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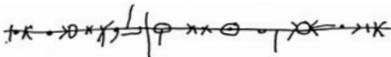
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from many national and (post)imperial geographies, in a comprehensive comparative picture that carefully takes apart, re-contextualizes, and brings to light conceptual similarities and discrepancies between biological theories, state policies, and modernist theories of national

degeneracy and regeneration. For a moment, all these were brought together, under the banner of an international Latin cultural community, in a collaborative effort to overcome marginality and to energetically modernize the states and populations of a series of European and American countries.

## **Constantin Bărbulescu, *România medicilor. Medici, țărani și igienă rurală în România de la 1860 la 1910*, București, Humanitas, 2015, 356 p.**



**Reviewed by Lidia Trăușan-Matu**

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Constantin Bărbulescu's volume, *Physicians' Romania. Doctors, Peasants and Rural Hygiene in Romania from 1860 until 1910*, (Humanitas, 2015), is built around the idea of the "degeneration of the Romanian race". This idea appears in the Romanian public space – largely because of the inefficiency of the medical system – in the second half of the nineteenth century and, slowly, until the end of the century, amplifies and acquires sharp contours. Using this theme, along with an enviable critical lucidity and sources lesser-known or lesser-used by researchers, Constantin Bărbulescu analyzes individually the most haunting topics, concerns and fears of the medical elite in Romania regarding the peasant and the rural world, in a time of accelerated modernization, under the reign of King Carol I.

Some of the themes (for example, "The Power of Medical Culture: New Laws for

Old People") are – as stated in the introduction to Bărbulescu's book – previous, older "independent studies". Rewritten as a whole or partially adapted, they complement the new texts, and by their renewed theme, they are written specifically for this book. Together, they breathe life into a complex picture drawn by the medical elite, between 1860 and 1910, in whose forefront shines the rural world and its lifestyle rules. Moreover, the transition of the peasant from the background to the foreground points to the historian's subtle concern for the deconstruction of some stereotypes and deeply-rooted prejudices in Romanian historiography. Finally, the construction, shown as a whole, is new in the literature of Romanian space.

The book opens with a broad and necessary discussion on the sources underlying the research (pp. 27-74). These are regular doctors' reports, be they of the county, regiment or employees in rural

hospitals, reports of the Superior Health Council, of the capital's Health Service or of the sanitary inspections, the memoirs of physicians and health legislation. The author draws attention to the real danger of using these sources: the distortion of truth by suspending one's critical thinking. And rightly so; in the absence of critical thinking, any source, regardless of type, style and importance, tends to mortify. In the case of medical reports which claim themselves to be, in principle, "scientific and objective", the result would be a blunt investigation reflecting the views (although profoundly ideological) of the person who registers the information and writes about it (medical elite).

The second part of the book is dedicated entirely to the medical discourse "on peasant and the rural world". Thematic subchapters are devoted to different aspects of hygiene: body and clothing ("*Dirt lies thick on their skin* or on personal and clothing hygiene"), food ("*The peasant's food is only polenta* or on food hygiene"), house and household ("*Most live in worse conditions than the Zulus* or on house and household hygiene"). Constantin Bărbulescu, investigating articles and school textbooks of the time, has noted that the discourse on peasant hygiene (body, clothing, dwelling place) is entirely negative. For example, physicians from the time write that most peasants "never" fully wash their bodies, few "wash at major holidays" and, finally, even fewer "wash once a week" (p. 82). Moreover, farmers don't use soap, don't comb daily, don't "freshen their clothes", and don't "take care of the home and household". In other words, nineteenth-century peasants are, from the doctors' perspective, dirty and smelly; they live in unsanitary conditions and are, thus, "prone to disease". This would be the image that sources provide at a first reading. However, historian Bărbulescu states that things are much more nuanced, raising the ideological dimension of these sources. As C. Bărbulescu notes, reports are part of a "descriptive discourse in

which doctors claim to describe an actual situation" and which overlaps another discourse (of a regulatory nature), "giving us the hygienic standards of the time, a hard-to-reach ideal for the Romanian peasant" (p. 82). In other words, black strokes and tough positions reflect a way to civilize and impose medical and hygienic modernity. On the other hand, doctors (urban people) come into contact and are faced with a totally different kind of man than the one from the world they live in, a man with whom they do not have any sort of familiarity, communication or understanding. It is hard enough for them to perceive that some elements of the Romanian peasant's food, clothing and housing do not only relate to the social group's material possibilities, education and the primitive state, but also to a certain cultural identity. Polenta, "opinca" (peasant's sandals) and "chirpicul" (clay and straws) are both products within the peasants' reach, but also symbols of a traditional lifestyle.

