the Ministry of Commerce and Agriculture. They travel by coach, crossing the lands at great speed, stopping only in the most important ones, at the most famous agriculturists and best-known farms. I travelled like this in France, Germany, England, but I am not a partisan of this type of excursion. (...) In the case of Turkey, I think it is best to imitate the British Arthur Young, who is known as the king of farmers, and who used to travel in a jaunting cart though France during the Revolution; this way you can stop wherever you find interesting things and also you can go quickly through the places that are not worth great attention (Ionescu de la Brad n.d., 114-5).⁸

The quote reveals not only the importance of travel as a knowledge experience, but also the different modes of travel and their implication for the type of knowledge produced. Throughout his career, Ionescu opted for the middle way between the slow pace of the wanderer and the velocity of the coach. In this we can read that the scientist did not seek the picturesque in his travels, but true and relevant data. This is also the case for the village monographs Ionescu produced while he worked as an agricultural inspector in Romania.

The three in-depth regional studies, later known as his monographs, described two border counties and an inner one, Dorohoiu, Putna and Mehedinți.⁹ These writings were the product of extensive expedition-like travel, (*'din sat în sat'*), undertaken as a requirement of the new position with the state administration. There is nothing exotic or adventurous about his travels, which he called 'investigations'. His style is scientific and rational, like his choice of transport. They deal with the state of Romanian agriculture after the 1864 land reform, seen as the main branch of the national economy (Biji 1969, 45). Their scope is clearly enunciated:

To record what is and to suggest what should be (...) is the two-fold scope of the investigations that we are presenting in this book whilst having in sight the higher aim of improving of our agriculture, which in turn will raise the degree of civilisation of the Romanian people (Ionescu de la Brad 1866, vii).

Although he hoped that his work would be the start of an extensive survey that covered the entire country, Ionescu instead proposed a reduced geographic scale as that he was able to manage himself. His ambition that the Dorohoiu county monograph would be the first of thirty-two other volumes was never realised.

Unlike travel writing and amateur collecting, his monographs were based on previous specialised training and stressed the importance of objectivity in the encounter with the field, combining what Talal Asad calls the 'hard' language of statistics with the 'soft' language of ethnographic description (Asad 1994, 15). The format of his monographs revealed nevertheless a distrust of pure statistics, which

⁸ All translations are mine.

⁹ Ionescu 1866, 1868, 1869.

only provided an overview and a basis for his in-depth field analyses. The Dorohoiu county monograph contains two larger chapters - one dedicated to statistics and one to agriculture - complemented by two much shorter chapters on industry and trade respectively.

Of the entire work, the study of agriculture (Chapter II) represents the minute transcription of Ionescu's travels, where he described the country's main farming estates area by area, replicating the route of his journey. The author analysed agriculture as a socio-economic relationship between the landlords, estate managers and peasants. His gaze designated all rural dwellers as economic agents, cultivators engaged in a productive activity, assessing their efficiency in working the land. The author did not judge their life style, culture or morals, but only considered their contributions to the country's economic progress. Therefore, in his effort to reveal the ways the 1864 reform had been implemented in the field, Ionescu understood the rising agrarian question primarily in economic terms, subordinating social relations to his main objective. Nevertheless, he was very critical of the abuses and greed of the large estate owners, the poor results of the land reform, and the poverty in which the peasantry was living (Ionescu de la Brad 1868, 289-293).

To conclude, Ionescu set the trend in travelling and writing about Romanian agriculture and country life, both through the format of his work, the monograph, and through the problematic addressed (Stahl 2001, 152). A pioneer of fieldwork and experimentation in farming and education, Ionescu's enthusiasm was curtailed by the state and by politics. If his writings were stimulated by the land reform and the promise of positive change in the countryside, those of his followers responded to the emergency of the agrarian question and to the waves of peasant revolts that announced it. His relationship to the state was different from that in countries where knowledge about the economy and society was actively used to raise the productivity and welfare of the population alongside governing and policing it more tightly.

