

## Research Article

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# Prolegomena to the Romanian Sociology and Historiography of Food

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**Abstract:** This article examines the dietary habits of the predominantly rural (and also urban) population from Romania, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In order to access valid data regarding the diet of the local population, we used the analysis of social documents: journals and memoirs of foreign travelers transiting the Romanian Principalities (Wallachia and Moldavia) throughout the nineteenth century, respectively the monographic research of the Sociological School of Bucharest published mainly in the magazine called *Sociologie Românească* (1936-1942). At various points in time, we employed comparisons between the diet of the people from urban and rural environments, or between the food regimens of adults and children, correlations between the dietary habits and health status of the population, and between the dietary habits from Romania and those from other European and South American countries. A reading of the current article reveals certain a continuity, for hundreds of years, concerning the deficient dietary regimen of the Romanian peasant, who relied heavily on mămăligă, eaten together with several dairy products. Another conclusion is that, in the rural environment, food scarcity was not economically conditioned: even in the relatively prosperous households that were supplied with all the necessary aliments, women prepared plain, tasteless dishes, because they did not know how to cook. And finally, from a theoretical perspective, in this article we aim to address the rural roots of Romanian historiography and sociology of food (which we shall attempt to examine against similar scientific approaches from Western Europe).

**Keywords:** anthropology of food, sociology of food, Sociological School of Bucharest, interwar Romania, peasant dietary habits, monographic research.

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## Introduction: Theoretical and Methodological Clarifications

In a previously published article [*A Hypothesis on the Origin and Synchrony of the Romanian and Western Medical Sociology* (Bucur, 2016)] we discussed, for the first time, the studies and research carried out or published in the period 1918-1948 in the field of sociology of food, by the Monographic School of Bucharest, founded and led by academician Dimitrie Gusti. As we have shown in the abovementioned article, the sociological research of the Monographic School of Bucharest in the medical and food field were interrelated and subsequent to the biological framework (one of the essential dimensions of the monographic methodology employed by the *Gusti* School). On this occasion, we have formulated two hypotheses we wanted to bring to the attention of the scientific community, the first regarding the Gustian origin of the Romanian medical sociology and the second regarding the synchrony in the development of the Romanian and the Western medical sociology. Given the specifics of the Gustian methodological architecture (where the biological framework incorporates and interconnects social aspects of medical and food-related nature), these two hypotheses, which apply to the Romanian medical sociology, are valid for the sociology of food as well. Thus, in the present article, we intend to argue in favor of this theoretical perspective and to expand upon it. In other words, our purpose is to bring to the attention of our contemporaries the first sociological research conducted in the field of peasant nutrition by the Monographic School of Bucharest, in between the two world wars period. At the same time, we made a historiographical presentation of the nutrition of the Romanian population in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. We resorted, in this regard, to social documents preserved from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, memoirs of foreign travelers who crossed the Danubian principalities and various writings of the native literate population. We thus wanted to rely on firsthand sources and persons who have directly experienced the reality of Moldavian and

Wallachian cooking. This method of analysis gives us a picture of the first attempts to structure the sociology and historiography of Romanian food. And last but not least, one can see that all these scientific endeavors, related to Romanian cultural space, were synchronous to those occurring in the West.

To begin with, we must mention that an overview of the Romanian and Western scientific literature on the subject of the sociology and historiography of food is available in *Sociologia alimentației: teorii, perspective și tendințe contemporane* (2016) [*Sociology of Food: Theories, Perspectives and Contemporary Trends*], by Angelica Marinescu. In her book, the author summarizes the works published internationally by recognized academics; of these, for the field of sociology of food, we mention the following: *The sociology of food: eating, diet, and culture*<sup>1</sup> (Mennell, Murcott and van Otterloo, 1992), *Sociologies of Food and Nutrition*<sup>2</sup> (McIntosh, 1996), *Explorations in the Sociology of Consumption: Fast Food, Credit Cards and Casinos*<sup>3</sup> (Ritzer, 2001), *Sociology on the Menu: An Invitation to the Study of Food and Society*<sup>4</sup> (Beardsworth and Keil, 2002), *A Sociology of Food and Nutrition: The Social Appetite*<sup>5</sup> (Germov and Williams, 2008), *The Sociology of Food and Agriculture*<sup>6</sup> (Carolan, 2012). For an historical perspective on food consumption from antiquity to modernity, the following books can be consulted: *Food and Society: A Sociological Approach*<sup>7</sup> (White, 1995),

*The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption*<sup>8</sup> (Trentmann, 2012) and *The Handbook of Food Research*<sup>9</sup> [particularly the first chapter, *The History of Globalization and Food Supply* (Murcott, Belasco and Jackson, 2013)]. A sociological perspective on the growth in food consumption, in England, between the Elizabethan Era and the Industrial Revolution, is found in *Introduction: Advents of the Consuming Society*, the first chapter from *The Sociology of Consumption: An Introduction*<sup>10</sup> (Corrigan, 1997). A book on how the people from ancient Greece and Rome dined and drank is *Food and Drink in Antiquity: A Sourcebook: Readings from the Graeco-Roman World* (Donahue, 2015). Also, the first chapter [*Cooking, Cuisine and Class and the Anthropology of Food*] from the book *Food Consumption in Global Perspective: Essays in the Anthropology of Food in Honour of Jack Goody*<sup>11</sup> (Klein and Murcott, 2014) represents an inspired introduction to the anthropology of food.