A special chapter, entitled "*Are Romanians alcoholics?* or on the hygiene of alcoholic beverages", is dedicated to a vice frequently invoked at the time: the "drunkenness" of the Romanian peasant (p. 160). The theme is an older concern of the medical elite in Moldavia and Wallachia. A good example is Dr. Ludovic Steege (not mentioned in Bărbulescu's book), who published a study entitled "On the Use of Spirits in Diseases and the Dangers Caused by the Abuse of these Drinks" (in the "Scientific and Literary Paper" from Iași, 1844). Like the writings of doctors from the second half of the nineteenth century, this study reflects the concern of the Moldavian doctor about the "reckless alcohol consumption" in villages and tries to convince the reader, citing a series of medical, physiological and economic reasons that this life style accelerates "the ruin of the body and health of the addict", which tends to become a real social problem. Constantin Bărbulescu identifies new aspects in medical writings after 1860, such as the shift in emphasis

from the insights and concerns to apparent certainties: alcoholism is a “social problem”, it is “intimately connected as a social problem to the Jewish problem” (p. 164), or alcohol is a sure cause of the “immense morbidity and mortality in modern Romania” and an enhancer of “race degeneration” (p. 179). The way the situation is described causes the author to conclude that, through their writings, physicians promoted an apocalyptic idea: “Alcohol – the universal evil – causes poverty, disease and decay” (p. 176). That is why the state, via its means of power and authority, attempts – especially after 1894 – sometimes radical measures (e.g. the removal of unrefined alcohol from trade or the encouragement of abstinence) to combat alcoholism “as a social scourge”. We are not just stating that the authorities simply prohibited alcohol. They couldn’t. In essence, it was an attempt to control the quality of alcohol in conjunction with the call to moderation. Moreover, we know that, at the time, doctors credited alcohol (especially wine) with major therapeutic virtues. Wine was considered a “medicine” for a wide range of diseases and distilled alcohol was used as the basis for the preparation of syrups and medicines. In addition, the peasant was drinking wine mixed with water, the latter in greater quantity. The reason is only one: at the time, it was quite difficult to find a reliable source of potable water and the use of wine for the “correction” of water served as an “antiseptic”.

The following text naturally completes the previous study: “*Pellagra, the Scourge of our Peasant* or on the birth of a disease”. Before addressing the heart of the matter, Constantin Bărbulescu sets the time, place and especially the causes that led to the outbreak and spread of pellagra, but also its manifestations and its tragic *denouement* (death). Studying doctors’ writings, especially doctoral theses, the author notes that in the 1860s “bits of information on a strange disease almost entirely particular to peasants appear in the

medical discourse, and, through it, in the public arena” (p. 186). Its name: pellagra. Incidentally, the disease was first reported in western Spain, around 1730, from where it spread to France and northern Italy. In its initial stages, the disease manifests itself as a “simple rash” and then, gradually, the body is infested with devastating purulent wounds followed by physical and mental decay and, ultimately, death. Furthermore, the historian notes that the debate became complicated as “in the absence of certainty regarding the etiology of the disease”, controversies on the account of prescribing medication appeared (p. 210). It all stemmed from “polenta”, the food presumed to have caused the disease. Two sides with different arguments and viewpoints were formed. One group pointed to damaged corn and flour as the leading cause of the disease and, therefore, blamed the patients (peasants) for eating food worth throwing away. The other side brought into discussion the plain, monotonous diet or nutrition, referring to the state of chronic and excessive misery of the peasantry. The conviction of the latter was that the situation could be fixed with a small amount of meat and fresh vegetables to be included in the peasants’ daily diet. This menu would ensure the daily requirement of niacin, a vitamin essential to the human body. Medical findings from the first decades of the twentieth century confirmed the latter hypothesis. In the years that followed, regardless of their belief, doctors did not close the subject; on the contrary, they turned it into a serious social problem, with catastrophic consequences, such as “race degeneration”.

The idea of “race degeneration” and its consequence, “the death of the nation”, are not just a chapter in the work of Constantin Bărbulescu, but rather its leitmotif. Being well-acquainted with the medical discourse, the author reviews the constituting elements of the degeneration theme. Step by step, we find a lot of causes that threatened the good path Romania was on: from diseases to morbid and moral heredity, from anti-

Semitism to hygiene and infant mortality. All these causes boil down to the same point: “population stagnation or decline”. The grim picture gave rise to fears, fantasies and prejudices. The whole process is highlighted by careful monitoring of medical reports and population censuses.

The book closes with a discussion on “Medical Culture versus Peasant Culture” in which Constantin Bărbulescu raises the issue of the process of medicalization in Romanian society. A variety of aspects such as the emergence and implementation of sanitary legislation, the functioning of the health service, the doctor-patient relationship, the rivalry between doctors and traditional healers etc. are widely portrayed. Relevant is also the conclusion reached by the author after having analyzed the process

of medicalization in the mid-nineteenth century: “it is only the beginning: really just the medical elite... is the one medicalized” (p. 328). We fully agree. Furthermore, we would like to point out that the reformatory process triggered in the Romanian principalities between 1830 and 1869 was indeed important, but limited. It should be perceived as an action which will trigger change and not one that enshrines a change that has already happened. In fact, even to this day the upgrade process of the medical system is still an unfinished project.

At the end of such considerations, given the rigor of documentation and the conclusions, one must admit that it is hard to imagine a future history of the Romanian peasant’s life without the book of historian Constantin Bărbulescu.