George Maior - the Exploration of Agrarian Romania

About thirty years later, in 1895, the Transylvanian agronomist George Maior, one of Ionescu's many admirers, published the first edition of his *România agricolă*, an economic survey of rural Romania, aimed at understanding the causes of the 1888-9 peasant revolts.¹⁰ This work, based on his extensive experience of and travel through the countryside as an agricultural inspector, combined his direct observations presented under the heading *O excursiune economică și darea de seamă* (An economic journey and its account) with an analysis of the causes and potential solutions of the 'agrarian problem' in the Romanian Kingdom. Maior's initiative responded to a different need than that of in-depth regional monographs, the need for a bird's eye view of Romanian economy (especially agriculture). In competition with his more famous colleague P.S.Aurelian, who worked on the presentation of the Romanian economy at the 1867 World Fair, Maior covered the same extensive geography, but used direct observation as his main method of study and addressed a Romanian public, rather than a foreign one.

The account of his travels is particularly interesting when contrasted with Ionescu's investigations. Travelling by train, a much faster modern vehicle and using the coach only when needed, Maior also went systematically 'from station to station' following the example of his predecessor.

¹⁰ A revised and added second edition of the book was reissued in 1911.

I got on and off at each station, visiting estates right and left along the railway lines from București-Călărași-Fetești, from Mizil to Focșani, from Buzău to Brăila, Galați, Tecuci and Bârlad (Maior 1911, 101).

This new means of transport points towards the advent of a professional travel-for-research. It also brings about a new set of embodied practices of reaching, connecting and experiencing places that sets the other modes of travel in a different light. Maior portrayed the coach alternative as more dangerous and exposed to the forces of nature, also separating the near-countryside from the remote one. From a social perspective, the train journey itself functioned as a meeting place. For example, on his way back from the Bărăgan estates, he had to listen to the complaints of a Greek estate manager about his disillusion with agriculture (Maior 1911, 162).

Maior's travels translated into a constructed geography of Romanian social reality. By visiting all social categories of the Romanian countryside – *proprietari* (landowners), *arendași* (estate managers), *mocani* (Transylvanian shepherds), *răzeși* (free peasants), *țărani* (land-bound peasants) and *târлаși* (landless manual workers), the professional agronomist dealt with each social category in turn, thus creating a distinct hierarchy according to their wealth and social status. His visits have a Dantesque quality, as they reorganise space according to social categories. Thus, multiple geographical locations correspond to a specific social group, creating certain microclimates where the impressions of the traveller dictate a general mood and even weather. For example, it is not by chance that in the section about estate managers, who Maior strongly dislikes, the analysis is interrupted by the description of a snowstorm in the Bărăgan field. (Maior 1911, 160-1).

Maior recorded change in more moralistic terms than Ionescu, who saw hard work and entrepreneurship as the mainstay of economic progress, and praised all diligent agriculturists regardless of their social background. Like many of those who wrote after the peasant revolts, Maior viewed change as decline and could not avoid recording the wretched living conditions of the peasantry. Although he did not ignore the fatal flaws of the 1864 land reform, his travels to the boyars' estates conveyed a sense of loss, the waning of the great landed aristocracy and the rise of a class of *parvenus* – the estate managers – whose ascendance on the social ladder was an unfortunate but irreparable tendency. Within the peasantry, Maior identified the layering of this social group, drawing a sharp distinction between the free peasants (*răzeși*) and the rest of the peasantry (*țărani*). He glorified the *răzeși* as the 'backbone of the Romanian population', in contrast with the amorphous land-bound masses of peasants living in a state of in 'moral and physical decay' (Maior 1911, 175). This analysis brings forth two important categories which would later become an essential in analysing the state of this social group: the distinction between different categories of peasantry and the alarming degeneration of the land-bound peasants (*clăcași*) especially. Struggling with why 'a peaceful and long-suffering creature' like the Romanian peasant could turn so violent and fierce, the agronomist portrayed them as the victim of their social and material conditions (Maior 1911, 3-4). This analysis of the different social strata in relation to land ownership and its interpretation in moral terms illustrates the rise of a sociological gaze of the Romanian countryside.

