DISCOURSES ON MODERNIZATION OF AN AGRARIAN SOCIETY IN THE FIRST HALF OF 20TH CENTURY ROMANIA

Paul Maximilian ANGHEL
PhD. Candidate, University of Bucharest

Abstract: The topic of various modernization paths of agrarian societies has dominated the political and intellectual discourse for a century (1848-1948), a timespan that was characterized also by significant societal changes driven by both endogenous and exogenous factors. Acknowledging a state of utter backwardness in respect to the industrialized West and facing the prospect of deepening societal cleavages, Romanian elites have provided various insights and opinions on the clauses and remedies for the "peasant / agrarian issue". This article aims at highlighting the main contentious topics in this regard, focusing on the issue framing within the pre- and inter-war ideological and intellectual discourses of Romanian elites.

Keywords: society, modernization, agrarian, ideological discourse, elites

Agrarian society and the „peasantry issue"

Starting from a state of economic and social backwardness towards the Western countries in the midst of industrialization, the transition from a semi-feudal system to a modern, capitalist one could not be a linear process, being, on the contrary, tributary, on the one hand, to the political frictions among the political elites, and on the other hand, to the international context. In the absence of progressive and profound organic developments in the socio-economic and political sphere of the Romanian society, the catalytic force in the modernization process reverted to the State, through a top-down interventionism.

Among the characteristics of peripheral regions, Petrusewicz (Petrusewicz, 2019) distinguishes the following: (i) geographical and topographical periphery, (ii) structural periphery (production of low value-added raw materials), (iii) political periphery (colonial or semi-colonial domination), (iii) a weak state apparatus with a reduced capacity to coordinate industrial, commercial and agricultural mechanisms, dominated by large-scale elites with a lack of legitimacy in the eyes of society as a whole and (iv); polarized social stratification between large landowners (increasingly deprived of political power, but holders of cultural hegemony) and peasants (poor and illiterate), with a small urban bourgeoisie and composed mostly of allogeneic elements (in the process of cultural assertion).

However, peripheralization is manifested both within the same territory, in the form of regional discrepancies, and within the transnational framework. In this sense, Daniel Chirot (Chirot, 2002) analyzes the social transformations in Wallachia from the perspective of the world system theory postulated by Wallerstein (Wallerstein, 2004), framing the successive stages of social organization in the ideal types of "community-commercial" society (13th-16th centuries), "protocol-colonial" (from the 16th century to

1821) and “neo-colonial” (from 1821 to the First World War). The essence of these transformations lies in the fact that the transition from one phase to another was never the result of endogenous factors, but on the contrary: Wallachia, even if it was a marginal territory on the geopolitical map of the great powers, was still engaged in the international system, and the external influences were mediated by the local political and economic system.

In the case of Wallachia, Chirot identifies the main features of a colonial society, as highlighted by Balandier (Balandier, 1966). First, the whole economic system is focused on the production and export of raw materials, in this case agricultural products, so as to meet the needs of the industrialized center (metropolis). This foreign trade is run by metropolitan agents, whether direct or local (indigenous or allogeneic). They will seek to generate as much surplus as possible for export, dispossessing the peasants of land, subduing the labor force and seeking to adapt crops to the demands of the foreign market. At the same time, the influx of Western manufactured goods is causing local handicraft production to decline. Under the infusion of neocolonial capitalism, the gap between the privileged minority, holding economic power and political influence, which acts as metropolitan agents and the broad layer of society, reduced to the stage of subdued labor, deepens.

Elites migrate to these centers and show a strong cultural mimicry that contrasts with local traditions, thus further deepening the socio-cultural gap. Indigenous elites retain political dominance, but the metropolis has a significant influence on matters of interest to it. Chirot's conclusion is that the Wallachia of the late nineteenth century was a dual society in transition, which had ceased to be fully traditional, but had not become fully modern either.

The center-periphery cleavage is manifested not only on the colony-metropolis axis, but also within the borders, between the political-administrative-economic centers and the peripheral communities. For example, Manoilescu (Manoilescu, 1940) argued that in the "economic triangle" village-city-foreign market, the rural space, although the main exporter, eventually became the net loser, urban space benefiting from most imports, due to the special role that the city and the foreign market had in the transformation of surplus agricultural goods into consumer goods. This phenomenon of internal colonization had multiple causes, as well as different intensity depending on the economic evolution of the country. Thus, if from the Phanariot period until the dawn of industrialization, cities were almost exclusively centers of consumption (exclusive beneficiaries of the conversion of agricultural surplus into luxury products), beginning in the late nineteenth century, as industrialization gained momentum, dependence on exports started to decline, with positive effects on rural areas as well. Therefore, Manoilescu finds a direct correlation between export dependence and income transfer from the hinterland to the metropolis (Love, 1996). To this is added the fact that the agrarian elites spent their fortunes in the metropolises, even if the material base came from the agrarian exploitation.

The historical experience not only in Romania, but also in other parts of the world, reveals a certain trajectory of agrarian societies in the period between the end of

the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, when the liberal elites made key choices about how to modernize state apparatuses and agrarian economies. The resulting state and class structures were conditioned, on the one hand, by the "radical" or "reformist" approach, and, on the other hand, by external influences during the period of liberal reform. In the evolution of these state and class structures there are certain predictable patterns of reaction and counter-reaction, culminating in the establishment of divergent political regimes until the middle of the 20th century (Mahoney, 2011).

The Romanian society from modern times has had as its central theme the "agrarian problem", which found its reverberations both among the elites and among the peasantry, giving rise to demands often generating social and political convulsions. One of the main sources of the agrarian problem is the overwhelming share of labor, to the detriment of capital and technological means, in the organization of agricultural holdings. This labor-dependent agriculture generates and is supported by both forms of oppressive labor exploitation (labor-repressive agriculture), such as feudalism or slavery, and by more subtle forms of maintaining dependence, such as limiting occupational, educational and mobility options among the rural population. In many cases, even if it is not a *sine qua non* prerequisite, this systemic coercion is reinforced by the regulatory and administrative framework (e.g. regulation of access to credit or employment contracts in agriculture), which is the expression of the will of political elites supported by agrarian elites.

When landowning elites find that cheap labor is at least as profitable as capital investment in mechanization, they will primarily seek to maintain the status quo of agrarian relations (Rueschemeyer, Huber Stephens, Stephens, 1992). Under these conditions, the restrictive regulation (in favor of large landowners) of access to resources (land, pastures, water, etc.) and land use rights were the key instruments of retention of the rural population in the sphere of landlord (estate) influence (Huber, Stephens, 1995), especially in societies where inequality in land distribution is strong. What is more, the undermining of rural organizations occured (Huber, Stephens, 1995).

The insecurity of property rights and their dismemberments characteristic of labor-dependent agricultural exploitation is an anachronistic feature of agrarian societies that have entered a stage of late modernization. The absence of formal contracts governing the rights and obligations of the parties (owner and lessee) or the discrepancy between formal legal and real social relations established on an informal basis, places the common man in the rural area in a much lower bargaining position than the owner, being under the constant threat of eviction, extortion of money or products and indebtedness (Prosterman, Riedinger, 1987).

The peasant problem is also exacerbated under monopsony economic conditions, specific to areas where land ownership is concentrated and the labor market is fragmented, where the landlord is virtually the sole buyer (and trader) of surplus agricultural products. This type of "imperfect market" consolidates "manorial dependence" and perpetuates neo-feudal agrarian relations.

If we refer to the social and geographical space of Romania, we notice that between the two provinces of the Old Kingdom, there were substantial differences in terms of agricultural exploitation, with repercussions on the relations between large landowners or tenants and the peasantry and, especially, on the welfare of the latter.

In Moldova, on the one hand, the "direct" farming by the owner / lessee predominates, who uses his own living and dead inventory (cattle, tools, etc.) and personnel. However, this involved a substantial amount of capital by a single individual, which was often quite burdensome, often leading to one's own financial ruin. In addition, under these conditions, the amenities and labor force of the peasants in the vicinity of the estate were not capitalized for most of the year, which contributed to their impoverishment.

On the other hand, in Wallachia the model of shared exploitation between the owner / lessee and the neighboring peasants was much more common. This system was based on the agreements of both parties, expressed in the form of agricultural agreements, which stipulated the conditions and obligations of each party. Thus, the landowner / lessee provided the peasant with a certain area of land to cultivate it with his own means, as well as a portion of the pasture for cattle. In exchange, the farmer undertook to cede a share of the harvest (tithe), to perform certain days of work on the plot of land reserved for the owner and other benefits ("either by hand or with the cart") and to pay an annual sum per cattle for grazing.

A recurring topic of discourses on land ownership is the quantitative and qualitative superiority of the large-scale agriculture, a fact statistically certified in the Old Kingdom. Some researchers (Cipăianu, 1920) motivated this situation by the ability of large landowners: (i) to hire specialized personnel to organize a rational exploitation, (ii) to use agricultural machinery that replaces human labor, improving cost efficiency and (iii) to cultivate areas that are economic in shape and size. In contrast, the small ploughmen had a low agronomic culture, not being familiar with certain varieties much more profitable than traditional ones (for example industrial plants), even though in Bucovina, Transylvania and Banat the degree of education and receptivity was higher. In addition, they had little and rudimentary agricultural inventory. Last but not least, the lots resulting from the previous small holdings had been divided through successions and scattered throughout the communes to the point of being completely unsuitable for a rational culture.

