

Science Popularization and Romanian Anarchism in the Nineteenth-Century

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In the second half of the nineteenth century the notes of Michael Bakunin were printed as *Dieu et l'État* [God and the State] aiming to hammer a nail both through the authority of supernatural divine forces and in the heart of the state apparatus. Soon in various European peripheries, various anarchist followers brought a third dimension to his credo, namely, to liberate the minds of workers and peasants through means of science popularization. By opposing liberal bourgeois scientific discourses, the relationship between science and anarchism was seeking individual self-emancipation, women's liberation and at the same time, as their popularizing literature managed to yield alternative printing platforms, to construct a critical scientific public sphere.

Historically, the practice of science popularization and anarchism were both strongly rooted in Enlightenment philosophy within which knowledge stood as an important pillar. Science, however, was perceived by the anarchists as a collective accumulation of facts and observations that a few privileged representatives of the upper class have deprived the populace of means from access to, with the establishment of scientific institutions. Thus, in the long run towards state decentralization, the anarchist view was clear: knowledge was power, therefore science should be available for all, regardless of one's social status or intellectual capabilities.¹

Setting up alternative communication spheres

During the 1870s political changes across continental Europe reached their imperialist heights with clashes between the Ottoman and Russian empires as just one example. As a consequence of the oppressive rule of Czar Alexander II, exiled members of the *narodnik* movement came straight to the city of Iași, with its new university.² In those days, the two Romanian Principalities of Moldova and Wallachia, were struggling to keep the peace because of social inequalities, high rates of illiteracy, agrarian reforms that kept the peasantry in serfdom, secularization of monastic land, and the modernization of its scientific institutions. Meanwhile, various clusters of revolutionaries based in the cities of Romania were smuggling books, setting up printing houses and translating banned literature.

In this vein, smuggling Western illegal literature into Russia between the years of 1874-1876 was done mainly through two Romanian routes. The first one was the crossing point located in the north of Moldova in Sculeni, where the local Jewish pub played a strategic role. The second one was based in the city of Galați. In this respect, the nihilist Zamfir C. Arbore (1848-1933), once the personal secretary of Bakunin, remembers in his autobiography crossing both border points successfully. Urged by Russian revolutionaries to help them with printing materials, he successfully managed to smuggle various boxes of printing type, thousands of books, brochures - all under the surveillance of Russian spies. Also worth mentioning is his plan to ship a printing press to the city of Reni in the Odessa district which proved that ingenious techniques were needed. In order to succeed, one of his comrades made arrangements with the landed gentry to receive two containers containing harvesting machines from Romania. Back in Galați, agricul-

¹ For other research on the relationship of Science and Anarchism see Álvaro Giron Sierra and Jorge Molero-Mesa, "The Rose of Fire: Anarchist culture, urban spaces and management of scientific knowledge in a divided city" in Oliver Hochadel and Agustí Nieto-Galan (eds.) *Barcelona An urban history of science and modernity, 1888-1929* (Abingdon: Routledge 2016) 115-135.

² Călin Cotoi, "Națiune Societate și Anarhism în România Fin-de-Si ècle" in *Revista de Științe Politice și Relații Internaționale*, Vol. XI, Nr. 2, (2014): 25-26.

tural and printing machines were disassembled and put together as one package which safely passed through the border patrols.³

Methods of Science Popularization

When it came to science popularization in rural areas, the narodnik ideology of ‘going to the people’ went hand in hand with scientific dissemination. This practice was not only a physical move made by some intellectuals from urban places to the local villages, but an organic transformation of one’s own way of living side by side with the one of the peasant. In doing so, Nicolae Zbucu Codreanu (1850-1878) after finishing his medical studies in Saint Petersburg was among the first to dedicate his activity to helping peasants with their field work, while sharing with them his anarchist views and scientific knowledge.

