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**BRIDGING THE GAP. AN ARGUMENT IN FAVOR OF THE  
COMPARATIVE METHOD IN HISTORICAL SCIENCES**

MIHAI CHIOVEANU

*Thinking without comparison is  
unthinkable. And in the absence of comparison,  
so is all scientific thought and scientific research.*

S w a n s o n

Over the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was mainly for the conflicting metaphors to shape the historian's discourse on what was, beyond the *Iron Curtain*, Eastern Europe. The situation did not change much after 1989. In many respects, at least in the case of historiography, *annus mirabilis* has not come by that time. One notable exception somehow occurred in that many historians are looking today at three different, although (re)invented regions: Central, Southeastern and Eastern Europe, when pursuing their analysis. Yet this is of not much help and sometimes it more or less impedes the work of the historian as long as the *dialogue of the deaf* continues to epitomize his/her methodological and theoretical approach<sup>1</sup>.

Too busy to reconstruct the Past as a unique series of events, historians often claim that general laws and monothetic statements are not universally true. Stubborn in their emphasis on time, space, and circumstances, they fear that large theoretical frames might lead them to a diffuse result. Possible errors of measurement and the fact that a comprehensive set of social variables and descriptive characteristics will never be completed are invoked to uphold their reluctance. Although some of them finally agree to accept a limited degree of

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<sup>1</sup> PETER BURKE, "Overture: the New History, its Past and its Future", in Peter Burke (ed.), *New Perspective on Historical Writing*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, and *History and Social Theory*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994. Historians are in general reluctant with regard to interdisciplinary research. Some disregard not only the achievements of social science, political science, anthropology but also the new perspectives on historical writing such as history from below and oral history.

generalization they never cease to assert that empirical historical outcomes should not be treated as “raw materials”<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, many nationalist-nativists remain in deep isolation in their search for ‘unique and incomparable expression of indigenous factors’<sup>3</sup>. For them, the national state still represents the only convenient framework. Thus, what they are striving for is not ‘exceptionalism’ but predestination, a deep anachronism. Only rarely do they cross this clear-cut bound, and even then, they reject intra-regional perspectives and the historical experience of the neighboring countries. Instead, as a profound expression of their cultural bovarity, nativists prefer to link national history with the European encountering. Therefore, they only came to uncritically accept theories of modernity, dependency, backwardness, and lack on a more useful search for guiding hypothesis and material for questionnaires. At the same time, historians from outside the region still operate with overarching theories that are now shaded by historical data that aim to indicate their familiarity with the topic. Thus, many of them finally come to be ‘trapped’ into the logic of the nativist. Only few are looking at regional historical outcomes and phenomena from a comparative perspective. Even then, many limit themselves to tracing lines of evolution, searching for resemblances and differences, putting them in balance and finally extracting convenient conclusions. Cases which do not fit in the frame are simply left outside. This combination of western theoretical models and local historical data often proved to be ‘deadly’ as it ended in misleading interpretations.

Fascism in Central and Southeastern Europe is an illustrative, not to say paradigmatic, example in this sense. There is so far only one comparative approach on this topic that takes into account Hungary and Romania<sup>4</sup>. Nativists prefer to talk about extreme right and simply refuse to admit any discussion on Generic Fascism. Nonetheless, many outstanding scholars from the West consider fascisms in this part of Europe as marginal, aborted, simple copies of European fascism. Few, such as Eugen Weber, discuss them as variant cases while others, such as Renzo de Felice and Peter Wiles, deny the very existence of fascism in this region and translate the phenomenon in terms of nationalist populism. Finally, some, like Veiga and Heinen (in the case of Romanian fascism), try to present those cases as contributions to the understanding of European fascism but fail in their attempt while focusing excessively on presenting local/national data and interpreting them in a proper manner<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> CHARLES C. RAGIN, *The Comparative Method. Moving Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies*, University of California Press, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> However, as long as they cannot invent a distinct language, they do appeal to qualitative breaks, and present history as a series of reductions in order to make it understandable for the reader.

<sup>4</sup> NICHOLAS NAGY-TALAVERA, *The Green Shirts and the Others. A History of Fascism in Hungary and Rumania*, Hoover Institution Press, Stanford University, California, 1970.