The agrarian regime that dominated the agricultural sector in Romania for about 60 years (1864-1921), affecting 50-60% of the peasantry but generating most of the country's commercial agricultural production, had some defining features. First of all, land ownership (large and small) was considered free and private. However, its distribution was deeply uneven, with large estates concentrating a large part of the arable land, as well as pastures and hayfields. On the other hand, the peasantry, even if it was free *de jure* and generally owning land (yet insufficiently), did not have the means to ensure its living conditions, being forced to enter into agricultural agreements with large farmers (landowners and tenants). Insufficient plot area and mediated access to

common goods (meadows, hayfields, forests, waters, etc.) have aggravated this state of affairs.

In the absence of a substantial capital of large landowners and their willingness to invest in the material means necessary for intensive agriculture, at least in the last decades of the nineteenth century, the agrarian regime relied on the contribution of the peasantry in terms of agricultural inventory and labor force. The agricultural agreements are thus presented as a requirement of the objective conditions of the agrarian economy, rather than as an instrument of oppression, even if they were accompanied by a series of abuses (by landlords, public administration, gendarmerie, etc.) that remained largely unpunished.

Axenciuc (Axenciuc, 1999) reveals that the transitional agrarian system was a dual one, each sector having its own types of agrarian relations: (i) that of the peasant economy and (ii) the symbiotic one between small and large property. The first is characterized by the small peasant farm, with its own inventory and labor supply, having a rather subsistence and a natural economy character, being only to a small extent oriented towards the production of goods. In general, this sector was restricted to the geographical and social space of the village, which is why the collaboration relations between the community members predominate. The second sector is based on a series of common economic interests between landowners / tenants, on the one hand and the contracting villagers on the other, but the relations are asymmetrical, the exploitation being accentuated as agricultural products become more salable both in the internal and external markets. The forms of this type of shared exploitation remained mainly those of the natural economy (tithe in products, per hectar, etc., and to a small extent in money). This type of transitional agrarian regime lasted until the Agrarian Reform of 1921, after which large-scale ownership was largely abolished, while undermining the material basis of its political exponents, marking the transition to the peasant economy.

The stake of the long process of agrarian reform (corroborated with the democratic civic reforms) therefore consisted in the peasantry taking over at least in part the social functions of the bourgeois elites of landed origin. This new arrangement, specific to an agrarian society progressively engaged in the capitalist economy, was to form the foundation of the "peasant state," with all its specific characteristics. In this respect, the French sociologist Henri Mendras (Mendras, 1976) would point out the following main features of the social group called the peasantry: ii) the family household has a structural relevance in the organization of the economic and social life of the community, (iii) a relatively autarkic economic system, but which maintains relations with the surrounding external economic environment, (iv) local communities characterized by internal relations of knowledge and relations and (v) the decisive role of local notables, who act as mediators between the peasant communities and the surrounding society.

In the conditions of a relatively precarious economic and social status of the peasantry, the cooperation movement develops in Romania as a means of supporting the production and consumption of the peasant household. Based on individual private property, voluntary participation and economic democracy, cooperatives generated

common benefits by sharing the amenities, capital and labor of the members. Within two decades, cooperative associations have grown significantly, diversifying their scope of activity, in 1912 being grouped into the following categories: people's banks (75%), consumer and supply cooperatives (7.7%), land-leasing associations (10.6%), forestry (3.8%) and others (2.9%). This movement enjoyed the support of many personalities before the Second World War, such as: Ion Ionescu de la Brad, P.S. Aurelian, I.G. Ducă, Spiru Haret, Ion Mihalache, Virgil Madgearu or C. I. Băicoianu. In particular, it found its echoes in liberal and peasant doctrine.

Village People's Banks, established since 1891, were the first forms of credit unions. Benefiting from the support of prominent personalities such as Spiru Haret and I.G. Duca, as well as a special regulation (the Law on Village People's Banks and their Central House of March 29, 1903), their number, members and assets increased rapidly in the first decades of the twentieth century: in 1926 there were 4,413 popular banks, with 915,388 members and a share capital of 971,786,812 lei. Among their members we find an overwhelming proportion of ploughmen (90.89%), traders, craftsmen, officials, priests, teachers and owners (Anghel, 2019).

Ideological and political discourse

The peasant question has been a central theme of public discourse, visible since the Revolution of 1848, continuing during the Ad-hoc Assemblies and sharpening and polarizing ideologically after the Agrarian Reform of 1864 and reaching its peak around the 1907 Uprising. Peasants' emancipation had been on the agenda of the 1848 revolutionaries, also serving as a tool for mobilizing the popular masses, even if the extension of the reform was a particularly contentious subject in the dispute between conservative and liberal elites. In fact, even among the revolutionaries, once in power, two divergent currents emerged, which eventually undermined any reform in this direction: the radical wing, whose exponent was Bălcescu and the conservative, anti-reformist wing, represented by Eliade, Tell, N. Golescu, to which we could add the ambivalent attitude of some personalities such as CA Rosetti, I. Voinescu, Ion Ghica or Ion Brătianu.

The agrarian question continued to be a sensitive topic in the years following the Revolution of 1848, both during the debates in the Ad-Hoc Divans (1857-1859) and during Cuza's reign. The impasse in the deliberative bodies (Divanurile, Focşani Central Commission), which had the effect of stopping the reform, also foreshadowed a new ideological cleavage (liberalism vs. conservatism), which will replace the old political cleavages among the elites, i.e. unionism vs. separatism (Kogălniceanu, 1891).

The Conservatives drafted a bill by which the peasants gained freedom over their own labor, but were denied ownership of the land they had been working on for generations, retaining only the right to own homes and pastures. This project was presented by the Conservative Prime Minister Barbu Catargiu as a bill and debated in the meetings from May 25 to June 6, 1862, being submitted to the final vote on June 11, 1862, a few days after his assassination. However, the next two conservative governments (led by Asachi and Kretzulescu, respectively) did not subject the law to

royal sanction, and thus it did not enter into force. In the spring of 1864, the cabinet led by Kogălniceanu promoted a new, more radical agrarian reform project, which met with fierce opposition from conservatives in Parliament. In this context, the Ruler, with the support of Kogălniceanu, carried out the coup d'état, establishing a personal regime that would allow him to promulgate and apply the Rural Law aimed at the final abolition of labor duties and the differentiated granting of ownership of peasants.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the condition of the peasantry was far from the ideals of 1864, exacerbated by systemic social inequities emanating from the new regime of social and labor relations in rural areas, as well as the impoverishing effects of some provisions of the Law from 1864 (scattering of peasant lots). In the context in which the social convulsions manifested themselves periodically, threatening with the outbreak of a violent, dissolving revolt, several elites advanced their own interpretation of the causes and remedies of this problem. Thus, the agrarian question, having "all the characteristics of a true social plague" (Seulescu, 1889), becomes a recurring theme on the public agenda, regularly reaching the forefront of public discourse, both in political and cultural, economic and journalistic.

Unlike the objective research of the social phenomenon / process of the transformations of the agrarian regime, the discourse analysis aims at the subjective positioning of the various political and apolitical actors to the agrarian question in Romania. This discourse belonged mainly to the elites, who, beyond affiliation with one ideological current or another, had their own ideals, visions, beliefs and interests. Thus, we can distinguish various nuances in the articulation of the discourse of politicians affiliated even to the same party, on the peasant issue, both between contemporaries and between generations.

Therefore, the researcher must take into account, in the process of framing the issue at the discursive level, the double quality that many of these discursive actors have: ideological and social affiliation, or in Marxist terms, class. We note that the result of political measures in this regard was the result of the fading in time of seemingly irreconcilable ideological cleavages between liberals and conservatives. Similarly, the origin of discursive actors, i.e. from the political or cultural / academic environment, must be taken into account in order to understand the degree of subjectivism and militancy of the positions.

The profound economic and societal consequences of the First World War led intellectual and political elites affiliated with various ideological currents to express their views on the modernization of the country, thus generating the "Great Controversy" between Europeanists and traditionalists that characterized interwar discourse. This approach involved re-examining the old values and features of the national character (Hitchins, 1994), practically overcoming the pre-war mood, especially in terms of the agrarian problem. For Europeanists who analyzed modernization from a cultural (Eugen Lovinescu) or economic-social (Ştefan Zeletin) perspective, emphasized the contribution of urban social classes (bourgeoisie, intellectuals) to the Western-style development of society, including industrialization at the expense of maintaining the agrarian character. Also, this category of Europeanists can include cultural personalities

such as Garabet Ibrăileanu and Mihai Râlea, grouped around the magazine Viaţa Românească, who supported an approximation of Western standards in terms of living standards, democratization, institutions, but disavowed exaggerated cosmopolitanism, instead preferring domestic societal resources. In his turn, Mihail Manoilescu, who had developed the theory of corporatism, saw in industrialization the only viable chance for development, and the bourgeoisie alone capable of fulfilling this economic desideratum, provided it could rebuild its political, economic and social organization.

On the other hand, the traditionalists had their own visions of development, one based on authentic Romanian elements derived from the country's agrarian character: the organicity of social relations within the community, the superiority of "culture" (soul of the nation / community) over "civilization" (technical and material progress), community (village), faith. The various currents of thought in this spectrum (*junimism*, *sămănătorism*, populism), as well as their interwar cultural reverberations (Nichifor Crainic, Lucian Blaga, Nae Ionescu, etc.) will seek these psychosocial and spiritual springs of the prosperity of the Romanian people.

The peasant movement crystallized in the interwar period as the main ideological current tributary to agrarian interests, but this time aiming at a much wider social stratum (landowning peasantry) than conservatives (defenders of large landowners). The whole economic and social conception of exponents such as Virgil Madgearu or Ion Mihalache focuses on the peasant household, with its specific productive forms and laws, different from both Western individualism and capitalist rationality, on the one hand, and Soviet collectivism on the other. The "new agrarian system" (Mihalache, 1925), supporting an agricultural property based on the contribution of family labor, disproved the idea of systematic exploitation of the labor of other social categories. The result is a much less internally diversified peasant social stratum, the idea of supporting middle ownership and the emergence of well-off peasants („chiaburime") being rejected. Industry, in the peasant movement's vision, has the functional role of supporting the agricultural sector and absorbing the surplus labor force, thus preventing the formation of the agricultural proletariat.