Even if scientific interest in the field of nutrition arose primarily amongst historians and had its origins in France, at the end of the eighteenth century, the historiography of food only began to establish itself as a field of study in the early twentieth century. One key factor that contributed to this process was the apparition of the journal *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* founded in 1929, in France, by the first generation of the École des Annales. In the field of food anthropology, the first studies began to be published by the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century (Marinescu, 2016: 35-58). Around the same period, according to Michael Carolan (2012), the first sociological research studies on nutrition are published in the USA, by W.E.B. DuBois (1898, 1901, 1904), James Williams (1906), C.E. Lively (1928). The first sociologist who was interested in food consumption, in the German

1 This book provides a historical and anthropological perspective on the cuisine and culture. Its first chapter is very important for the topic of the article because it proposes a useful overview on the functionalist, structuralist and developmentalist theoretical approaches of the sociology of food.

2 In Chapter 2 [*An Overview of Sociological Approaches to Food and Nutrition*], William A. McIntosh (1996: 9), argues in support of the emerging scientific discipline, the sociology of food and nutrition.

3 A relevant issue for the topic of this article can be found in section titled *The Contrast with Sociology in Other Nations and with Other Disciplines*, where George Ritzer (2001: 18-20) discusses the differences between America and Western Europe regarding the evolution of sociology.

4 This book suggests a very good explanation of scientific routes that led to the incorporation of food-related studies into the mainstream sociology.

5 Chapter 1 [*Introducing the social appetite: towards a sociology of food and nutrition*] is very eloquent, taking into consideration the topic of this article.

6 Chapter 1 contains a brief historical overview of the sociology of food and agriculture.

7 This book exposes types of human nutrition from different societies, in different periods, from Premodernism [Chapter 2: *Food and Nutrition in Pre-industrial Societies* (from 12000 B.C. to A.D. 1850)] to Modernism [Chapter 3: *Scientific Nutrition and Food from the Industrial Revolution* (from A.D. 1850 to present)].

8 This book presents a comprehensive overview regarding the eating habits of the population of all times in different regions around the world, from Ancient Greece, Ming China, Africa, India, Japan, Western Europe, National Socialist Germany, and Soviet Union to nowadays society which is experiencing globalization of consumption.

9 This book has the merit of completing and summarizing studies, encyclopedias, dictionaries and textbooks recently published and focused on the history, anthropology and sociology of food, cultural geography, and public policy of food as well (Murcott, Belasco and Jackson, 2013: 1-2).

10 Chapter 2 [*Theoretical Approaches to Consumption*] contains a statement of the main theoretical perspectives that have significantly influenced the development of the sociology of food consumption, starting with Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* of 1899.

11 This book contains studies analyzing the Chinese (Chapter 2 and Chapter 9), Ghana (Chapter 3), India (chapter 4), Ecuador (Chapter 5), Portugal (Chapter 6), England (Chapter 7), and Bangladesh (Chapter 8) diets.

cultural areal, was Georg Simmel (1910) who published the article *The Sociology of the Meal* (Symons, 1994: 333; McIntosh, 1996: 1). As for the roots of the sociology of food, Michael Carolan (2012) and William A. McIntosh (1996) consider that they are to be found in the rural<sup>12</sup> and medical<sup>13</sup> sociological literature:

I will argue that while the sociology of food and nutrition shares some of the same subject matter as rural sociology and medical sociology, it also encompasses topics left untouched by these two fields. [...] I suggest that the characterization of rural sociology and medical sociology as having had no impact on the discipline is untrue and that the sociology of food and nutrition will make similar contributions to the sociology. [...] I will suggest that food and nutrition encompass subject matter beyond what generally is considered either rural or medical sociology and that by incorporating this new subject matter into the new subfield, substantial contributions to the sociological theory are possible (McIntosh, 1996: 9-10).

However, even as late as 1986, some American scientists insisted, erroneously, that there is no such thing as a tradition of research on diet in the field of sociology. And even if they were willing to admit that such claims might have been exaggerated, if not wrong altogether, they were not familiar with any scientific paper published in this field prior to 1939 (White, 1995: XI). A similar argument – which is wrong in our opinion – was adopted by William A. McIntosh (1996) who speaks about ‘the lack of sociological attention to food’. He says that ‘as a consequence of this lack of interest, the sociology of food consumption has languished until recently’ (McIntosh, 1996: 1). Similarly, Alan Beardsworth and Teresa Keil (2002) consider food consumption a case of sociological neglect.

Regarding the studies and research carried out in the Romanian cultural space, on the eating habits of the local population, especially of the residents from rural areas, their origin can be traced in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century (as is the case with the similar studies and research from the West).

<sup>12</sup> A complex discussion on rural origin of nutritional sociology is found in *Rural Sociology* section of Chapter *An Overview of Sociological Approaches to Food and Nutrition* (McIntosh, 1996: 13-16). For further insight into the development of the sociology of food – from its being a mere component of rural sociology to eventually becoming a main topic of interest for contemporary sociological debates – one can consult the *Introduction* Chapter (Beardsworth and Keil, 2002). A perspective on current research in the field of rural sociology is presented in *The ‘New Rural Sociology’ and the Emergence of Agricultural Research* (Murcott, Belasco and Jackson, 2013: 8-13).

<sup>13</sup> A complex discussion on the medical origin of the sociology of food is presented in the *Medical Sociology/Nutritional Sociology* section of Chapter *An Overview of Sociological Approaches to Food and Nutrition* (McIntosh, 1996: 10-13).