<sup>5</sup> See FRANCISCO VEIGA, *Istoria Gărzii de Fier. Mistica ultranaționalismului*, Humanitas, Bucharest, 1995, and ARMIN HEINEN, *Legiunea Arhanghelului Mihail. O contribuție istorică la înțelegerea fascismului internațional*, Humanitas, Bucharest, 1998. Veiga insists on the existence of a *palingenetic ultranationalism* as a necessary and sufficient condition for the existence of

Without being a ‘universal panacea’ or ‘talisman of knowledge’ but a ‘tool, sometimes not so easy to manipulate’ as March Bloch puts it, the comparative method can help historians to surpass insurmountable differences that occur in different terms between core and marginal cases or, generally speaking, distinct ones. It can ‘show’ the way out of certain dilemmas and help them come to ‘universal’ terms. The only necessary and sufficient condition for this is to admit that general phenomena can only be produced by equally general causes. That a parallel study of societies or civilizations, with or without common origins, that were at least once neighboring and/or contemporary, and were exposed to constant mutual influence and action of some broad causes, is worthy. After this first step is made the rest is to come. Limits in geographical frame and period of time, a critical and rigorous classification of objects of study, an attentive selection of questions are to provide richer results and make the work of the historian less risky and hypothetical yet also less imaginative – a traditionalist would say superficial.

Historians accept that “bringing the seed to light is not the same thing as to show the causes for its germination”. Some might also agree that “the unity of place is only disorder” and “Only the unity of problem makes a center”. From this perspective it seems that the question is not whether we should compare, but rather what is it worth comparing? The answer to this question might offer the historian who admits that a one way road in historical interpretation is no longer possible a minimum of confidence that he or she is not going to follow paths that might prove to be ‘blind alleys’.

By their nature, historians trust the idiographic interpretative method based on thick description and rather wary of sociology with its essential typological method. Nevertheless, some are looking for regularity and generalization that helps them evaluate cases relative to substantive theoretical criteria but dislike to go far beyond findings, to challenge historicism and counterfactual reasoning. What they fear most is that they might fall apart of ‘tradition’. Some do not even realize that in Weber’s works, whom they often quote at least for his ideal (weberian) type, they can find a good example of how one can bridge the gap between human agency and persistent historical structures, between small events and huge developments and processes. When they finally do realize the importance of Weber’s work, they only come to appreciate the way in which a comparativist historical sociologist conceived history as a network of dynamic processes and alternate paths of development. Others might emphasize his methodological individualism, his definition of social action, the methodological canon. Yet few are able to understand that what is first of all important is the way in which Weber partly transcends the assumptions of his own culture and therefore avoids the risks of incoherence that prevail in the search for the unique and concrete<sup>6</sup>.

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fascism, while Heinen tries to compare the political movements, encompassing too many differences between the cases and finally comes to restrict his focus on the Iron Guard as a particular case. For the same reason, the existence of too many particularities, Klaus P. Beer stated that the Romanian phenomenon can not and should not be understood in terms of fascism.

<sup>6</sup> FRITZ RINGER, *Max Weber’s Methodology. The Unification of the Cultural and Social Sciences*, Harvard University Press, 1997, pp. 168-174.

It is hard to say what comparativism can offer to a historian since there is no clear definition of it and since a rigorous method has not emerged so far, due to the holistic feature of this kind of approach. Instead, no matter the methodological decisions, any comparative approach will lead to unavoidable political implications. Furthermore, historians will always argue that it is important *who* makes comparison and *when*, claiming that a dose of relativity in relevance and importance always occurs<sup>7</sup>. However, one might include in an attempt to define the comparative inquiry its search for general statements and laws that helps to define phenomena and explain them. Recognizable patterns can be added here as they help to demonstrate that societies undergo structured processes of development. Nonetheless, the twin goals of this method – to explain and to interpret macro-social variation – are also of utmost importance. As for the way in which the comparative method operates<sup>8</sup>, things are a little complicated as there are three main distinct logics and also pairs of those that can be employed<sup>9</sup>.

All those theoretical guides are to help the historian, show him what is he looking for in order to avoid superficiality, offer some valuable variables such as economic development, political dependency, political culture, industrialization and urbanization; impose and paradoxically eliminate limits as long as it is for the investigator to set the boundaries. One might operate at a micro or macro level (although he can use them simultaneously), go from class to world system, introduce explanatory and observational units alongside with units of analysis<sup>10</sup>. There is only one thing comparability depends on, and this is the degree of generality that makes possible the step from what is unique to what is meaningful and ‘universal’ and thus ensure communication beyond limits.