On the other hand, during the last two decades of the nineteenth century, Romanian socialists and libertarians started to build their own alternative cultural institutions. This meant organizing spaces where people could attend public lectures, borrow books or learn new skills. In this way, various reading clubs and libraries run by the workers began to flourish all over the country. Sharing their private premises for collective readings, an illiterate Romanian could also take part in their debates. For example, Ioan Nădejde, also nicknamed the monster of science, frequently organized in his private house in Iași, weekly soirées where college students, workers, peasants and future Romanian scientists got in touch with scientific theories.⁴

Another example where anarchist books were held on the same shelves with scientific titles was the library set up by the members of the railway workers’ socialist union. The library was run by the ‘Unirea’ [The Union] Reading Club, established in 1896 in the village of Pașcani-Gară. Their library held collections of newspapers, magazines, journals, books - which by the turn of century reached over one thousand items. By rotation members of the union worked as librarians and took charge of the daily opening hours while managing their own borrowing system. Dancing parties were regularly held with the aim of ‘crowdfunding’ in order to print new materials or make new acquisitions. Besides painting lessons and a literature festival, the library also had its own choir. According to Scarlat C. Manoliu, the library was like “a people’s free university, where the readers could find the light of true science and industry, as well as literature and arts.” Thus, until the local police shut it down in 1907, their inventory catalogue listed titles from William Shakespeare, Henrik Ibsen, Victor Hugo, as well as titles signed by Romanian scientists and anarchists – Nicolae Leon, Victor Babes, Panait Mușoiu, Zamfir Arbore or Pentru Poni.⁵

Romanian Anarchist Science Popularization Periodicals

One of the first narodnik newspapers to be published in the Romanian language, Besarabia appeared in 1879 and aimed not only to oppose liberal discourses, but also to provide a space where

³ Zamfir C. Arbore, *În exil. Din Amintirile Mele* (Craiova: Institutul de Editură Ralian și Ignat Samitca 1896) 188-202, 420-423.

⁴ See Adi Dohotaru, ‘Portraits of Young Socialists: Moral Standing and Socializing Places,’ in „Anuarul Institutului de Istorie «George Barițiu» din Cluj-Napoca”, Tom LIV (2015): 249-264.

⁵ Scarlat Sc. Manoliu, *Istoricul clubului de lectură «Unirea din Pașcani» Întocmit după 10 ani de existență* (Fălticeni: Tipografia M. Saidman 1906)

science could be popularized. The editorial stance in relation to the ‘Republic of science’ mainly reflected its exclusionary tendencies.

“[Nowadays] science is accessible only to those who can afford it; peasants are kept in complete ignorance. [...] Science advances only when it is represented by a great number of people with distinct talents, while these talents and geniuses are rarely to be found. People like Darwin, Haeckel, Virchow, Dubois-Raymond, Claude Bernard, Spencer, can be counted on a few fingers due to the fact that in the modern state, science is accessible only to a small majority of the population. How many talents and geniuses would science count if not only people with great wealth, but everyone capable had the opportunity to study it?”⁶

Sold for a small amount of money, subscriptions for *Besarabia* could be afforded both by urban and rural readers. Nevertheless, it was throughout their pages that people could find out the working hours of the anarchist doctor Russel (Nicolae K. Sudzilovski 1850-1930, future governor of Haiti) who offered consultations two times a day, alternative medicines for cough, or even ads from various students offering their time by giving free courses. Science was covered in the *Feuilleton* style after the French *Le Temps* inaugurated their science section known as ‘*rez-de-chaussee*’.⁷ Small articles explained in plain words a variety of subjects such as: the finding of the ‘missing link’ of *Archaeopteryx*, or how everything in the Universe is related to moving matter, atoms and molecules.

Other anarchist editorial activities offered a platform with free access for those who wanted to publish ideas related to liberation. Such was, *Dacia Viitoare* [Future Dacia] that was printed by Romanian students based in Paris with their headquarters at café Cluny. In their words, the first issue from 1883 declared that:

“Our newspaper will be a tribune for all the dispossessed, [...] freedom will be offered to any contribution. The editorial board will be responsible only for articles signed by its members; all editors are accountable for their own piece of writing.”⁸

When it came to science, contributions published in *Dacia Viitoare* frequently touched issues arguing against the instrumentalization of Charles Darwin’s theory by official intellectuals. In this vein, their translation from Elisée Reclus (1883) is best read to turn Darwin’s theory against their oppressors by stressing that:

“The bourgeoisie are trying by any means to legitimize through science the exploitation of the working-class by adhering to the theory of struggle for existence as the cause of human progress [...] we the workers will claim the victory, because we are the strongest [...] the best adapted, [...] while [the bourgeoisie] are only parasites.”⁸

By the mid-1890s new periodicals appeared in Bucharest that involved the work of Panait Muşoiu (1864-1944), one of the most emblematic figures of Romanian anarchism. Like many

⁶ “Ce e statul actual?” in *Besarabia* Anul 1, No. 8, 21 October (1879): 1

⁷ Alex Csiszar, *The Scientific Journal. Authorship and the Politics of Knowledge in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press 2018) 90.

⁸ “Răzvrătirea și Darwinismul” in *Dacia Viitoare*, Anul 1, No. 11 (1883): 172-175

others, his periodical *Carmen Sylva Revistă Literară și Științifică* [*Carmen Sylva Scientific and Literary Review*] (1895) also set out to fight against the authority of science. Insisting on the idea of progress and their stance against clericalism, specific articles revealed the discrepancies which appeared between intellectuals and the populace. “Noima Științei” [The Sense of Science] is emblematic of their fighting approach:

“Science and its facilities are being monopolized like every other social apparatus. The majority of humankind is looking longingly at the alienated outcomes of its mind and its manual labor. Science, once the illumination of the minds and the resurrection of the hearts, is now the privilege of some, while the majority of the masses are still walking through the deep dark of the unknown.”⁹

In the same period a new periodical format appeared in the Romanian publishing world. This was the pocket brochure introduced in 1885 by the Samitca firm in Craiova that initiated the series *Mica bibliotecă a istorioarelor interesante* [Small library of interesting tales]. The Jewish editors from Iași, the Șaraga Brothers, also inaugurated the popular series, Șaraga Collection, while the same format was printed in Bucharest by Carol Müller who published the famous *Everyone’s library*.¹⁰ However, their technique was hijacked by anarchist publishers to reach a greater majority of people. All these brochures were sold for a small amount of money, and in some cases were handed over free of charge.

On the other hand, at the turn of the century, Romanian anarchism’s encounters with science passed through the influences of the free-thought movement, which besides its declared anticlericalism was also advocating the separation of church and state and promoting alternative ways of living such as civil marriages and secular funerals.¹¹

The impact of free-thinkers, together with Comte’s positivism will overwhelmingly increase anarchist printing activities on science matters. In this period, Panait Zosin (1873-1942) and Panait Mușoiu (1864-1944) stand out as the most important editors of anarchist science popularization literature. Thus, authors such as Jean Baptiste Lamarck will be translated for the first time into the Romanian language; small pamphlets will be published on the works of Darwin, Wilhelm Bölsche, Ernst Haeckel, Peter Kropotkin, Georges Mathias Paraf-Javal and many more.

In sum, nineteenth century science manifested in various public spheres, ranging from theaters, cafes, salons, pubs and the like; however, parts of the Romanian public spheres were under surveillance or even shut down due to the threat that they might pose for political stability. In this respect, state authority played a significant role in negotiating the communication process of science, while the same authority could be invoked for legitimizing new scientific discoveries. Far from being an isolated movement based in Eastern Europe, Romanian anarchism played an important international role in their daily activities. Nevertheless, science represented another weapon against the official discourse of the period. Their press turned out newspapers, pamphlets and other formats in order to reach and include the lay people’s opinion. Reading aloud or going to the people proved once again that the orthodox communication of science was not

⁹ Panel, “Noima Științei” in *Carmen Sylva*, 12 November (1895).

¹⁰ Alex-Drace Francis, *The Making of Modern Romanian Culture. Literacy and the Development of National Identity* (New York: Tauris Academic Studies 2006) 166.

¹¹ Marius Rotar, “The Freethought Movement in Romania until the Outbreak of the First World War: Developments, Criticisms and European Influences” in *History of European Ideas* (2016): 1-16.

enough in reaching their target. These stories, however, are still locked up in our myriad ways of exploring the bigger picture of how science was debated in the nineteenth century.

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