Thus, the first Romanian work entirely dedicated to the study of rural food was *Din bucătăria țaranului român* [*From the Cuisine of the Romanian Peasant*], written by folklorist Mihai Lupescu, in 1916; its manuscript is kept at the Library of the Romanian Academy (Marinescu, 2016: 59-71). On the other hand, as mentioned above, an essential contribution to the sociological research and documentation of the peasant food in interwar Romania was that of the Bucharest Monographic School (Marinescu, 2016: 71-86). Especially since 1925 – when the *Gusti* School first launched the method of sociological field research – peasant food shall receive special attention from the Romanian monographers. In what follows, we therefore propose to put into question early sociological and historiographical approaches on the eating habits in the Romanian cultural space.

From a methodological point of view, in this article, we will particularly use the qualitative research method of Document Analysis, in terms of historical notes on Romanian nutrition between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as monographic research studies and reports of the interwar period, undergone by the Sociological School of Bucharest.

## Morbidity, Mortality and Famine in the Romanian Principalities in the Eighteenth Century

A previous analysis<sup>14</sup> centered on the toll taken by extreme weather and epidemiological events on the dietary regimen and health status of the people in Wallachia revealed and elaborated on the fact that, between 1716 and 1828, long, cold, bitter winters, either early or lingering into spring, drought periods, prolonged wars and uprisings, military occupation and devastation of the territory, robbery, pillage and plunder expeditions, destructive fires, earthquakes, locusts invasions, plague, cholera and other such calamities or disasters were the main causes that prompted, with a frequency that would seem unthinkable to the modern man, outbreaks of morbidity or mortality, often occurring yearly, and always accompanied by famine (Bucur, 2008: 57-118).

In the pre-modern era, more than 80 per cent of the population from the Principality of Wallachia was completely dependent on soil fertility, resided in rural

<sup>14</sup> Reference to Chapter 3 (with the title *Vrăjmășia vremurilor. Valahia – ‘lăcaș al groazei’*) from the book *Devălmășia valahă (1716-1828): o istorie anarhică a spațiului românesc* (Bucur, 2008: 57-118).

areas and was occupied exclusively with agricultural work. Thus, the negative impact of such tremendous afflictions on the lives of the vast majority of the population translated mainly in their impossibility of securing the minimal amount of food resources needed for subsistence. All of this added to the generally uncertain life, contagious diseases, existential misery and material poverty characteristic to that particular time, that furthermore put to the test the peasant population's ability to survive (especially during chronic food shortages). For instance, the winter of 1940 was such a harsh one that even in Bucharest food grew expensive and inaccessible for most people. On the street, 'people would tear bread from each other's hands' (Bucur, 2008: 91). In 1794, Wallachia faced a shortage of food. In 1795, 'starvation was very high, and many Christians died from it, some were then eating bran, and many others even tree bark, which they would knead with bran instead of bread, and in this way lengthened their lives' (Bucur, 2008: 93). Often, extreme weather events – such as those from the years 1808, 1812, 1821 and 1823 – also implied compromised agricultural crops and scarcity of animal fodder, which resulted in the death of the farm animals and, consequently, lack of food resources for people's livelihoods (Bucur, 2008: 94-95). In 1811, 'such a terrible starvation befell, that [...] many people ate bark of trees' (Bucur, 2008: 94). The same catastrophic consequences for the food security of the population of Wallachia were generated by locust invasions that – in 1746-1747, 1780, 1779, 1782 and 1824-1825 – almost completely ruined the crops and caused the scarcity or price increase of food (for people) and fodder (for animals), which in turn eventually led to the onset of famine (Bucur, 2008: 111-112). A 1782 testimony, from Bucharest, depicts the situation rather tellingly:

For the last three days, there was no bread in the marketplace, and barley is lacking entirely. The butter and tallow had been sent to Constantinople and urgent word reached to send out the new grains as well, in large quantities (Bucur, 2008: 112).

We would expressly point out the unusual low number of decidedly positive accounts, of the sort that remarked upon people's good life, such as tranquility, hearty meals, good agricultural production or existence of satisfactory harvests, plentiful food. Such unequivocally positive accounts – which corresponded, unsurprisingly, to respites from extreme weather and epidemiological events – lead us to conclude that, for the whole period of 1716-1828, we can pinpoint only three years of food security (in the sense of good agricultural output, and consequently of access to sufficient and relatively cheap foodstuff): 1756, 1796

and 1798 (Bucur, 2008: 118). Therefore, the research of the memoirs published by foreign travelers transiting the Principality of Wallachia, in pre-modern times, and that of various accounts from native, literate citizens, paints a dismal picture for most of the rural people who, at the time, faced death, starvation or illness on a regular basis, as part of everyday life. Sufficient, safe and nutritious food has always been expensive and out of reach to the peasantry, and, generally speaking, for this particular social class, food has been one of subsistence at best.

## Romanian Eating Habits of the Nineteenth Century Seen by Foreign Travelers

Even after the definite entry of the Romanian Principalities into the Western sphere of influence, marked by the signing of the Peace Treaty of Adrianople, on 2/14 September 1829, Vlach and Moldavian mores regarding food hygiene and eating habits remained far removed from the standards of Western civilization, even in the Bucharest houses of the great nobility. The testimonies of foreign travelers abound in spectacular Oriental manners of the native population. Thus, Hungarian portraitist Miklós Barabás, describes in detail in his memoirs the strange eating habits of the Bucharest nobility, in the period 1831-1833:

In Bucharest, I received many dinner invitations from a number of boyars, but after the first, I always found some excuse and declined further invitations, because all the food was cooked with garlic, which I can't stand. There was no wine or water, and no glasses either on the table, but in a corner of the living room stood a servant holding a bottle of wine and a glass, and whoever at the table wanted to drink, signaled this to him, which prompted the man to come to them and offer them a glassful. However, wine left in the glass wasn't thrown away, but the glass refilled and given in turn to the following guest, and so everybody drank from the same glass. Fruit jam was served in the same fashion, with only the use of one teaspoon and one glass of water, so that only the one served first got to use clean tableware, with the next person having to lick the jam leftover from his fellow dinner guest, should they have happened not to slurp clean all his share of rose sherbet or lemon marmalade. This curious manner of serving dessert was so repugnant to me that I used to decline fruit jam whenever offered, on the pretense it was bad for me and my doctors forbade it (Cernovodeanu, 2006: 60).