Among the leftist currents of Marxist origin, in our country we can distinguish the socialist-democratic one (Dobrogeanu-Gherea), the populist one (Stere) and, later, the socialist one (Pătrăşcanu). It is noteworthy that both Gherea and Stere came from the Tsarist empire, whose conditions of economic, social and institutional development contrasted sharply with those of Western Europe, with a deep rift between the elites and the great peasant masses.

The interpretation of historical and social facts from the orthodox Marxist perspective presupposes the acceptance of certain laws, of a determinism based on the linear, but not smooth, evolution from one economic-social system to another. This perspective on the evolution of the agrarian question emphasizes the class struggle triggered by the existing antagonisms within the society at a certain stage of development, as changes in the economic base determine the organization of class interests of various social groups. For example, the rebellious attitudes of the peasant masses towards the "exploiters" did not concern an ethnic cleavage (for example, the

Greek rulers), but an eminently social one (the status of boyar or to be enriched by the exploitation of the peasantry).

Socialist authors, such as Lucreţiu Pătrăşcanu, point out that the precondition for these social upheavals to give rise to social revolutions is the existence of a critical mass of revolutionary social groups, with a class consciousness and a capacity for political mobilization. Pătrăşcanu therefore interprets the events of the revolutionary socio-political mobilization of the first half of the 19th century (Tudor Vladimirescu's revolution, the Pasoptist revolution), in terms of the degree of maturity of progressive, protestant social groups, corroborated with the alteration of the economic and social of society (Pătrăşcanu, 1969).

Another angle of his research on events, social facts and social relations, targets the elites. In the Marxist sense, the social origin is the defining element for the individual's trajectory, being decisive for the system of values, interests, attitudes and actions of progressive or reactionary leaders. "Progressive" elites, no matter how personally animated by improvement ideals, generally prove incapable of disregarding their own social condition and class interests in order to generate a social revolution, but, on the contrary, act in accordance with "the social origin, the environment and the way of life, the immediate interests as well as the permanent ones of the class to which they belong" (Pătrăşcanu, 1969: 190). This progressivism is therefore superficial, because once they have secured their political and economic emancipation, these social forces in turn become "reactionary", seeking to preserve by any means their monopoly on these sources of capital, either by coalition of distinct social groups, but with converging class interests, or through exploitation and coercion (including through state institutions) of underprivileged social groups. The main demands of the rising social classes (the petty bourgeoisie, the bourgeoisie) were to gain access to political power, and once they seized the reins of power through their exponents, gradually turn into a reactionary force, dissociating themselves from the peasant masses (peasantry, labor) and tending to marginalize its most radical elements. The main reasons why neither in 1821 nor in 1848, one can speak of a social revolution in the true sense of the word are, on the one hand, the incipient stage of development of new relations of production (capitalism), and on the other hand, the lack of a popular critical mass, with a class consciousness and capable of political mobilization to defend its interests.

In all this context of nation- and state-building, the very largest layer of an agrarian society, the peasantry, has always been excluded from political life, including the creation of the superstructure of modern society. In fact, even the "spirit of brotherhood" between social classes was only a chimera, because the interests of the ruling social classes (the great boyars) and the lower ones (the peasantry, the workers) were antagonistic. The renunciation of privileges and the proclamation of freedom and equality by the great nobility would have undermined the foundations of their class domination. The only revolutionary elements that had the capacity to mobilize also came from the echelons of the privileged classes or the rising bourgeoisie, but had common interests with those of the regime which they tried not so much to remove or replace, but to penetrate.

In fact, we note that Pătrășcanu shares Dobrogeanu-Gherea's point of view, according to which the entire legal and institutional scaffolding was subservient to the interests of the ruling class, consisting mainly of large landowners, serving as a means of systemic exploitation of the peasantry. This regime that governed the relations between the social classes that populate the rural area was called "neo-serfdom" and contrasted sharply with the idealistic, axiomatic view of the emancipation of the peasantry as an effect of ownership (Dobrogeanu-Gherea, 1910). Gherea believed that the new landowning elites, who dominated political life, had done everything in their power to keep the peasant in servitude, going so far as to renounce their own Western aspirations for the rule of law and national unity. Proof of this is the law on agricultural agreements, which had a special character, derogating from the provisions of the Napoleonic-inspired Civil Code and which suspended the Constitution with regard to relations between peasants and landowners.

The ideological differentiation within the currents of Marxist origin aimed at the way they related to capitalism and its forms of economic manifestation (Psalidopoulos, Mata, 2001). If the orthodox Marxists promoted a deterministic view of the succession of stages of social organization according to the forms of exploitation of the means of production, considering capitalism as an inevitable phase in the transition to communism, the populists sought rather the current correspondent of the intended end. In the eyes of the Russian narodniks, for example, the archaic nature of the rural world did not necessarily have a pejorative meaning, equivalent to backwardness, but on the contrary, it was perceived as a factor of stability and continuity in the process of advancing towards the ideal, just, socialist social order. This current was articulated not only as a socio-political ideological platform, but also as a form of active militancy of the elites among the peasant masses, who glorified the virtues of the common people and sought to renew the organic link between the peasantry and the elites in the context of a society deeply split into social and cultural cleavages. The role of the militant elites was therefore to look for those particular forms of social and economic organization (archaic forms of community life) that can serve as a foundation for the advancement of society. Hence the confidence in the justice of the socialist order.

David Mitrany (Mitrany, 1961) believed that Eastern European populism could offer a sustainable alternative to modernization of Stalinist origin, through forced collectivization and industrialization. He also points out that the ideological origins of Eastern European populism are found in Marxism, but its conceptual and ideological identity crystallized by rejecting the dogmatism of orthodox Marxism that the peasantry was an anachronistic social class, disintegrating under the pulverizing action of the capitalist economy and which could not play a decisive role in the revolutionary process of transition from capitalism to communism. Thus, the revisionist current even within the Marxist school (Eduard Bernstein, Eduard David) came to the conclusion that the incorporation of the peasantry into the revolutionary process is a mandatory condition, particularly in a predominantly agrarian society, where the idea of a proletarian revolution in the absence of an industrial proletariat was inconceivable. In turn, the Russian populists (Chernyshevschi, Mikhailovsky, Vorontsov, Danielson) made the

disjunction between economic conception / critique and materialist philosophy on history, extracting from the first the conceptual and analytical framework for studying the existing conditions and the special path of evolution towards socialism in the predominantly rural countries, without going through the phase of industrial capitalism (Rizescu, 2020).

The populist discourse of the interwar period in the Eastern European space focuses mainly on two reforms with strong social implications: on the one hand the agrarian one, aiming at property rights (private property), forms of property (small property to the detriment of large property, distribution of property based on work, not rank) and forms of work (cooperativism) and, on the other hand, the electoral one (democracy vs. plutocracy) (Adam, 2018).

The local populist current, having as exponent Constantin Stere (Stere, 2005), is articulated as an alternative vision to the one preached by the socialists led by Dobrogeanu-Gherea, regarding the development of the eminently Romanian agrarian society. It presents itself as an intellectual reaction to the perverse effects of modernization, likely to alter the archaic and organic foundation of social and economic relations, uprooting the individual from the community and alienating him from import institutions. The criticism that Constantin Stere brings to the latter is mainly aimed at ideological dogmatism, which, by virtue of proclaimed infallible laws of social progress, does not take into account the particularities of each people, namely its demographic composition and related stage of development. In the context of a predominantly agricultural society, in which industrialization was at an absolutely incipient stage under the impetus of state protectionism, Stere considered that the existence of a social democratic party was not justified in Romania, because it lacked the very reason to be: a capable social class to recognize their collective interests, susceptible to political mobilization, engaging in conscious class struggle (Stere, 2005).

In the view of the Orthodox Marxists, the industrial proletariat is bestowed with the historical purpose of leading society in a higher phase than the capitalist-bourgeois one, through a process of emancipation, of liberating social and economic relations from the yoke of relations of domination and exploitation by creating a socially undifferentiated society. But in order to have a proletariat, it was necessary for society to go through the phase of industrialization, until the antagonistic forces of bourgeois capitalism, characterized by the concentration of the means of production and wealth in the hands of the exploiting bourgeois class at the expense of the impoverished and exploited classes. This would invariably lead to the exacerbation of the class struggle and the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat, once the political power is conquered by the exploited.

Stere precisely criticizes this deterministic perspective on the course of social evolution, which disregards the alternative ways of development of non-industrialized societies. From this point of view, the author considers that orthodox Marxism was fundamentally wrong when it disregarded the peasant and the peasantry in general, considering it a conservative, reactionary, peripheral force, imbued with bourgeois values and attitudes (especially attachment to land ownership), unable to produce a

radical social transformation. Under these conditions, the peasantry was very unlikely to voluntarily give up these deeply-rooted attitudes and behaviors, in order to rally consciously to the cause of the proletarian revolution, which is why the only prospect of social democracy to gain support from it was to wait for (or to precipitate) the ruin of the peasantry under the material pressure exerted by the concentration of the means of production in agriculture in the hands of the large capitalist landowners.

In Stere's view (Stere, 2005), the extrapolation of the process of industrial organization of agriculture omits precisely the atomized, insularized character of the small land property (plot) and the specific form of its exploitation (family work, with no or very few employees), which predominates in the European rural area. As long as this attachment of the peasant to his parcel persists, the socialization of agricultural labor cannot be achieved by proletarianization, but by stimulating cooperation. Only that such measures were essentially bourgeois, preserving and perpetuating a mode of production which the Socialists regarded as reminiscent of the old system. Even in Romania at the turn of the twentieth century, support measures had been taken, such as the establishment of popular banks and credit, consumption and production cooperatives.