Unlike Ionescu, who was a pioneer investigator of the countryside, Maior wrote in a time of fierce intellectual competition over knowledge about the 'rural question'. Therefore, he felt the need to clarify his approach against all those who 'write and write a lot about things they have never seen, or copy from some one else's work

(...)' (possibly referring to P.S. Aurelian). His travels allowed him to write about what he *saw* (Maior 1911, 103). In his view, travel provided authenticity, which led to the truth (*scrutarea adevărului*) that lay bare in front of a trained observer's eye. Maior's constant reference to another 'home' – Transylvania – that he often took as a model in his comparisons also shows his use of the half-native, half-foreigner point of view as a proof of objectivity and distance from a familiar object of study.

His type of travel, that of the lonesome professional exploring the social structure of the countryside with its complex layering, allowed a comparison both between different geographical areas and between Romania and the adjacent Romanian-inhabited territories.¹¹ Yet, unlike Ionescu who understood the need for detailed studies of manageable geographical units, Maior remained very much on the surface, unable to go into much greater depth. Less systematic than Ionescu's and more impregnated with the fictional elements Maior wanted to avoid, the latter's work also reveals the struggle between specialised sociological writing and travel writing, somehow also announcing the rise of the realist novel in Romanian literature. Despite these shortcomings, *România agricolă* focuses clearly on the social classes present in the countryside, also relating them to the past social organisation (*stările agrare din trecut*). With this, Maior took a step away from Ionescu's monographs, adding a quasi-sociological interpretation of the agrarian question directly related to the social structure of agrarian Romania.

A.V.Gîdei's Village Monograph - the Micro-Vision

Apart from the specialised travel to the countryside, Ionescu's influence was felt in a particular style of writing about the peasantry – the monograph. Monographic writing as a tool for social research became widespread as a result of the peasant revolts that started in 1888 and climaxed in 1907. The fear of social unrest led the Minister of Interior, Vasile Lascăr, to initiate a large data collection project focused on rural life in 1903 (Stahl 2001, 168; Lascăr 1912, 817). Instead of trained statisticians, he planned to use the village intellectuals as informants and data collectors. Focused not on a region, but on a single village, the monograph was to provide the ground-data and details for a macro-analysis of the generalised 'peasant problem'. The format was standard, containing separate sections with respective sets of questions. Although it centred on the peasant as a *homo oeconomicus*, crucially it also included information about morality, culture and hygiene.

Vasile Gîdei's monograph of the village of Bragadiru was part of this project, but offered a particularly interesting addition: a section on how to teach-yourself-to-write-a-monograph 'for all those who come in contact with the peasantry and were interested in its welfare' (Gîdei 1904). Much like the apodemic texts produced by humanist travel theorists, it offered a grid for how to look at the countryside and study it (Gîdei 1905, 7-25). The monograph and its accompanying textbook show a different attitude to travel from Ionescu's or Maior's. Although Gîdei himself travelled to Bragadiru, a village near the capital, the great majority of the monographs requested by the Home Office (*Ministerul de Interne*) were to be written by people on the ground and thus required little or no travel at all. Yet, if getting to the village became unimportant and was hardly mentioned, travelling inside the village and taking a certain 'gazing' distance from the reality under scrutiny became essential. This new 'monographic gaze' isolated the peasantry and fixed them in a place and a

¹¹ See Maior 1906.

social condition of their own.

In the introduction of his own model-monograph, Gîdei provided clear indications of the time-scale of his research and his mode of travelling inside the village. His visit took eighteen days of fieldwork and seven days of archive work. Like those who travelled extensively (who went from station to station), the monograph writer travelled 'from house to house', spending about half an hour with each family, trying to get as intimate as possible with them. This is why the author added an entire section about the tactics and ethics of dealing with the 'informants', i.e. the peasantry. Explaining that a detailed survey was a delicate matter ('*o ancheta amănunțită e o cestiune delicată*'), Gîdei warned his trainee-writer that the peasant, especially the peasant woman, avoided telling the truth and taught them how to use the fear and superstitions of the villagers to convince them to be honest.