In 1836, British writer Julia Pardoe confirms that the custom according to which fellow guests ate jam with the same spoon and drank wine from the same glass was apparently slowly being abandoned in Wallachia

(according to her, at this time etiquette forbade the use of the same cutlery twice) (Cernovodeanu, 2006: 356-359). Still, a writing published by French painter Charles Doussault, in December 1853, reveals the same oriental way of serving fruit jam and beverages (with the use of the same pieces of tableware by everybody), practiced even in the case of a dance thrown by the Bucharest young elite from the Stelea suburb.

The habit of jam serving, which, in the houses of great boyars was offered in small porcelain or crystal plates, took, in our modest milieu, its national, primitive form. Marița held a tray with two bowls: one contained lemon marmalade, the other rose petal jam; each of us would take a spoonful of their own preference, and, after licking the spoon clean, put it back in the bowl, which was then passed to the next guest. Tinca, the other gypsy maid, carried a tray with a large glass bowl filled with fresh water from Dâmbovița, in which we would all dip our lips, unceremoniously, like in days of the patriarchs (Bușă, 2010: 155-156).

Save for the manner itself of serving dinner (which related more to the Orient than to the Western world), the jams served in Wallachia as gesture of hospitality to foreign guests, particularly in urban environments, were the delight of Hungarian writer Ūrmösy Sándor who, in an overnight stay in Câmpina Mare, in July 1843, noted the following:

Jam [...] is abundant here; it is made in every household, from all sorts of summer fruit, and is sweetened with sugar cane honey. The seasonal fruit used are sour cherries, wild strawberries, grapes, raspberries, blackberries and more. This sweet delicacy is even more common in the towns from the southern part of the country, where it is used not only as food, but as relief for thirst quenching during heat waves, when they use to take a sip of water after each spoonful (Cernovodeanu, 2007: 318).

But offering a cup with jam together with a glass of water was not the only form of Romanian hospitality, throughout this period. In a travel diary published in 1838, Russian Prince Anatoli Demidov is treated – during an audience given by the Prince of Wallachia, Alexandru Dimitrie Vodă Ghica (1834-1842) – with pipes and coffee, in the Turkish fashion (Cernovodeanu, 2006: 612).

As for the actual diet of the population from the urban environment, British writer Julia Pardoe describes how, in 1836, while in a town from Mehedinți located on the Romanian side of the Danube, she was served – in the house of a local notability – with several kinds of fruit, a roasted bird, poached eggs, boiled milk, lettuce and cheese. Breakfast consisted of coffee and rusks. For lunch, they had salted fish, caviar (black sturgeon roe) and pickles, then soup, followed by a dish of beef with sauce,

poultry, lamb with peas, fish and sauerkraut salad with oil and vinegar. For dessert, they were served tasty grapes, peaches, pears and nuts. Coffees and pipes followed a cheap and hearty meal (since in underdeveloped societies, food can be purchased for low prices, and welcoming hospitality is a deeply rooted social norm of the collective mentality) (Cernovodeanu, 2006: 356-359).

In the Principality of Moldova, in Galați, a city upon the Romanian bank of the Danube, lovers of good food could treat themselves, in October 1842, with a variety of food products ranging from fish to game, which satisfied the most demanding of gastronomic appetites, at modest prices, with the sole condition that they employed a good cook. Some of the local delicacies, according to Swiss botanist Charles Guébbart, were crabs, sturgeon, caviar and meat of great bustard, wild rooster, wild bear, deer and grouse (Cernovodeanu, 2007: 185).

German agronomist Wilhelm Philipp Ritter von Hamm makes unfavorable assessments on the unhygienic way in which, in 1859, meat was cooked and dinner was served in the eateries from the city of Galați, including in the Greek and German ones. In the same Moldavian city, Wilhelm von Hamm also mentions the existence of a brewery and a few coffeehouses, where the coffee was served in the Turkish custom (Bușă, 2012: 206). In Galați, drinking water came from the Danube and, in order to disguise its bad taste, it was usually taken with a spoon of jam. As for the wine, it was light and cheap, and poorly prepared, which is why it was always consumed young. Almost the entire adult population of the city, men and women, smoked paper cigarettes (Bușă, 2012: 206-207).

Johann Daniel Ferdinand Neigebaur also offers some considerations on the diet of the urban population from mid nineteenth century. He was well acquainted with the mores from Wallachia and Moldavia, in 1843-1845, in his quality of Consul General of Prussia, accredited for both Romanian Principalities, with the official residence in Iași:

Since French cuisine is customary in the houses of local notabilities, seldom does one come across the tasty meat so specific to English cooking. There are also a lot of Turkish dishes, such as hotchpotch, poultry *ciulama* and mutton; they use a lot of rice in everything, and eat a lot of sweets. The jams are particularly good; they are taken with every glass of water drunk through the day. Wine and tea are only occasionally drunk, with coffee being the preferred drink, though the ladies only seldom indulge in it (Cernovodeanu, 2007: 240).