Stere disproves the idea that agrarian societies are doomed to stagnation. Pure agrarian societies can prosper provided they acknowledge the fact that agriculture has different development forces than industry and thus channel their struggle to defend peasant interests, in the sense of raising the cultural and material level of the peasantry by unleashing productive forces and developing a "Romanian rural democracy".

For this, however, a political mobilization is needed, which is why the author advocates the employment of various progressive social groups (petty bourgeoisie, village leaders, intellectuals), along with the most prominent elements of the peasantry, in a peaceful political and legal struggle, whose purpose is a higher social order. Stere focuses on village leaders, who enjoy a higher status in the community, but who feel the strongest frustration induced by hermetic and oligarchic parliamentarism, abusive public administration and, in general, the lack of prospect of prosperity (Stere, 2005).

The convergence of interests between the urban petty bourgeoisie (commercial and manufacturing) and the peasantry is based on a symbiotic economic relationship: urban areas can be a market for agricultural products, and the prosperous peasantry can ensure the consumption of urban products. However, the precondition for such a closed economic ecosystem is the inaccessibility of external markets, due to the lack of a competitive advantage.

So, even if, at first sight, populism seems to idealize the agrarian society, with its social and economic ruralism, it actually puts forward a vision of improvement, which emphasizes as vectors of progress and social and economic prosperity the typical forms of economic organization: the peasant household and artisanal craft. These elements are considered to be the only authentic and viable ones, in contrast to large-scale urbanization and industrialization under the impetus of the aggressive development of Western capitalism. Therefore, Stere (Stere, 2005) seeks to provide a framework for the applicability of socialist precepts: the eradication of the class struggle through social non-differentiation, the merging of means of production and labor, associationism.

In the view of the liberals, the state has a moral obligation to take care of the fate of the masses. Notable personalities, such as Spiru Haret or Nicolae Basilescu, stand as supporters of state interventionism in regulating civil legal relations regarding land ownership, even if the result would be the disappearance of the minority class of tenants. Thus, at the beginning of the 19th century, the political exponents of this party became the promoters of a new agrarian reform, having as defining elements the expropriation of large estates and the redistribution to peasants. The approach of the liberals is an egalitarian one, in the sense that the ownership policy is a uniform one, which does not take into account the internal differentiations among the peasantry.

In their turn, theorists of liberal sociology, such as Ştefan Zeletin, consider that the historical experience of the development of capitalism and especially of the bourgeois class denotes the existence of laws, from which not even Romania can deviate substantially, but rather lags behind. Once capitalism penetrates a territory, it also attracts a set of ideas (freedom, equality, humanity) and new (exchange) values, which once unleashed will produce profound and irreversible effects in the social, economic, political, legal, institutional and cultural sphere. It takes over the Marxist idea that "in agrarian societies commercial capitalism is the autonomous and revolutionary economic factor, which gradually dissolves the old mode of agrarian production until capitalist production is born" (Zeletin, 1991).

The social transformations produced by the penetration of primitive forms of capitalism manifested themselves both on the former ruling class (the landed nobility) and on the lower strata (the peasantry, the craftsmen). Taking Marx's findings, Zeletin argues that the decline of the great nobility was due to the incipient forms of capitalism, namely usury capital and commercial capital, the prerogative of the Jews.

Zeletin examines the transformations brought about by the penetration of capitalism in the rural area and their correlation with the revolutionaries' policy of attracting the peasantry through concessions (ownership) and their oppression against large landowners (changing labor relations). For the lower strata of society, the expansion of commercial capitalism (including the influx of consumer goods) has the effect of dismantling trades and the domestic industry, forcing peasants or former craftsmen to work for change, not for subsistence. Agriculture remains in this phase the only activity producing new values.

Thus, the peasants become owners over a piece of land and free to dispose of their own work, but it is not enough for their subsistence. This is the reason why subordinate relations will be perpetuated between large landowners and settlers, the latter being indebted in times of hardship and unable to pay by mortgaging their land (sanctioned by law as inalienable), but only providing work for the benefit of creditors. Only the property became bourgeois (a monetizable good), while labor remained feudal (the peasant holding the agricultural inventory, not the owner who bargains for it).

The First World War and the ensuing mass ownership had profound macroeconomic (inflation, rising prices for agricultural products) and social effects, as well as the in the sphere of rural-urban relations. Economically, one of the first phenomena noticed were the "ruralization of cash", and the disappearance of the social

class of large landowners and the establishment of "plutocracy" (Zeletin, 1927). The decline of the agrarian ruling social class is also reflected in the new constitutional settlement of the interwar period, which favors the interests of financial capitalism, to the detriment of rural property (see, for example, the nationalization of the subsoil).

In contrast to the populist vision, Zeletin emphasizes that "the «emancipation» of the peasantry has no historical purpose of providing it a material basis for independent existence; on the contrary, the historical meaning of emancipation is to separate the peasant from land - either suddenly or gradually - and to render him available to the bourgeoisie as a free worker, as a proletarian" (Zeletin, 1991: 213). From this perspective, the "tragedy of the peasantry", with its rebellious reflexes, is an inevitable episode in the historical process of capitalism's development, characteristic of the incipient phase of capitalism (the period of capital accumulation), which would fade as the bourgeoisie advances from commercial capitalism (the process of circulation) to industrial capitalism (the process of capitalist production) (Zeletin, 1922).

The ***Conservative discourse***, in which we also distinguish more radical or moderate nuances, generally expresses an attachment to an organic development of society and not one based on import institutions that are not compatible with the social and cultural background of the Romanian agrarian society. In the field of agricultural policy, a persistent element of conservative discourse is the preservation of large property and the consolidation of a medium-sized property. Moreover, agrarian reform must not be hasty and spoiling, nor must it be driven by an egalitarian spirit, but must be differentiated according to one's abilities and capabilities.

The main arguments of the conservatives in favor of maintaining the functionality of the large agricultural property are its qualitative and quantitative superiority and the overwhelming contribution to Romania's national wealth and trade balance. However, on the world market, however, Romania is forced to compete with other grain exporting regions (North America, Russia, India, Australia, etc.) and the competitive advantage in this field could be maintained only through favorable fiscal and customs policies. Conservative leaders, such as Ioan Lahovari (Lahovari, 1907), criticized the policies of liberal governments, which had put heavy financial burden on agricultural production: imposing taxes on the import of agricultural machinery and equipment (provided by the new customs regime), relatively high taxes income and property tax, transfer fees, etc.). In addition, he sees the fact that most of the estates were mortgaged, mostly in charge of the Land Loan, which further made the large property vulnerable.

Interesting is also the positioning of the conservative-democratic wing, grouped around the personality of Take Ionescu (Iordache, 2011), whose social origin was not an aristocratic one, but petty-bourgeois (his father being a grain merchant). Standing in defense of the interests of large landowners, they also apologized for the large property, which they viewed not as the prerogative of the descendants of aristocratic families, but as the source of capital and the working means of the entire ruling class. This idea expresses a desideratum of a homo novus and at the same time a reality of the societal changes that occurred since the middle of the 19th century, namely the permeabilization of the circle of landowning boyar elites. It is not surprising, then, that through such a

positioning, Take Ionescu attracted both the sympathies of the new agrarian bourgeoisie, but also the antipathy of conservatives of aristocratic origin (Gr. Cantacuzino, P. Carp, etc.).

The societal consequences of the First World War were profound, with the Agrarian Reform of 1918-1921 de facto establishing a new agrarian regime based on peasant property. For the conservative political elites, the loss of the material land base was a blow not only materially but also symbolically, because at the same time they lost prestige and relevance. Their place, as exponents of agrarian interests, was occupied by the peasant current, which campaigned for the eradication of the landlord oligarchy that had dominated the political and economic sphere of the country. However, this current did not represent a uniform doctrinal platform from the beginning. On the contrary, the heterogeneity of the various emerging populist parties on the political scene at the end of the First World War derives from their geographical location and social or historical experience, proving a greater appetite for either social cause (see Peasant Party, led by Ion Mihalache) or for the national one (see the National Party led by Iuliu Maniu), as well as various degrees of radicalism, from the most protestant (see the Peasant Party of Bessarabia, led by Constantin Stere) to a moderate one (People's Party, led by Alexandru Averescu). Over time, however, two doctrinal pillars crystallize: peasantry (as agrarian populism) and cooperation (as economic populism) (Adam, 2018).

One of the main theorists of peasantry is Virgil Madgearu (Madgearu, 1922). He pointed out that the Agrarian Reform of 1921 strengthened three regimes of agricultural ownership and exploitation: (i) peasant ownership and exploitation, (ii) large and medium-sized property exploited by agricultural agreements, and (iii) large and medium-sized property, managed by salaried work. The potential for progress and prosperity of the peasant class is found mainly in the first alternative and, to a lesser extent, in the third. The mode of exploitation in the form of agricultural agreements remains an anachronism that inhibits development (Madgearu, 1936).

The desideratum of this peasant property regime is not only the maximization of agricultural production and related income, but also the cultural upliftment of the nation. Madgearu advocates an agrarian policy aimed at social progress, but one based on the objective conditions of existence and development of the peasant economy, as shown by research on the individual structure and socio-economic dimension of the peasant economy. With regard to the benefits of consolidating peasant households, the author considers them to be an outlet for the goods of domestic industry newly out of state protectionism and a retention factor of the rural population, preventing excessive proletarianization or emigration, both provided that ownership is not pulverized by successions or economically unviable partial alienations.