I endeavoured to make the peasants be more diligent in their statements. I therefore made use either of their shame or of their superstitious fear of jinxing, that he who falsely laments his poverty will call poverty upon himself. I took no mercy on those who I caught telling lies and I ridiculed them in front of their neighbours (...) by making jokes, which they were quite sensitive to (Gîdei 1905, 34-5).

The door-to-door fieldwork experience was not without adventures. Just like the weather could invade, torment and harm the travelling body, entering people's homes could be equally painful. Since these monographs recorded not only statistical or economic data, but also issues about peasant life, hygiene, food, education and morals, the encounter with the real peasant opened a dazzling sensorium for the outside researcher. Gîdei noted:

In 40-45 of the 58 houses I noted down as dirty it was impossible to linger for more than a minute. As soon as I opened the door, a stench similar to that of a dead body would arrest me in the doorway, so I had to retreat, despite my determination to enter and look everywhere. I stayed for longer only in one house to note down what I needed; but I didn't have the courage to repeat this experience (Gîdei 1905, 166).

A few points are worth mentioning about the structure and style of monographic writing. In the same way as Ionescu's regional monograph, the structure follows the same pattern, combining an overview of the history, geography, and population of the area with a systematic presentation of the economic situation (agriculture, industry, trade, road infrastructure). Another similarity to Ionescu lies in the emphasis on objectivity and accuracy in recording facts and numbers, as well as on the central role of the peasant budget, and the importance of the agricultural contractual arrangements.

The main difference appears in the scope of the study. Unlike Ionescu (and even Maior) who focused on agriculture and the agents of agricultural production, Gîdei dealt with a corpus of social issues that covered various aspects of peasant life, ranging from the material conditions to morals, culture and spirituality. The plan as such gives more weight to the material life of the peasantry, subordinating the other aspects to it (Gîdei 1905, 3). Yet, the monograph approached the peasant not only as an economic producer, but also as a social category. For the author, the ills of the countryside sprung from the interconnection of many factors – material, historic, political, social, spiritual, etc – and the relationship amongst peasants as well as

between them and other social groups. Highlighting the similarities between Gîdei's project and the interwar Monographic School of Bucharest, Henri H. Stahl noted that the Bragadiru monograph tackled more than just the agrarian question: 'it was trying to understand a sociological problem, namely the laws that governed people's lives' (Stahl 2001, 178).

To sum up, the village monograph as exemplified in Gîdei's project systematised the 'rural sociological gaze', introducing a new element into ethnographic fieldwork, what Asad called 'a preoccupation with local conditions as an experiential whole' (Asad 1994, 1). This holistic view of the peasantry as social was shaped by the immediacy of the agrarian question that in time had become the peasant question – snowballing to include all aspects of village life. These aspects of the problem, expressed in a descriptive and at times narrative way, did not harden into statistical data despite the main scope of the monographic project. Although it contributed to a *prise de conscience* about the ills of the countryside pointing to their material source, this localised approach resisted generalisation and, more importantly, was not used by the government as a basis for action or reform. Instead, it contributed to the formation of amateur and professional practices of investigating rural life that impacted on the development of Romanian society.