Another in depth account of the dietary habits of the Romanian people, from the period 1845-1848, is that of French physician Joseph Caillat, who notices that even

the great boyars (who find themselves at the dawn of the civilization) are insensitive to the subtleties of gourmet foods and delicacies praised by the Western cuisine (in the Danube Principalities, almost no one makes any difference between a gourmet dish and regular food). Among the dishes of choice of the Moldovan and Wallachian elite are: rice soup seasoned with vinegar or lemon (a starter), *sarmale* (Turkish food consisting in a mutton and rice meatball covered in vine leaves), caviar – both fresh and salted, yoghurt (light and a little sour), salad vegetables (with okra or Greek beans, wild horseradish vinaigrette, chopped cucumber), bread (generally homemade), *mămăligă* with milk and sugar, fruits (particularly melons and watermelons). In urban areas, the nobility shares the habit of pipe-smoking and drinking cold water with jam; the latter is prepared from flowers or ripe fruit, and is also considered to have various therapeutic roles (jam made with honey has a laxative effect, rose petal jam is used for intermittent fever, dogwood jam is astringent, quince or cedar jam strengthens the stomach during convalescence, horseradish jam is used for the loss of appetite, raspberry jam for refreshment). With their food, boyars also serve wine from the most renowned local vineyards, Drăgășani and Buzău (red wormwood wine distilled with absinthe is only used in the cases of intermittent fever). In the countryside, people mainly eat *mămăligă* (made of boiled corn flour with salt), lentil or bean dishes and corn on the cob (in summer). Only seldom, on the occasion of major Christian holidays, do peasants indulge in ox or buffalo pastrami, salted and sun-dried. With their food, peasants always drink water, and only in holidays wine or, more often, spirits, or plum, grape or grain brandy (Bușă, 2010: 521-523).

Russian officer Piotr Jadovski, stationed, in June 1853, in an Iași household, is welcomed by his host with jam, a glass of water and a cup of coffee. In classic Moldavian custom, he is served, at dinner, with *mămăligă* (a kind of boiled thick corn gruel, made of a sufficiently large amount of corn flour) with sour cream and melted butter, followed by fatty meat rolled in boiled cabbage leaves with hot peppers as side dish. All these were accompanied by half a decanter of Odobești wine (Bușă, 2010: 164-165).

In 1853-1854, a Polish officer in the Tsarist Army (physician by profession) mentions having dinner in a French restaurant in Iași, where he ordered beef. In Bucharest, ice cream is very cheap, especially in summer. Confectionery stores and fruit stores (that offer apricots, watermelons, pears, apples, sour cherries, strawberries and other garden varieties) can be found on almost every street. One can have a glass of water with jam almost everywhere. The restaurants in Bucharest serve wine (one

of the most appreciated specialty being the Moldavian wine of Odobești) with mineral water (Bușă, 2010: 194-196). In August 1854, in a Bucharest restaurant, English diplomat and journalist Joseph Archer Crowe is being treated with a dinner with champagne (Bușă, 2010: 194-196). In 1857-1863, Frenchman Xavier Kieffer describes the streets of the capital which were roaming with peddlers selling sweets, biscuits, gingerbread, Turkish delight, roasted hazelnuts, jams, water, *bragă* (beverage akin to beer made from millet and water), cheese, vegetables and seasonal fruits (sweet and hot peppers, okra, onions, parsnip, eggplant, cabbage, tomatoes, asparagus, mushrooms and delicious melons), game (quail, partridge, woodcock, canaries and wild birds, rabbits and wild goat), fish (salmon, sturgeon, perch, carp, pike, crayfish) and bread (which is generally expensive, poorly made and rarely of appropriate weight). There are a lot of pubs and coffee houses in Bucharest, that usually serve wine, spirits, absinthe, plum brandy or Turkish coffee, and where customers smoke cigarettes, pipes or hookah (Bușă, 2013: 202-204).

Thus, while the boyars and wealthy merchants (who lived mainly in the capital cities of the Principalities) adopted the French cuisine<sup>15</sup>, in the second half of the nineteenth century, for the peasant population, the staple food of the diet remained *mămăliga* (similar to its Italian counterpart, polenta, and made from coarse corn flour). For the rural population of the Danubian Principalities, consistent and quality food remained expensive and inaccessible.

At this point, we must add that, when it came to the peasant population, all foreign travelers have remarked, without exception, its dreadful filth, extreme poverty and human degradation<sup>16</sup>. While passing, in 1836, on the Romanian side of the Danube, through the Cernești village, in Șimian commune, Mehedinți County, British writer Julia Pardoe is strongly impressed with the dreadful diet of the locals (whose main food was *mămăliga* – a type of polenta made out of coarsely ground corn flour). In this community, she notes, surrounded by the unceasing

<sup>15</sup> A brief description of the dinners given in the old times by the Romanian boyars can be found in the paper published by the National Archives of Romania (2015: 38-53) and commented by Ana Iorga and Filip-Lucian Iorga.