The meaning of the evolution of rural private property was contrary to that predicted by Marx (the stripping of the peasant from the land and his capitalist exploitation), becoming from "instrument of exploitation and domination" a "tool of labor - labor property". Unlike the socialist revolutions, which seek the “radical transformation of production”, the agrarian revolutions aim only at a redistribution of land, without affecting the form of ownership. On the other hand, insofar as the latter

reflect real societal dynamics (for example, increasing the functional role of peasant property in agricultural production), they may alter the economic constitution itself.

Madgearu highlights the internal differentiations within the peasantry, which he relates to the size of the property and the position in the productive process. Three categories are thus identified: (i) large peasants, who use surplus labor, having a surplus of land, (ii) self-employed peasants, who together with the family ensure their subsistence on their own plots, and (iii) small peasants who cannot afford living on one's own lot. To these the landless agricultural worker can be added.

Politically, prominent figures in the National Peasant Party, such as Mihalache, criticized the abuses committed by the authorities, starting with the ministers of agriculture (Alexandru Constantinescu, Constantin Garofild), regarding the implementation of the Agrarian Reform, such as excluding peasant delegates from the commissions for expropriation and redistribution of land to peasants, the transformation of the Agrarian Committee into a court presided over by the minister (meaning the cumulation of executive and judicial prerogatives), derogatory provisions from the Law (by Regulation or even ministerial orders) to remove several types of estates from expropriation, etc. He also declared himself a promoter of the co-operative movement (which had also benefited from the contribution of the liberal Spiru Haret).

As recurring themes in the speeches on the agrarian topic we find: the agrarian character of the Romanian society, the condition of the peasant and the peasant household, the relations between the peasants and the owners / tenants and the agrarian reform. In general, the position of the discursive actors regarding the agrarian issue also denotes a certain deeply-rooted vision of the Peasant.

The agrarian problem, as outlined in the political and intellectual discourses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, had some systemic causes, determined by the evolution of relations between the various social groups that populate the countryside, namely the peasantry, on the one hand and the nobility / landlord / tenant on the other. One of the catalysts of the changes in the sphere of agrarian relations was the Rural Law of 1864, the reverberations of which were manifested on all levels.

Exponents of Marxist currents sought to identify historical phases and combative social forces, highlighting materialism, legitimacy, and determinism in social (r)evolutions. For example, Lucreţiu Pătrăşcanu (Pătrăşcanu, 1969), analyzing the changes in the relations between the peasantry and the nobility in the Romanian Principalities, concluded that the transition from the feudal to the proto-capitalist economy practically coincides with the establishment of serfdom. From the point of view of the relations of production, the economic basis of feudalism is the small peasant property, which is engaged in the natural economy. This type of work organization presupposes that the free peasant cultivates with his own means the piece of land, as much as is necessary for the subsistence living and the coverage of the rent due to the owner of the land. The serfdom system, driven by the exchange economy (especially the export of agricultural products), which has been booming

since the middle of the eighteenth century under the Phanariot regime, replaces rent in products with labor rent (claca), which, in its turn, as capitalist economy consolidates, would become financial rent. The fundamental difference between the two systems is that in the first case the value of using the products matters, while in the second case their exchange value prevails. The monetary economy is increasingly stimulating the boyars' desire to accumulate movable assets, to the detriment of perishable natural products. The means of acquiring the financial wealth is the sale of the surplus, and this could be generated only by the fierce exploitation of the peasantry.

However, Pătrășcanu points out that there have been a number of changes in the relationship between the peasant masses and large property, being influenced by both endogenous and exogenous factors. Internally, the consolidation of the state and the development and diversification of social strata as capitalist-type economic relations gained ground, demanded the replacement of the mode of serfdom with a capitalist-type one. The issue of land ownership acquires a special significance, given that the joint exploitation („în devălmășie") contradicts the economic interests of the nobility engaged in the exchange economy. In this context, the boyars will militate for an increasing restriction of the rights of use over the land by the peasants, which was equivalent, in Pătrășcanu's opinion, to a genuine mass expropriation. However, this process is a gradual one, which follows exactly the developments in the exchange economy, respectively the monetary value (for export) of agricultural products.

Regarding the second dimension, this is the result of the international context, the young Romanian state being an arena open to the spheres of influence of the Great Powers: France, England, Austria-Hungary, Prussia, Russia and the Ottoman Empire. From this point of view, the support that the Western industrialized countries (England, France) gave to the efforts to improve the conditions of the peasantry was mainly determined by the need to create new markets for goods, but any radical approach (for example, granting mass ownership at the expense of large estates) was viewed with reluctance precisely because of the risk of affecting the supply of raw materials. At the same time, Tsarist Russia believed that the scourge of a social revolution in this area could fuel protest movements in its own territories.

In the view of the exponents of the leftist currents, such as Pătrășcanu or Dobrogeanu-Gherea (Dobrogeanu-Gherea, 1910), the transformations at the level of the superstructure took the form of a hybrid mixture of feudal remains and bourgeois-capitalist institutions, arising from the interweaving of different forms and funds (Pătrășcanu, 1969: 217). In this sense, Pătrășcanu considers that, despite the fact that the Union of Principalities has led to the consolidation of the State at all levels (institutional, administrative, legal, economic, cultural), economic structure and basic social relations, with cereal production as a central element, have remained largely the same: (i) a predominantly agrarian society engaged in international trade as an exporter of agricultural products; (ii) a striking imbalance between the contribution to agricultural production of various classes and social groups and their corresponding benefits, which is a major source of social inequity (peasant labor vs. profits of big boyars and merchants) and (iii) the tendency of elites to consolidate their private and

exclusive property rights over the land, as well as to benefit from the labor or financial services of the peasants.

Regarding the labor relations between peasants and landowners / tenants in the agrarian economy, while the socialist authors emphasize their asymmetrical and coercive nature, the conservative discourse relativizes this unidirectional character of these relationships, highlighting the abuses of both parties, which requires stricter regulation. In this sense, Lahovari (Lahovari, 1907) points out that there were cases of violation of agricultural contracts sometimes by one side and sometimes by the other. Regarding the owners / tenants, the abuses of some of them were manifested by exploiting the urgent needs of the peasants (e.g. usury), delays in tithing and payment, deception in measuring the land / weighing the harvest, non-compliance with legal provisions, etc. On the other hand, the peasants did not always comply with their obligations, exploiting, for example, labor shortages during periods of greatest need, increasing the cost of their labor or abandoning the estate to work for another.

Liberal leader Spiru Haret, a staunch supporter of the village co-operative movement, noted the anachronism of the lease system, “the remnant of the days when the peasant was a slave, tied to the land, and rented, along with the land, to which he was a mere annex” (Haret, 1905: 31). This form of land use was very different from the capitalist forms of agricultural exploitation (in terms of capital and wage labor) and incompatible with the modern institutions of the country.

However, this state of systemic inequality and coercion, which contrasts with the ideals of modernization and democratization, is also highlighted by other liberal leaders, such as Nicolae Basilescu: even if the Law of 1864 gave the peasant economic freedom and legal equality, its real condition had become one of "economic slavery" and "civil inequality". Demographic conditions had changed in the last 50 years, and relations between peasants and large landowners had also suffered severe alterations: if before Cuza's reform we could speak of a symbiotic relationship between the two classes (the landowner being constrained to bargain with the peasants to capitalize on his estate, and the peasants being forced to bargain with the landowner to cultivate also parts of his lands to ensure their subsistence), with the development of mechanized agriculture and capital, coupled with the consecration and spatial division of property rights, these reciprocal and relatively fair ties eroded, taking, over time, under the title of agricultural contracts, the form of *de facto* and *de jure* constraints of the peasantry (Basilescu, 1914).

On the other hand, the exponents of the conservative current appreciated that the condition of the peasantry had improved substantially in the last half of the 19th century. In this sense, Lahovari (Lahovari, 1907), looking at the causes of the Peasant Uprising of 1907, has a position contrary to the claims of the peasants, which he considers exaggerated and unjustified, given that, statistically speaking, the conditions of that time were rather favorable to the rural world: the significant degree of ownership, the fertility of the soil, the good harvests, the freedom regarding the varieties and the way of cultivation, the non-burdensome taxation, the demographic density, the positive birth rate, etc.

All the agrarian policy and reform initiatives of the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century had as a point of reference the Rural Law of 1864, in view of the systemic effects it produced, on the one hand. on the one hand, at the level of the distribution of land ownership, the status of property rights and labor relations, and on the other hand at the level of the collective mentality. Even if the way in which the Law was decreed, following Cuza's coup, with the support of Kogălniceanu, shows a rift between reformists and conservatives regarding the optimal way to regulate the agrarian issue, the opportunity of the law was no longer contested by the observers of agrarian evolution a few decades later, for several reasons.

First of all, the Reform was an act of social justice, which was also rooted in the democratic ideals of emancipation, promoted by the liberal reforming elites. In his confessions, Mihail Kogălniceanu (Kogălniceanu, 1891) admitted that the great reforms for which he campaigned in his political activity were inspired by liberal ideological currents in Berlin's intellectual circles, which promoted a monarchy based on democratic institutions. Transposing the reformist projects in the Romanian context, Kogălniceanu aimed at: (i) the liberation of the gypsies, (ii) the proclamation of equal rights and duties for all the component classes of the nation and (iii) the emancipation of the dependent peasants („clăcaşi") and granting them ownership over the lands they had used for centuries. However, the completion of the reform within the deep Romanian society was a long-term approach, which demanded the raising through culture of the degree of civic consciousness of the peasants (rights and duties) (Kogălniceanu, 1891).