A Short Comparative Analysis

In comparing the three authors in relation to the agrarian question, one can see some consistency that can be attributed to their direct methods of investigation. Going into the field and visiting people, villages and estates is reflected in the details and depth these scholars added to their studies of the Romanian countryside. Their travels problematised the great differences between regions and social groups, while allowing some degree of generalisation. The geographical range they proposed (regional, national and local) also indicates the different levels on which the agrarian problem was addressed by intellectuals, but not truly by the state – Ionescu attempted the manageable size of the region, Maior adopted a more generalised approach, while Gîdei limited his scope to one single village. In both the first and the last of cases there existed an underlying unfulfilled promise for the state to designate more scholars to compile similar monographs for the entire country. This in turn shows the ambiguous position of these writers in between the state apparatus and the object of their academic studies, the countryside. It is clear now that the agrarian question was not to be solved by these studies alone, but it is also clear that the Romanian state made uneven and almost insignificant efforts to use social science to improve its governance or the wellbeing of the peasantry.

Beyond their similar point of view and shared methods, Ionescu, Maior and Gîdei produced individual visions of rural Romania that differed on topics such as the agrarian question and its resolution. In relation to the first point, Ionescu's monographs coincide with the rise of the agrarian question after the 1864 land reform. They centre on agriculture, but also discuss the social outcomes that the implementation of this new law had had. Unlike Ionescu, Maior and Gîdei grappled with the agrarian question at its height, responding to the crisis created by the peasant revolts. Thus, the social side of the question becomes more visible, as the social structure of the countryside becomes meaningful. As mentioned above, Maior proposed a socioscape of the countryside instead of a regional treatment of Romanian agriculture, thus pointing to the social changes that had led to the current situation – the dawn of the great (aristocratic) landlords, the appearance of the rapacious and

ignorant estate manager, and the impoverishment of the enserfed peasantry. In his critique Maior showed how this social structure acted as a vicious circle and blocked the progress of Romanian agriculture. Overall, for him, the 'agrarian question' appeared as a socio-economic issue.

Gîdei's monograph introduces many more dimensions to the study of the countryside than those of Maior and Ionescu. Getting much closer to the peasants than the other two scholars, he proposed a site-specific investigation of all aspects of village life based on a standardised all-inclusive questionnaire. His writings were not a traveller's observation notes jotted down while passing through different places, like Maior and Ionescu, but the minute scrutiny of the social microcosm of the village. This holistic view differs from the previous research and comes closer to the sociological investigations undertaken in the interwar period by the Monographic School of Bucharest.

With regards to their conclusions and solutions for the future, the three scholars also held different views. Ionescu believed that organised scholarly education of the peasantry and of all other agricultural agents was one of the keys to overcoming the difficult situation in the countryside. A few decades later, Maior was disillusioned with the attempts to use formal education to enlighten the countryside. Instead, he believed the best way to improve Romanian agriculture and wellbeing in the countryside was through colonisation and cultural exchange, criticising the regime for its closed-mindedness and disinterest in models for progress (Maior 1911, 35-43). By the first decade of the twentieth century, Gîdei's conclusions indicate that the regime as such was to blame for the poverty and its diverse manifestations in the village he described – the fragmentation of land, the harsh work arrangements, the lack of cattle, the cost of land, the peasants' lack of initiative correlated to that of education, and the low standards of health and hygiene.

Conclusions

This chapter has dealt with the two main issues: the development of rural research and the transformation of the agrarian question from an economic into a social issue in pre-war Romania. By concentrating on fieldwork as a type of research involving specific practices such as travel and writing, I have explored how direct interaction with the countryside contributed to the development of a specific discourse about it. In the three examples presented above I have looked at two main practices: travel and writing as the opposite ends of the research process. The examples showed how the spatial relationship between the centres of knowledge and the countryside saw a tendency to get closer to the peasant, to reach into their intimacy, to scrutinise not only the economic relations, but also all aspects of peoples' lives. In terms of writing, this translated into a shift from extensive travel to intensive and detailed monographs, which in turn corresponded to the transformation of the economic gaze into a social gaze that progressively bound material conditions with morality, health and culture. As explained above, this last change related to the impact of the social and economic reality on the researchers. If the first wave of studies was triggered by the land reform - promise of progress in agriculture and consequently in the welfare of the agricultural producers - the second was linked to the peasant uprisings and reflected the failure of the reform and the degenerating effect on the rural population.