<sup>16</sup> A number of foreign travelers describe in detail the harrowing living conditions of the peasantry, the horrible squalor and insalubrity of their dwellings, whether they were underground ones (murky dens and lairs, or burrows dug directly in the ground) or above ground (mud and wattle and daub lodges). The rejection or disgust inspired by the peasants' way of life was generalized amongst those passing through the territories inhabited in the nineteenth century by the Romanian people (Cernovodeanu, 2006: 705).

growling and squealing noises of the packs of dogs and pigs, some foreign travelers sat around an improvised table and relished themselves with morsels of grilled tuna, sturgeon and eggs (boiled on a brushwood fire), a group of fishermen shared some black bread and vinegary wine, a half-naked girl bathed a bunch of naked small children in a wooden tub that looked more like a troughs for pigs (a household appliance used for many domestic functions, including in the kitchen, for preparing the food), a woman was cutting the head of a chicken in the yard, while an old gypsy man, with grey hair, danced awkwardly with a beggar woman (Cernovodeanu, 2006: 356-359).

Another British traveler crossing the Principality of Wallachia, in the period of June-July 1837, is the Anglican Pastor Nathaniel Burton, assistant chaplain of the Dublin Regiment of Irish Artillery. He describes, unknowingly, green bean stew (a sort of soup made with green beans mixed with pork fat) which he deems the regular food in the city of Pitești. Generally speaking, the people of Wallachia consumed a lot of pork meat (in the form of salted ribs or square pieces of white hard bacon) and bread. Also, they drank spirits and a light, yellowy-clear wine, a tad sour. Close to Curtea de Argeș, Burton receives, from a native woman, a chunk of *mămăligă*, a small bunch of spring onions and an earthen bowl with pickled vegetables. At an inn just outside of Căineni (the border town where the customs point between Wallachia and Transylvania was found), the pastor is fed a large piece of bacon, a large plate of broiled mutton, bread and spirits (Cernovodeanu, 2006: 588-592).

In a paper published in 1835, Adolf Schmidl mentions that the customary food of the Romanian population in Transylvania was *mămăliga* (together with other products derived from corn, such as baked corn flour and corn flour pies) and spirits (Cernovodeanu, 2006: 265). The situation is similar in the case of Romanian Banat (at that time under Austrian rule), according to pharmacist and botanist Joseph von Dörner. He roams through the province, in April-October 1835, and takes note of the local culinary habits. According to him, to quench their hunger and thirst, locals ate *mămăligă* and drank water or spirits (Cernovodeanu, 2006: 417). *Mămăliga* – described by French literate Auguste Labatut, who travelled through Wallachian land in October 1837, as coarse bread made of corn flour – appears to be the only food accessible to the Romanian peasantry from Wallachia at that time (Cernovodeanu, 2006: 705). According to the great Italian man of politics and publicist Lorenzo Valerio, who passed through Banat County in June 1835, the traveler should count himself lucky should he receive, beside the regular fare of *mămăligă* and spirits, a morsel of barely cooked

meat, which seemed to be, together with bacon, the favorite food of the locals (Cernovodeanu, 2006: 336-337).

In his voyage through Tsarist Bessarabia, in 1838, Johann Georg Kohl tries Romanian foods and drinks, taking note particularly of the ‘*mămăligă* with butter and grated cheese, the national food of the Moldavian people’ (Cernovodeanu, 2007: 118). In another part of the country, close to the border between the Principality of Wallachia, the Principality of Serbia and the Habsburg Empire, the same German traveler describes how the Wallachian border guards from the Plavișevița locality prepared the traditional Romanian *mămăligă*, made with water from the Danube (the staple food of the locals):

A large fire was quickly built, corn flour and water thrown in a pot, and the thick porridge called *mămăligă* was soon ready. One of the soldiers brought some salt in a wooden spoon and another one a bit of shredded sheep cheese in some paper. We did not eat those. Nor the *mămăligă* was entirely to our taste, the Frenchman lamenting that after the first bite that it was stuck in his throat forever. The Danube water was quite murky in daytime, but since we could not observe that at that time in the night, and since the corn flour was as dry as the sand of Arabia, the Danube had to be of some help. ‘Oh, *mămăliga*, oh, corn flour! Oh, beautiful Wallachia!’ we sang the rhymes so fittingly dedicated to Wallachia by the German people settled in this land; for there are, from here to the Nistru River and Black Sea, as much *mămăligă* and corn flour as there is air. The entire nation loves this food so much that it held obstinately onto it, under Turkish, Russian and Habsburgic rule [...], never having taken to another type of bake-meats or bread (Cernovodeanu, 2007: 122-123).

Crossing Banat County, Austrian writer Friedrich Uhl notices, not far from Orșova, the eating habits of a group of bricklayers, stonemasons and laborers, who worked on the construction of some thermal baths nearby, and who would gather, at sundown, around fires above which they hung the cauldrons they cooked their *mămăliga* in (this was almost their only food, similar to a thick corn flour porridge) (Cernovodeanu, 2007: 589).

Another account of the dietary habits of the rural population from the Province of Wallachia is left to us by Jean Henri Abdolonyme Ubcini, during the Wallachian Revolution of 1848, when he acted as secretary of the provisional government in Bucharest:

The meal of the Romanian peasant is very primitive, not to say outright foul. A thick porridge made of corn flour, called *mămăligă*, which is eaten instead of bread, is the basic food. Its preparation requires little effort; all one needs to do is to boil water in a cauldron and add, with a pinch of salt, the needed amount of corn flour, which is then slowly stirred until it thickens to the consistency of dough. After it boiled sufficiently, it is chucked on the table and everyone cuts themselves a slice

with a piece of string. In the good days, milk, butter or sour cream is added, and this combination makes it a pretty tasty dish. But you need to be used from early childhood, like the Romanian peasant, to mold the *mămăligă* with your fingers and eat it like bread, with radishes or raw onions. The customary drink is water, although spirits are drunk as well, especially those made from fermented plums, called *rachiu*, and used throughout the entire European Turkey. The common folk from the cities usually drink, instead of water, a sort of beer made from millet, called *bragă*, introduced by Albanians, which these sell through the country (Bușă, 2009: 275).