On the other hand, Barbu Catargiu had stated as early as 1862 the conservatives' position on the peasant issue, which was contrary to the egalitarian current, pleading instead for the State to support the more deserving elements of the peasantry, without affecting large property (Basilescu, 1914). For his part, the conservative Ioan Lahovari admitted, half a century later, that the Rural Reform of 1864 was an act both revolutionary and necessary, even if its repercussions among the peasants were dangerous: the expectation was created that the State should resort to a similar method in the future, not distinguishing between hardworking and lazy peasants (Lahovari, 1907).

Even liberal voices campaigned for gradual, not revolutionary, reform for national and macroeconomic reasons. Thus, among the vocal critics of the time, we find the liberal leader Ion Brătianu, who argued that such a profound reform was not appropriate as long as social peace had not been reached (Opriş, 1944). In his view, beyond specific issues of concern, such as the fact that the ownership targeted other village categories than the dependent peasants, or that the scheduled compensation violated the principle proclaimed in 1848 "to the detriment of no one and for the benefit of all", such a reform would be an attack to the cohesion of the Nation and to the economic foundations of the country.

Kogălniceanu, as the promoter of the Rural Law of 1864 and the previous coup, appreciated, retroactively, that these fears had largely proved unfounded and that the

justice of the reform could not be denied, since, despite the shortcomings and the injustices regarding the application of the Law, there had been no episodes of vindictive violence of the peasants against the boyars, as had happened in Austria or Russia, but was instead accompanied by an atmosphere of general celebration (Kogălniceanu, 1891).

The Rural Law of 1864, constituting a defining moment in the evolution of the agrarian question in Romania, analyzed retroactively in terms of its positive and negative effects, can be classified as a transitional act, which established certain principles of bourgeois, capitalist socio-economic organization (exclusive private property, economic freedom, legal equality), but it has also occasioned the perpetuation of anachronistic, quasi-feudal labor relations.

For example, Dobrogeanu-Gherea considers that, beyond the general shortcomings of the law (insufficient surface of the lots, exclusion of some rights or certain categories from the ownership, lack of pastures and communal forests, etc.) or the occasional ones arising from the application (tendencies to evade the law by some landowners or abusive delimitation of plots of land), this gave rise to a non-viable, hybrid economic and social body that was not able to generate long-term prosperity for either the peasantry or the large owners, and nor to society as a whole: on the one hand, large landowners risked losing their labor, as it was natural for the peasant to work his own lot first, no matter how small and inferior in quality, ensuring only subsistence with minimal demands; on the other hand, the state also risked being deprived of the main source of wealth.

Gherea believed that this regime, characterized by capitalist and serfdom duality, was favorable exclusively to landowners, because the serfdom dimension gave them all the advantages of "free will" labor performed by peasants, exempting them from any mutual obligations, while the capitalist dimension facilitated their unrestrained exploitation. On the other hand, for the peasantry this regime presented many disadvantages, starting with the obligation to perform forced labor and ending with the de facto deprivation of free disposal of one's own labor. Moreover, the author considered that the omissions of the law reflected the hidden tendency to undermine the newly proclaimed freedom of the peasant, by maintaining a state of dependence on the landlord. In this regard, the most eloquent cases were those concerning the conditioning of easements for access to the plot of land or cattle waterers.

This inherent contradiction of the new legal scaffolding, which was superficially Western-inspired but quite retrograde in depth (borrowing elements specific to servitude), was manifested mainly in the way the peasant is treated: although free by law, he is in fact subjugated. In this sense, Gherea highlights three distinct features: (i) tying to the land, (ii) forced labor and (iii) the form of exploitation. The underlying perception on the peasant is a form of reaction of the ruling classes to the basic principles of economic liberalism, namely that the peasant can dispose of his will and his land without constraint.

From another perspective, the conservative Ioan Lahovari (Lahovari, 1907) laments that the agrarian laws, starting with the one of 1864, even if they were meant

to address an acute problem (the anachronism represented by the condition of the landless peasant), had proved to be animated by an egalitarian spirit, which did not take into account the laws of natural social selection, respectively the differentiation that would appear among the newly landowning peasantry depending on the diligence and resources of each. Thus, the establishment of a wealthy peasant class had been inhibited by certain legislative provisions, such as the inalienability of plots provided for in the Rural Law of 1864 or the standardization of plots for ownership from the State estates, as amended by the 1889 Act by the Liberal government. Moreover, this random and undifferentiated allocation according to resources, without requesting any advance payment and with a very long-term payment period (60 years), triggered an overbidding of the estates by the peasants. Last but not least, the bill of 1897 and the successive ones regarding the establishment of the Casa Rurală had, in Ioan Lahovari's opinion, the main defect that opposed to a single individual (the landlord, as seller) an entire internally undifferentiated collectivity (peasants associations, as buyers) that was likely to exert formidable pressure to obtain consent. A similar but more vehement position, contrary to such an institution, is found in other conservative leaders, such as Take Ionescu or CG Dissescu, who saw it instrumental to the forced dismantling of large property, with profound long-term social implications: a new "peasant aristocracy" and the final loss of the social prestige of the descendants of the boyar families (Iordache, 2011). All these normative measures had the effect of perpetuating a polarization of land ownership (large property vs. small property), undermining the prospects of consolidating the middle land ownership and, implicitly, of a rural middle class, susceptible to progress.

In turn, the liberal Spiru Haret attributes the miserable condition of the peasants, despite successive ownership reforms (1864, 1879), to the excessive fragmentation of land by inheritance or alienation, loss of possession by long-term lease (10-15 years) and lack of means materials for fruitful exploitation. In addition, he considers that the remaining State estates would not be enough for a new wave of ownership and would not meet the long-term needs of the peasantry.

The peasant uprisings (1888, 1907) were manifestations of the sharpening of the agrarian problem, being interpreted by most elites, regardless of their ideological affiliation, from a structuralist perspective, namely as an expression of asymmetric social relations reaching paroxysm. The Marxist discourse emphasized the class struggle, which intensified as a class consciousness was fostered among the peasantry and a communion of interests with the working class. From this perspective, the demands of the oppressed peasantry do not refer strictly to basic needs (ensuring a subsistence life), but to the elimination of the relations of exploitation between oppressors (bourgeois-landlord class, and later the rich peasants) and oppressed (poor peasantry).

From the perspective of Zeletin's liberal sociology, but also based on Marxist methodology, peasant uprisings can be interpreted as reactionary manifestations to the new bourgeois establishments, as a continuation of the attitude of the former conservative large landowners's attitudes, being typical for the transition phase from

the old agrarian regime to the new bourgeois regime" (Zeletin, 1991). In this case, too, we see the presupposition of the existence of societal laws, of a historicism. The result of this process is the adaptation of relations of production and labor to the capitalist economy.

The Conservative discourse disproves the idea that the main causes of these social upheavals are exclusively systemic in nature (abuses committed by large landlords / tenants), emphasizing the anarchist character, under the impetus of some agitating agents, and implicitly the danger that these phenomena can have on the cohesion of the nation. The real causes of the peasant movements are, in Ioan Lahovari's view, economic (unfair agricultural bargains, lease contracts, inefficient cultivation, etc.), legislative and moral (Lahovari, 1907).

The form of organizing the agricultural exploitation presents the serious inconvenience of arising from the antagonism between capital and labor (Lahovari, 1907: 16), which renders peasants susceptible to socialist propaganda, characterized by Lahovari as "antisocial propaganda". He accuses politicians, the "intellectual proletariat" (revolutionary students animated by such figures as Iorga) and rural notables (teachers and, to a lesser extent, priests), of spreading "subversive ideas" and "criminal sermons" among the peasantry in the form of "unachievable promises": a new mass ownership reform at the expense of the landowners, the reduction of the tithe, the unrestricted grazing on the land of the owners. Lahovari denounced above all the deliberate manipulation, for electoral or pecuniary purposes (local notables being the shareholders of the People's Banks), of the feelings of an uneducated peasantry blinded by the thirst for land.

In addition to the so-called miserable state of the peasantry, Ioan Lahovari rejects other possible causes of the peasant movements: (i) the existence of disadvantaged areas, (ii) the rapacity of Jewish leasehold trusts, (iii) the secular aversion to the boyars. Regarding the first aspect, Ioan Lahovari considered that the peasant movements had a purely anarchist character, all the more so as they had broken out in Muntenia in the counties with the highest agricultural productivity (Teleorman and Vlașca). Regarding the second aspect, unlike Moldova, where the exploitation by the big Jewish lease trusts (the so-called "Fischerland") could be a cause of rebellion, animated by anti-Semitic feelings, in the southern part of the country almost all tenants were Romanians.

Thirdly, Lahovari notes that the great boyar families, holders of land rights, had succumbed as a strong social class, not being "protected from its prodigalities and weaknesses by artificial laws - primogenitures, substitutions, permanent inalienability of property, etc." (Lahovari, 1907: 11). They were replaced by a new class of Romanian farmers, who would play a special functional role in modern Romanian society.

Under these conditions, the causes of collective violence are rather structural, targeting the relationship between peasants and large landlords / tenants, local government, politicians and notables, as well as between "natural law" and legality. The mere fact that the system of exploitation pitted the owner / lessee against a significant group of peasants could be a risk factor for escalating violence. The

economic, cultural and symbolic capital of the landlord was countered by the numerical superiority of the peasants and their cognitive capital, characterized by a series of norms, values, attitudes and beliefs deeply rooted in the collective consciousness, facilitating collective action: since Phanariot times , when the condition of the peasant had deteriorated to the stage of servitude, the national hatred had turned into a social hatred, directed at those with whom he was in direct contact and whom he perceived as oppressive (Lahovari, 1907).