A clear definition of objects or ‘units of analysis’ as well as the use of clear concepts that define something holistic is needed in this case. Aware of the fact that the discourse about reality is not the same with reality itself, one might understand if it is proper to employ them and thus, avoid the danger of mystification while using *idealizing words*. For example, fascism is generally defined as an ‘interwar European (political) phenomenon’, and many outstanding scholars of fascism oppose its extended application in the case of other categories that only resemble it<sup>11</sup>. However, the label ‘fascism’ was often applied in an unproper way even during the interwar period. It was mainly for the

<sup>7</sup> MARIA TODOROVA, *Balcanii și balcanismul*, Humanitas, Bucharest, 2000, p. 232, referring to Szucs’ study “The three regions of Europe”, published in the 1980’s.

<sup>8</sup> CHARLES C. RAGIN, *op. cit.*, p. 34. The simplest way in which the method works is to start from cases that share a common outcome, look for similarities, than for causal relevances and finally come to general explanations. When differences and deviations occur, that is not to indicate that the causal relation is not good. One might interpret this as a variety and a sense of originality, and thus only accept a greater challenging task. Or, he might accept such a negative case in order to check the validity of the theory in the rest of the selected cases.

<sup>9</sup> THEDA SKOCHPOL, MARGARET SOMERS, “The uses of comparative history in macro-social inquiry”, in Theda Skochpol (ed.), *Social Revolutions in the Modern World*, Cambridge University Press, 1980.

<sup>10</sup> CHARLES C. RAGIN, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> ROGER EATWELL, *Fascism. A History*, New York, Penguin Books, USA, 1997, pp. xix-xxi.

opponents of fascism to do so and use this label in cases where it was not accurate to. In contrast, many followers of fascism rejected the label and emphasized distinctiveness (legionarism, falangism), although they admitted the existence of an *International Fascism*. Following this path, many nationalists in Eastern Europe reject today the discussion on fascism in particular cases and prefer to emphasize 'extreme right' as a more accurate and comprehensive category when it comes to describing different phenomena that occurred at national level. Sometimes they are not even aware of the fact that fascism is no longer translated in terms of extreme right in the Western academia. That several categories of fascism (left, right and center) are now taken into account by political scientists and that some sociologists, like Andreski, approach fascism as a center of two political extremes<sup>12</sup>.

In order to avoid this and make fascism understandable in various particular cases, one might go beyond specific historical outcomes and 'translate' fascism as a middle-class phenomenon, an opposition to proletarian uprising, as a political-national and social revolution, or introduce variables in order to analyze it in terms of modernization, urbanization, industrialization, social mobility. Yet he/she might encompass difficulties in formulating historical explanations, especially when it comes to interpret differences, and this is due the existence of some relevant standards<sup>13</sup>, and the extensive use of rather static definitions.

The discussion on middle-classes' role in the birth of European fascism no longer makes a mandatory, yet crucial and reliable, point case in Western literature on fascism. The interpretation of the history of middle classes, *Mittelstand* or *classes moyennes* as a 'prehistory of fascism' is no longer *en vogue*<sup>14</sup>. The former definition of a standard, homogeneous, European middle class is out of work today, and historians now emphasize a certain degree of nuances among cases at the core level as well as within particular societies, and focus on different categories, different political consciousnesses, and different long term significances. Small town and rural, and not only big cities middle classes come under scrutiny. Middle classes as an 'expression of class conflict' lost their previous importance while circumstances in which different categories evolve, their social mobility and political dynamics are now on stage. However, in the case of Romania, the situation is completely different. The absence of a middle-class in its classic formula is underlined and thus one of the main peculiarities of Romanian fascism is stressed. Not only its existence

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<sup>12</sup> SEYMOUR MARTIN LIPSET, *Political Man. The Social Bases of Politics*, The John Hopkins University Press, 1981.

<sup>13</sup> Without paying too much attention to bounds and standards, an anthropologist would look for common roots and common attitudes, leave apart differences in terms of background and followed paths, and interpret differences in terms of harmony and completion and not necessarily contradiction and isolation. He would only raise questions on what advantage or handicap, and authentic means for he would make sense of comparing not nations or states, but cultures. Thus, beyond a certain degree of relativity, he would strive merely for what is really significant in the discussion.