In a regime of neo-serfdom, knowledge about the population did not end coercive governing practices, but neither was it suppressed by the state. In the public sphere, it led to fierce intellectual debates, while in practical politics it supported or had little

influence over a biased and corrupt legislation. Nevertheless, an overall transformation of the ideas and knowledge about the countryside had occurred by the first decade of the twentieth century, leading to the development of a sociological way of seeing the countryside that would shape the development of Romanian social sciences in the interwar period.

Works Cited

- Anderson, P. 1974. *Lineages of the Absolutist State*. London.
- Alexandrescu, S. 1999. "Populism și burghezie în burghezie: România la începutul secolului XX." In *Privind înapoi, modernitatea*, 91-124. Bucharest.
- Asad, T. 1994. "Ethnographic Representation, Statistics and Modern Power." *Social Research* 61: 55-88.
- Aurelian, P. S. 1880. *Terra nostra*. Bucharest.
- Biji, M. 1969. "Statistica în lucrările cu caracter monografic ale lui Ion Ionescu de la Brad. I." In *Din istoria statisticii românești*, edited by M. Manescu, C. Ionescu, M. Biji, 43-52. Bucharest.
- Chirot, D. 1976. *Social Change in a Peripheral Society. The Creation of a Balkan Colony*. New York.
- . 1989. *The Origins of Backwardness in Eastern Europe: Economics and Politics from the Middle Ages Until the Early Twentieth Century*. Berkeley.
- Chirot, D., and C. Ragin. 1975. "The Market, Tradition and Peasant Rebellion: The Case of Romania in 1907." *American Sociological Review* 40: 428-44.
- Dobrogeanu-Gherea, C. 1910. *Neoiobagia. Studiu economic-sociologic al problemei noastre agrare*. Bucharest.
- Dreyfus, H. L., and P. Rabinow. 1982. *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. London.
- Eidelberg, P. G. 1974. *The Great Rumanian Peasant Revolt of 1907: Origins of a Modern Jacquerie*. Leiden.
- Gîdei, A. V. 1904. *Monografia comunei rurale Bragadiru-Bulgar din județul Ilfov, plasa Sabaru*. Ministerul de Interne. Bucharest.
- . 1905. *Programul monografiei unei comune rurale și monografia comunei rurale Bragadiru-Bulgur din plasa Sabaru, județul Ilfov*. Bucharest.
- Ionescu de la Brad, I. (n.d.) *Excursiune agricolă în Dobrogea făcută de Ion Ionescu de la Brad în anul 1850*. (no publisher or place of publication. Copy available at *Biblioteca Centrală Universitară 'Carol I'* in Bucharest).
- . 1866. *Agricultura Română din Județiulu Dorohoiu*. Bucharest.
- . 1868. *Agricultura Română din Județiulu Mehedinți*. Bucharest.
- Ionecu-Sisești, G. 1943. Viațași opera lui Ion Ionescu de la Brad. *Ion Ionescu de la Brad. Opere*, vii-xxi. Bucharest.
- Lascăr, V. 1912. *Discursuri politice*. Vol. 1. Bucharest.
- Maior, G. 1911. *România agricolă. Studiu Economic*. 2nd ed. Bucharest.
- . 1906. *Politica agrară la români. Desvoltarea chestiunii agrare în toate țările locuite de români din secolul XVII, XVIII și XIX*. Bucharest.
- Ornea, Z. 1971. *Sămănătorismul*. Bucharest.
- Roberts, H. L. 1951. *Rumania: Political Problems of an Agrarian State*. Yale.
- Stahl, H. H. 1980. *Traditional Romanian Village Communities: The Transition from the Communal to the Capitalist Mode of Production in the Danube Region*. Cambridge.
- . 2001. *Gânditori și curente de istorie socială românească*. Bucharest.
- Turnock, D. 1986. *The Romanian Economy in the Twentieth Century*. London & Sydney.
- Wolf, E. 1988. "Inventing Society." *The American Ethnologist* 15: 752-61.