Peasant movements stand out for their generality and uniformity, which indicates that local excesses of agricultural contracts or anti-Semitism were not the root causes. In Moldova, the main claim was the price per hectare ("Falcea with 25 lei"), while in Muntenia the specificity was the systematic devastation of the property of landowners and tenants (Lahovari, 1907).

Spiru Haret agreed that agriculture was of special significance for Romania, but the social and economic changes of the last 50 years that had altered the rural world (ownership laws, expansion of the railway network, diversification and expansion of foreign trade, expansion of cultivated land, establishment of lease trusts , etc.) claimed a bold undertaking of tacking the peasant issue in a holistic manner (Haret, 1905: 6). Thus, even before the outbreak of World War I, the agrarian problem and the prospect of new mass ownership, coupled with a vast expropriation, would become a central theme of the liberal political agenda.

Nicolae Basilescu, for example, considered that the moral legitimacy of such a reform derives from the fact that the Romanian people are not in the cities, but in the countryside, where the lowest social class – the peasantry – is also the most numerous and the poorest. Responding to criticism from conservatives that an expropriation-centered "revolutionary" reform would risk undermining the dynasty and the foundations of the country, Basilescu claims that the very condition of "sub-people" to which the peasants were reduced risks being the catalyst for widespread social upheavals (Basilescu, 1914).

Other notable personalities had a more conciliatory approach, this being the case of Barbu Ştefănescu Delavrancea (Ştefănescu Delavrancea, 1917). In his speech in the Chamber on the peasant reform, Delavrancea points out that among the Romanian political "oligarchy" (elites), regardless of their ideological orientation, there was a lively concern and consensus on the need to improve the fate of the peasantry, not only out of populist interest, but especially by virtue of a general good and a humanist spirit. In fact, the composition of both historical parties was similar: descendants of the boyars, large landowners, freelancers, merchants, industrialists, etc. If the middle class, the bourgeoisie, was barely cohesive, being assimilated into these two political forces, the peasantry remained largely excluded from political life. Moreover, he emphasizes the identity-affective factor.

Agrarian reform thus gained a social and national ambivalence. It was considered of national importance because it contributed to the cohesion of the society reunited within Greater Romania, a cohesion that could only be achieved if the peasantry, representing the largest social stratum in all provinces, truly felt the

benefits of the Union in contrast to the old arrangements. On the other hand, the social objectives are to transfer the functional role of large landowners to small landowners.

The discourse of the political elites on agrarian reform also reveals a number of principles that would make such an approach fair and sustainable. Although there has been a consensus since the Pasoptist Revolution on the need to regulate property and labor relations "for the benefit of all and to the detriment of no one", we find different positions of the elites in this regard, both in terms of the nature of property, as well as the method of redistribution of land (expropriation with or without compensation, granting new ownership).

The expropriation had become the pillar of the agrarian reform promoted by the Liberals, who had been actively concerned with this issue since 1905, Vintilă Brătianu setting up a Circle of Studies in 1910 to outline the agrarian reform and electoral reform policy guidelines for "a radical change of the oligarchic regime of today" that would foster full-hearted solidarity of the nation and would give full play to the national energies (Bârzan, 1936).

In this regard, the stormy debate between the Conservative and Liberal camps focused on the principle of inviolability of property. If the former availed themselves of the consecration of this right in the Constitution in order to limit a mass dispossession, the others argued the fairness, even legal, of the expropriation, in the light of the very particular evolutionary process of land property rights in Romania, that is both a historical and a social process (Basilescu, 1914: 29).

Responding to conservative criticism that such a reform would have been subversive, revolutionary, an attack on the inviolability of property, Basilescu reiterates a principle of political economy: when there is strong social inequity, the right to property can be altered by the legislator, by organizing a redistribution of the land, by virtue of the guiding principle of justice, as it emanates from the public opinion of the time.

The position of the liberals in this regard is legally argued by Basilescu: the novation of land rights from former boyars to current owners was done in violation of the principle of law *Nemo plus juris ad allium transferre potest, quam ipso haberet*. Before the Organic Regulation, the property right of the rulers was not regulated as such, being rather a royal right. On the contrary, it unequivocally provided for a real right of the peasants over the plot of land for housing and the land for cultivation and pasture necessary for subsistence, this right being a personal, innate one. This *ab origine* right had neither been repealed by nor enshrined in the 1864 Act. On the other hand, the liberal project of expropriation had to consider another principle of law, namely the right won in good faith, which is embedded in the current large property, by virtue of transactions carried out under the new legislative framework (Civil Code).

For these two legal reasons, the Liberals supported the option of *restitutio ad integrum* through expropriation with compensation for large estates. This formula was, on the one hand, a reparation for the expropriation made to the detriment of the peasants, when the historical right to cultivate the entire estate was limited to those of

that time and their successors, and on the other hand, it conferred a fair compensation for the current landowners of good faith.

Regarding ownership, Basilescu argued that the provisions on the inalienability and indivisibility of plots should be maintained so as to avoid the detrimental effects of the previous mass ownership of 1864. He signals the danger of dismantling the peasant class as a consequence of the abolition of inalienability as a juridical instrument safeguarding the integrity of peasant property against the monopolistic tendencies of the local potentates (Basilescu, 1914).

The Conservatives' criticism of the liberal agrarian reform program, as well as of socialist propaganda, was that they pursued an equal distribution of land, the expression of "a deceptive equality contrary to the fundamental law of nature, which does not achieve the progress of species or of individuals by any other means than selection" (Lahovari, 1907: 59). Instead, they supported the direct sale, by the owners to the peasants, and only to those who had the necessary means (the rich peasant farmers), the rest of the villagers becoming proletarians.

Marxist authors, such as Dobrogeanu-Gherea or Pătrășcanu, considered that the subject of property remained a contentious one due to the discrepancy between the legal and institutional establishment devised by members of the ruling classes (boyars, large landowners), no matter how liberal, progressive, enlightened they were, on the one hand, and the underlying foundations of the social and public and private order arrangements established for centuries, on the other hand. From this perspective, Gherea considered that the remedy for the agrarian problem consisted in: (i) the abolition of all relations of production, labor and agricultural contracts and their replacement by capitalist labor relations, (ii) the repeal of supervision laws, agricultural bargaining and any other provisions, including the inalienability of plots, (iii) the transformation of small rural property into a truly viable one and (iv) ensuring a state of full legality, not only in writing but also in fact (Dobrogeanu-Gherea, 1910).

Another important element of the discourse on agrarian reform is its approach from a political and public policy point of view. In Lahovari's view, peaceful reform was a lasting one, which could not be reduced to forced redistribution (Lahovari, 1907). In turn, Haret (Haret, 1905) is an advocate of a holistic approach that takes into account the complexity of the causes of the peasant issue and the needs of the peasantry. As a conclusion on the issue of peasant ownership, Haret believes that this process will be gradual and incomplete, satisfying the direct needs of only the relatively wealthy minority and without abolishing large property. Constantin Stere also advocated the correlation of agrarian reforms (extended peasant ownership) and electoral reforms (extension of electoral rights), to create the societal foundations of a more inclusive democracy (Bulgaru, 2003), a view shared by the liberal Nicolae Basilescu (Basilescu, 1914).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, when the agrarian problem was exacerbated by demographic pressure and societal change, elites affiliated with various political currents sought to identify the causes and factors that determined the state of misery of the peasantry and the necessary regulatory or public policy

measures. The positions of two exponents of the Liberal parties (Spiru Haret), respectively Conservative (Ion Lahovari) reveal a series of similarities, but also particularities, including different accents on some aspects. The main topics are: access to land, protection of peasant property, regulation of labor relations (prevention of mutual abuse), optimization of peasant exploitation, social and economic insurance, "civilized reforms" (culturalization, administration, public order, etc.).

In his speech, the liberal leader Basilescu criticized the conservative program of large landowners and tenants, grouped in agricultural unions, the most vocal being the General Union of Agricultural Unions led by the conservative leader Nicolae Filipescu, that rejected the idea of expropriating large estates, proposing a series of measures instead: (i) voluntary sale, with larger lots for wealthy peasants and advanced payments for new occupants, (ii) "civilized reforms" (improving the administration, developing the cultural-educational level, improving farming methods, facilitating and improving access to transport infrastructure, sales and export of products, etc.), (iii) decentralization and (iv) abandoning the principle of inalienability of peasant plots, so that the most deserving peasants could work enough land, becoming a class of well-off peasants and rendering the others available as proletarianized labor force. These measures, in the view of the liberal critics, represented only a reiteration of the guideline of the conservative policy regarding the peasantry drawn up by Barbu Catargiu, which demanded the stimulation of the most deserving peasant elements.

Starting from the reality of a polarized rural society, the discourses of the elites on the evolution of the agrarian society have as recurring themes, on the one hand, the relationship between large and small property and, on the other hand, the relations between owners and peasants. The redistribution of land, through the dissolution of large property and the consolidation of peasant property, was a complex societal process, because the new wealthy rural stratum had to be able to take over the functional social and economic role of the previous one. In order to be viable in the long run, small property requires a science-based, intensive culture, not an extensive one.