In the autumn of 1852, Venetian prelate Francesco Nardi visits and describes the Romanian side of the Danube. He professes to be impressed with the squalid accommodations of the peasants (straw and mud huts or underground hovels, all consisting of a single room, which served at the same time as kitchen, shed, stable and dormitory), and with their precarious diet (the main food being *mămăliga*, similar to polenta) (Bușă, 2010: 20).

In a work published in 1858, American James Oscar Noyes tells about the dinner he was served in an inn from the village of Călugăreni, consisting in a hard omelet and a piece of hard black bread, accompanied by a gross beverage which anywhere else in the world would have served as vinegar, but which for local peasants passed as wine (Bușă, 2010: 208).

In 1859, German agronomist Wilhelm von Hamm accepts the invitation of a Moldavian family from Galați to breakfast, which consisted in ‘an odd-looking heap of beans, half-baked, served simply of their pods, with some salt and nothing else’ (Bușă, 2012: 206). In any case, the food regimen of the local peasant is generally very poor; ‘corn, cooked in all possible manners, represents his favorite meal, but the basic food, eaten day by day, is *mămăliga*, a porridge made of corn flour and water; in the wealthier families and in the holidays, it is eaten with butter and eggs (Bușă, 2012: 212). Sometimes cabbage soup, cucumbers, sauerkraut, onions, watermelons, rye bread and sheep’s cheese are eaten too. The beverages drank are spirits and wine (Bușă, 2012: 212).

In a monographic work published in 1863, Austrian speleologist Adolf Anton Schmidl observes that the main food of the Transylvanian population in the Bihor mountains area was corn, prepared in various ways (as boiled *mămăligă* or corn bread), with dairy products, sheep cheese, onions, fresh cucumbers (sprinkled with salt and paprika) and beans. During the days of fasting, peasant diet becomes extremely modest (people eat a mash of onion and garlic spread on a slice of bread and, occasionally, baked apples, which were considered a delicacy). Salted and smoked fish is a main food. Wine is the preferred drink, while beer is not ordinarily consumed (Bușă, 2013: 165).

Also, according to the Frenchman Xavier Kieffer, who lived in the Principality of Wallachia in 1857-1863, the Romanian peasant was thrifty and strong, accustomed to modest food, which usually consisted in *mămăligă*, a corn porridge, accompanied by dairy, onions, leeks and dried meat, called *pastramă* in these parts (Bușă, 2013: 203).

A description of food of the Romanian peasant population living in the Principality of Serbia, in 1859-1868, was left to us by Austro-Hungarian ethnographer Felix Philipp Kanitz:

Corn is the main food consumed by Romanians, who grow almost nothing else. They make their bread out of it, and the thick gruel, salted and fried in the hearth, eaten with bacon, called *mămăligă*, which is their favorite food. The foods stocked in their kitchen are sheep cheese, onion, bacon, fruit and fish; the beverages, often drunk in excess, are wine and spirits. Milk use is very limited (Bușă, 2013: 291).

All these testimonies are evocative of the typical eating habits of the Romanian peasantry – which will remain virtually unchanged throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and until the interwar period, as proved by the medical reports of the Romanian physicians [compiled between 1860 and 1910 and published by Constantin Bărbulescu (2015: 123-159)] and by the monographic research reports of the Sociological School of Bucharest, which we shall examine in the following pages – based primarily on the consumption of *mămăligă*.

## The Sociological School of Bucharest on the Dietary Habits of the Peasantry from the Twentieth Century

The activity of the Sociological School of Bucharest<sup>17</sup>, in the period 1918 – 1948, was paramount for the study and knowledge of the peasant dietary habits from interwar

<sup>17</sup> The Monographic School of Bucharest was founded at the initiative of Professor Dimitrie Gusti, member (1919-1948) and President (1944-1946) of the Romanian Academy, head of the department of *History of Greek Philosophy, Ethics and Sociology* at the University of Iași (1910-1920) and of the department of *Sociology, Ethics, Politics and Aesthetics* at the University of Bucharest (1920-1947). Dimitrie Gusti is the author of the first Romanian system of scientific sociology. He is also the creator of sociological university education in Romania. For more information about the activity and sociological research methodology of the Monographic School of Bucharest please see the article *A Hypothesis on the Origin and Synchrony of the Romanian and Western Medical Sociology* (Bucur, 2016a).