<sup>14</sup> Geoffrey Crossick, Heinz-Gerhard Haupt (eds.), *Shopkeepers and Master Artisans in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Methuen, London and New York, p. 6.

during the 19<sup>th</sup> century but also its visibility after 1918 within mass politics and times of crisis is underestimated – *i.e.* the importance in politics of the radical and suspicious, anti-Semite, anti-proletarian and anti-big finances<sup>15</sup> generation of white collars from the 1930's, a generation who at least in part is the outgrowth of enduring categories of shopkeepers and artisans. Taking all those into account, a comparative study at a micro-social level might indicate what patterns can tell us more about the significance of different categories of middle classes, and their role in politics as part of an electorate in a state of uproar. Moreover, it might show what specific issues to address in order to avoid typologies that equate in the case of both middle-classes and fascism in Romania<sup>16</sup>.

Almost the same situation occurs in the case of the working class and the birth of fascism as a response to proletarian upheaval. As many nativists in Romania are mainly concerned today to offer a theoretical justification in response and in opposition to the previous, Marxist one, they often come to claim that there was no working class in interwar Romania or, if there was one, that it was too marginal and insignificant. Thus, they are only accepting the image of a backward, dependant society, translating everything in terms of status, emphasizing the image of a stagnant, traditional and not *post-traditional*<sup>17</sup> peasant world dominated by clientelism and a powerful, centralized and in many respects traditionalist state as the only agent of change<sup>18</sup>. From this perspective, fascism is to be understood in terms of 'internal displacement', a helpful theoretical point but at the same time a 'vivant' denial of any particularity of fascism and its variants. Beyond this, many historians encompass serious difficulties when it comes to explain, when they choose not to minimize or simply disregard, the noteworthy revolutionary upheaval of the Romanian proletariat in the aftermath of the first World War, with its numerous strikes, the existence of 'red' unions in conflicts with the 'yellow' unions backed by police and armed forces that finally asked for a brutal intervention of an authoritarian, brutal state. Nonetheless, they can hardly explain the significant attraction exercised in the 1930s by the 'archangelic socialism' of the Iron Guard among workers<sup>19</sup>, not to mention the fact that many 'red' *legionari* joined the

<sup>15</sup> In this particular case represented by the state, a state which in 1937 for the first time was unable to manipulate elections due to a massive lack of support from the part of its white collars.

<sup>16</sup> Geoffrey Crossick, Heinz-Gerhard Haupt (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>17</sup> See for a definition of post-traditional societies S. N. EISENSTADT, "Post-traditional societies and the continuity and reconstruction of tradition", in *idem* (ed.), *Post-Traditional Societies*, WW Norton & Company INC., New York, pp. 1-3. See also E. HOBSBAWM, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, 1986, pp. 1-6.

<sup>18</sup> Kenneth Jowitt (ed.), *Social Change in Romania (1860-1940). A Debate on Development in a European Nation*, Institute of International Studies, University of California, Berkeley 1978, and Daniel Chirot (ed.), *The Origins of Backwardness in Eastern Europe*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1989.

<sup>19</sup> An agrarian state, interwar Romania did not experience market economy. However, it is not to say the same thing with regard to capitalism and industrialization or the existence of a working class 'manufacturing goods, with the aid of machineries, and in exchange for wages'. If its efforts to improve its position on the labor market and its weak political organization are not impressive, this is due to the unfavorable circumstances of that time. After its participation in the 'short episode of Great socialist family resemblance across national boundaries', the Romanian working class, at least parts of it, joined the Iron Guard as the only *mass party* striving for a *fundamental change* and offering its followers a *revolutionary* (even if not based only on class) *interpretation*

Romanian Communist Party after 1944, and definitely not for opportunistic reasons.

As long as no 'theoretical norm' is to be enforced today, a comparative study that would include Romania might allow historians to perceive it not as a deviant but rather as a different case of working class formation. Its unique configuration and distinct dynamics, as well as the combination of local factors, might contribute to the understanding of broad development and resulting structure of working class and suggest a new array of patterns<sup>20</sup>. Nonetheless it might tell something about what is, if at all, 'revolutionary' within the nature of fascism and not only *legionarism*.