The Conservative discourse, especially in the pre-war period, when it was competing with the Liberal one for asserting itself as a dominant discourse, attributed to the large estates and their corresponding social class a particularly important functional role of generating progress (economic, technical, etc.) and ensuring continuity of the national identity. In this sense, Lahovari's apology of the landed elites (landowners and tenants) takes into account three main dimensions: economic, social and national (Lahovari, 1907). Petre Carp also considers that large property is beneficial to the ploughman, as it gives him a market to sell his labor when his lot left over from successive divisions is no longer satisfying, thus preventing a dangerous social phenomenon: rural proletarianization (Gane, 1936). The social valence, with strong national accents, is due to the fact that agriculture was the foundation on which the Romanian middle class (the authentic Romanian bourgeoisie) was built, largely on the ruins of the former boyar elites. The agricultural industry was the only one that was truly national, with the majority of tenants being Romanian (except for the Jews in

Moldova). In the conservatives' view, the Romanian tenants were not mere cultivators, but true agricultural entrepreneurs. For many of the Romanian tenants who started from the bottom, agriculture was a real vector of social ascent to the status of agrarian and / or intellectual elite / civil servant (white collars), thanks to the sources of economic and social capital. For this reason, Take Ionescu in turn dismissed the criticisms brought against this social category, even if he admitted that an imperfect agrarian system contributed to its formation and ascension (Iordache, 2011).

Haret, on the other hand, declares himself ready to sacrifice the great tenancy, which he considers anachronistic and an obstacle in establishing direct and fair relations between landlord and peasant: „what the tenant offering fantastic prices actually exploits is neither his capital or his labor, nor the product of the land, but only the labor of the peasant and the impossibility in which he finds himself to defend himself"(Haret, 1905: 31).

In this context, many authors, regardless of ideological affiliation (Lahovari, Haret, Stere, etc.), see the establishment of a strong rural middle class as a remedy for the agrarian problem. The variations are mainly related to the emphasis on individual vs. collective well-being, but also on the role of the agrarian economy in the economic setting of the country. The Conservatives, led by Carp (Gane, 1936), considered this vital, which is why they had provided in the draft law on the sale of state property to reserve a quarter of the estate to be sold at auction, for subdivision into lots larger than 11, 15 and 25 ha.

Haret's vision of the status of the peasant is that of "free man, master of his work, and with whom the owner talks" (Haret, 1905: 32). In turn, the populist current promotes the same desideratum of a free peasantry and dominion over its land, while adding a number of other measures desirable to national life: supporting small industry and trades, promoting cooperation, nationalizing large industry.

Associationism is a principle of organizing agricultural work that we find in many authors, whether we are talking about the conservative, liberal, populist or peasant spectrum: for example, Lahovari believes that middle ownership should belong to "groups of peasants, owning a few tenths of hectares, forming as many natural centers of conservative interests and becoming the pillar of the social order in our villages"(Lahovari, 1907: 18), and Stere pleads for "intense cooperative movements in villages and towns" (Stere, 2005).

Regarding the future of an agrarian society, while the populists campaigned for the development of economic and social life based on the material and immaterial values of essentially anti-capitalist ruralism, the socialist Dobrogeanu-Gherea ridiculed this idealistic vision of an agrarian society: "A society based on small agrarian culture, and on the peasant household industry would be the path of economic misery, therefore also cultural and moral, national" (Dobrogeanu-Gherea, 1910: 494).

Conclusions

Modernization is a central theme in humanities research on the evolution of societies, including in the Eastern European space characterized by the

peripheralization of rural areas. Some historians have interpreted this pre-war process as the expression of the conversion of group privileges into rights, which is an adaptation and consolidation of the status of old elites, rather than the establishment of a new social reality. In other words, it is an evolutionary process, not a revolutionary one, as was the one that led to the collapse of the landlord social class, with the establishment of communism.

In nineteenth-century Europe, as some regions flourished in the industrial age, while others remained predominantly agrarian, the center-periphery cleavage intensified. In this context, there is a modernizing current oriented towards the development of the peripheral rural world, but taking into account its structural specificities. These modernization programs were led by landed elites, who, aware of the dangers of peripheralization and implicit dependence, nevertheless pursued a model of modernization different from the "Manchester civilization" focused on urban concentration, social polarization, and industrialization.

First, we note the antagonisms of two modernizing ideological currents. Petrusewicz (Petrusewicz, 2019) indicates that liberal agrarian modernizers were trying to position the country in the peripheral sectors (agricultural production) of the capitalist world economy, while pursuing their own model of modernization, different from that of the center. For the Romanian cultural-political space, Constantin Stere's populist vision is edifying in this respect.

In turn, the political opponents of the liberal elites, grouped around conservative factions, exponents or successors of the old regime, sought to temper this momentum of modernization through institutional forms of import devoid of substance (social realities, values, attitudes, etc.), but without completely denying it. In fact, these conservative elites advocated for a modernization at a different pace than the center and on the specific regional foundation, which was a real political, economic and educational project, inspired by Junimea movement (Schifirneț, 2007).

A second dimension is that of control over resources. On the one hand, the Conservatives, as exponents of the large property, independent and holding a vast economic and social capital, sought a greater decentralization of power, which would enshrine their status in the community. On the other hand, the new liberal elite, coming from the ranks of the petty nobility, the bourgeoisie and the state-dependent bureaucracy, campaigned for a centralization of power, the abolition of privileges and state control over resources (Sdrobiș, 2015).

The third dimension concerns the way in which political elites have sought to secure their base of support in certain segments of society. In this regard, we see the coagulation in the second half of the nineteenth century of an elite of liberal modernizers, composed mainly of bureaucratic and cultural intelligence, as well as large landowners interested in export-oriented farming. They found a pool of support among the bourgeoisie (capitalists, bankers, entrepreneurs). In fact, this tendency to seek a communion of interests in other social strata had become prevalent since Cuza's time, when it was obvious that the reactionary nobility did not approve of the surrender of their own privileges and possessions, which is why the ruler sought to establish a form

of dictatorship based on the popular support of the newly landowning peasant masses (Riley, 2010), in the absence of a consolidated bourgeois middle class.

Regardless of the characteristics of each path of modernization of peripheral regions, a common feature since the mid-nineteenth century is that of institutional development in the form of a liberal constitutional state, in the sense of creating a bureaucracy and a political superstructure designed to accelerate development of economic infrastructure and to guarantee property and social order.

The state of a social group (peasantry, aristocracy, bourgeoisie) can be analyzed both longitudinally, in terms of historical social evolution and thus relations with other social groups and transversally, following the status quo at a certain historical moment, usually around significant events, such as social upheavals, structural reforms, etc. The landed aristocracy, for example, proved to be one of the social classes most prone to share resources and power with other emerging social forces, rather than dominating them. We can conclude, therefore, that this convergence of interests between two influential social groups in both rural and urban areas, thanks to their economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital, was predictable for an agrarian society, since a significant part of the incipient elements of the Romanian bourgeoisie was of landed origin, while the other part was interested in a territorialization by owning estates. The process of modernization that pre-war landed elites were considering, regardless of ideological affiliation, was therefore one based on land and agriculture, the building blocks of the "vocation of the territory": increasing productivity through the introduction of intensive cultivation, chemical fertilization, mechanization, and other scientific techniques, such as crop rotation, all under the control of the global capitalist system. However, as society moves towards modernity, the egalitarian current is gaining ground, accelerating democratization and social mobility.

The agrarian question was a recurring theme of public discourse (political, ideological, journalistic, cultural, etc.) on the modernization of Romanian society. An in-depth analysis reveals a variety of sub-themes (distribution of property, labor relations, emancipation, the role of administration and superstructure, etc.), which in turn are viewed from an ideological perspective by discursive actors. The evolution in the agrarian question in the interwar period reveals a tendency of "peasantization", defined as an organizational and institutional form centered on the owner of an independent economic unit, with social and cultural features and specific attitudes. In the interwar period, characterized by relative stability, but also by an economic crisis, the agrarian elites and the agricultural sector as a whole remained strong enough to temper this boom in industrialization, seeking allies in the field of radical and / or authoritarian movements and regimes (May, 2007).

Overall, we can argue that the societal transformations that marked the transition from a semi-feudal to a modern regime manifested themselves on all levels: forms of ownership, labor and production relations, social stratification, production processes, organizational forms of work and economy, legal and institutional framework, etc. Between the successive agrarian reforms (1864, 1918-1921, 1945) we notice a series of common features, but also differences. First, all land reforms had two main components:

expropriation and redistribution. Referring to Huntington's distinction between land reform and agrarian reform (Huntington, 1999), their redistributive character is unequivocal, the focus being on increasing the share of peasant property. If in 1864 a proportional expropriation (relative value) of two thirds of the owned area is applied, in 1921 and 1945 only the maximum limits of the non-expropriable quotas are established quantitatively (as absolute values).

Granting mere ownership, without bringing about a profound reform of farming methods and means, failed to bring the promised prosperity to the peasantry. Researchers of the evolution of land ownership note two main trends, namely (i) differentiation and polarization that occurred within the peasant property, and (ii) decentralization as a result of successions and alienations in the case of land ownership (Axenciuc, 1999). However, it has had an effect on the social relations between the smallholders and large landowners classes. After a relatively long period of subdued relations of subordination and serfdom (the so-called state of neo-serfdom), with the societal transformations of the First World War, the democratizing and egalitarian current gained ground, marking the final loss of political influence of the old landed class.

The success of this process of transition from an agrarian regime characterized by high agricultural concentration to an agrarian regime based on small and medium peasant ownership depended on the ability of the peasantry to take over not only the economic but also social and even political functions of large ownership. Last but not least, the element of Romanianness (national) that the land incorporates in an agrarian society should be noted. This is a leitmotif in the discourses of the elites, the apocalyptic visions foretelling that the lands resulting from the fragmentation of the great domains will be seized by foreign creditors.

In addition, we can appreciate that the agrarian reform undertaken between 1945-1949, followed by collectivization (1953-1962), served to establish and consolidate the communist authority, largely the political impulses prevailing over the economic and social ones (Dobrincu, 2009). The establishment of the communist regime led to a brutal cessation of both rank-based society and the bourgeoisification process, which meant, on the one hand, the loss of the prestige of economic capital and, on the other hand, the loss of the political and cultural capital of landed elites.

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