While choosing to look at fascism from the perspective of the Revolution, one would make sense of macro-social inquiry. Although the historian has to bear in mind that in none of the cases of fascism the classic definition of revolution will work entirely and also that some historians (i.e. Ernst Nolte) will argue that fascism, as part of the European Civil War, merely represents a counterrevolution. However, if one decides to pursue such an analysis, he/she might first look at different models of revolution like the one proposed by James Davies in *When Men Revolt and Why* as useful and profitable. Delineating Revolutions in consecutive stages: causes and precipitating conditions, followed by alignment of classes and parties, mobilization and demobilization, and finally a revolutionary outcome as an alternative to misery and progressive degradation; and translating them in terms of rising expectations and disappointments by a down turn, the existence of an angry public, as well as the possibility to approach revolution on a mass and also individual psychological basis would considerably reduce the burden of a long, extremely laborious and yet risky enterprise. For example, the case of 1930s Romania fits perfectly within Davies' model. Not even the observations and nuances introduced by Charles Tilly (the fact that Davies' model lacks to show what satisfactions are crucial, what leads to frustration, and whether or not there is a link between an existing discontent and the seizure of power) are to impede in this particular case. Moreover, the structural circumstances introduced by Tilly: the military vulnerability of the state, the internal organization of opposition, and the character of coalition among classes<sup>21</sup>, almost perfectly match the reality of interwar Romania in the late 1930s, when a right wing revolution, at least an attempt of, occurred. Although tempting, because it opens an unlimited field, such a model is unsatisfactory as it lacks comparison and neglects structures. Instead, the kind of analysis proposed by

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of social reality. This is to explain somehow the fact that, like the French socialists, Codreanu managed to persuade many members of the proletariat with the help of the model of non-participation in government under capitalism.

<sup>20</sup> ARISTIDE R. ZOLBERG, "How Many Exceptionalism?", in Ira Katznelson, Aristide R. Zolberg (eds.), *Working-Class Formation. Nineteenth-Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States*, Princeton University Press, p. 400.

<sup>21</sup> CHARLES TILLY, *Big Structures. Large Processes. Huge Comparisons*, Russel Sage Foundation, New York, pp.103-105.



Barrington Moore in *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*<sup>22</sup>, and the different types of revolutions it introduces might help understand the history of a specific country.

Barrington Moore makes a special room for fascism as the outcome of a 'revolution from above', an alternative political route to modern world that includes the development of capitalism by a relatively weak bourgeoisie and in the absence of a complete liquidation of landowners. Germany fits perfectly in this definition, yet Romania does not. In fact, according to the categories Moore introduces interwar Romania can be described as a stalled democracy (failure of serious rural transformation), although the intention and impression of the political elites was that in 1918 a bourgeois revolution that led the country to liberal democracy took place. Nevertheless, in the 1930s Romania ended, due to a forced industrialization and nation-building process, in a revolution from above and in fascism. Only now the real problem occurs, as the Iron Guard, the most important fascist movement in Romania, always emphasized the idea of a revolution from below while addressing huge masses of peasants and not only intellectuals, blue and white collars and army officers.

How to make sense of all these perspectives? Should one substitute investigation on such specific cases or overemphasize some facts just to make them fit into theory? Should a case such as the Romanian one be treated as roughly negative, in order to test the validity of already accepted theories? Not necessarily, for one might start asking useful and new questions. Who were the fascists in Romania? Did Romania experience a rebellion or a revolution in 1941? Can we talk about fascism in Romania? Or, he may take Romania as a disparate case that did experience fascism, and then use the comparative method to search for new historical generalizations. A contrast-oriented analysis would make sense in this case. Not only because the historical integrity of each case would be preserved, and the use of ideal-types is possible. It is the fact that two, or three, maximally different countries that are placed, or not, geographically at the extremes of one civilization, participate in different ways, to certain different degrees and with different results to its history while sharing only their affiliation to something, can form 'at least a kind of commentary on one another character'.

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<sup>22</sup> Unlike Theda Skocpol, Barrington Moore does not come to universalizing terms on revolutions and does not offer a full independent weight to the state. Instead, Moore takes advantage of variations while looking not only for successful revolutions and thus came to Randal's assertion that "a theory of revolutions should be a theory of the conditions for various kinds of revolutions".