Romania. Both the founder of the Sociological School of Bucharest (the academician Dimitrie Gusti) and his main collaborators (Ștefania Cristescu-Golopenția, Ernest Bernea, Ion Claudiu, Ion Chelcea, Romulus Vulcănescu) and assistant professors (Gheorghe Vlădescu-Răcoasa, Henri H. Stahl, Anton Golopenția Traian Herseni, Mircea Vulcănescu) were preoccupied with the monographic research of the biological framework<sup>18</sup> (in the sense of knowledge of the impact of food on the population's health). For instance, Dimitrie Gusti talks about excessive use of corn in rural areas, linked with low consumption of meat and fresh food. Another aspect mentioned is the lack of knowledge the housewives showed in preparing meals, as well as the precariousness of food hygiene. Peasant diet is characterized by malnutrition and alcoholism. Ernest Bernea describes wedding or funeral feasts; Henri H. Stahl presents the phases of agriculture and rural habits (including food-related ones) from Southeast Europe. A fundamental contribution to the study of peasant dietary habits belongs to Ștefania Cristescu-Golopenția, who describes the food rituals of the traditional peasant household (such as bread-baking, slaughter of the pig, pickle-making, etc.). An essential work for the sociology of food was published, in 1938, by doctor Ion Claudiu, Secretary of the Department of Biology from the Romanian Social Institute [founded and headed by academician Dimitrie Gusti]. *Alimentația poporului român în cadrul antropogeografiei și istoriei economice* [The Diet of the Romanian People from the Perspective of Anthropogeography and Economic History] focuses on the detailed description of the peasant food consumption in Greater Romania. Another collaborator of the Sociological School of Bucharest was Professor Romulus Vulcănescu. In his work, *Romanian Mythology*, published in 1987, the former PhD student of academician Gusti describes the symbolic foods (such as *mămăligă* or *colivă*) or those with sacred significance (such as wheat or millet) for the Romanian people. A significant contribution to the Romanian food anthropology and sociology was that of professor Ion Chelcea; he was the first Romanian

sociologist directly interested in the nutrition of the Romanians. Even though it was published only in 1987, his paper *Despre hrana rituală la români* [On the Ritual Food of the Romanian People] is one of the most important in this field (Marinescu, 2016: 71-86).

For an in-depth look at the beginnings of Romanian sociological research in the field of nutrition, please see the article *A Hypothesis on the Origin and Synchrony of the Romanian and Western Medical Sociology* (Bucur, 2016a). In the following, we offer an outline of this issue. Thus, we begin by mentioning that in the period between the two world wars, the Sociological School of Bucharest developed an exhaustive monographic method of investigating and studying the world of the Romanian village, in a unique attempt to improve, on scientific grounds, the precarious living conditions of the peasantry (Gusti, 1946; Bucur, 2011; *Idem*, 2013a; *Idem*, 2013b; Georgescu, 1936; Herseni and Truszkowski, 1940; Stahl, 1939). Another area of scientific interest for the Sociological School of Bucharest was the correlation between the widespread physical retardation that affected the school-age children from Greater Romania and improper nourishment (Cressin, 1937: 212-214; Școala..., 1939: 225-229; Vidican, 1938: 381-382; Herseni, 1936: 37; Georgescu, 1938: 390; Manuilă, 1939: 173). Furthermore, studies carried out by scientists of the Monographic School revealed that the diet<sup>19</sup> of adults was equally deficient to that of the children (Florescu, 1937: 510; Ionescu, 1937: 451; Lenghel-Izanu, 1939: 271-272; Știrbu, 1938: 521; Mărculescu-Dunăre, 1939: 246-249; Vintilescu, 1937: 505; Bărbat, 1938: 30-31; Zane, 1938: 555; Popoiu, 2010: 97-103; Gusti, 1938: 435). Finally, we have to mention that the issue of the examination and amelioration of the deficient food regimen of the local rural population represented a legitimate and ongoing preoccupation not just for Romanian social scientists (irrespective of their affiliation to the Sociological School of Bucharest), but throughout the Balkans, in Latin America and Western Europe as well (Golopenția, 1938: 598; Galitzi, 1939: 29; Morariu, 1942: 386-388).

## Conclusions

The purpose of the present article was to bring to the attention of the scientific community the monographic research carried out in the interwar period, in the field of peasant nutrition, by the Sociological School of Bucharest.

<sup>18</sup> According to the monographic research methodology, social reality had to be investigated according to an analysis grid consisting of eight elements [four frameworks (cosmological, biological, historical and psychological) and four manifestations (economic, spiritual, moral/legal, political/administrative)]. Particular attention was shown to the biological framework, since matters such as health and food affected the lives of people directly. The results obtained from sociological field research were meant to substantiate legislative drafts or public policy projects of the Romanian government, in its effort of improving the population health status and food habits (Bucur, 2016a).

<sup>19</sup> An overview of the average annual food rations, peasant food caloric intake and household food expenditure for the rural population in the interwar period can be consulted in Annex 13.

At the same time, we conducted a review of the existing historiography on Romanians' food in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The subsequent conclusion was that the interest of the local scientific community in these issues was synchronous to that exhibited in the Western world. Also, regardless of the preferred historical or sociological method, it appears that, for a significant proportion of the peasant population, an incorrect diet, deficient in vitamins and quantitatively and qualitatively insufficient, determined the emergence of physiological debilities. Moreover, a nutritional overview of the school-age youth from interwar Romania revealed a particularly alarming situation: nation-wide, only one quarter to one third of all school-age children were appropriately fed and only about half of them were normally developed physically. A diet based on *mămăligă* was, evidently, insufficient and unwholesome for both the adult population and for the young. This unfortunate reality would lead to serious medical consequences for the health of the rural population. For this reason, the Sociological School of Bucharest has researched issues such as food and health, under the unified methodological umbrella of the biological framework.

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**Annex 1:** Food rations determined – according to the methodology employed by the Social Research Institute of Romania – as average annual values, in 1938, for 50 families, consisting of 263 people residing in 12 villages from Transylvania [values are expressed as daily unit of consumption] (source: Georgescu, 1939: 315)

|                         |              |
|-------------------------|--------------|
| <b>Proteins (grams)</b> | <b>134.6</b> |
| Fat (grams)             | 115.9        |
| Carbohydrates (grams)   | 680.7        |
| Physiological calories  | 4,304.3      |
| Net calories            | 3,873.9      |

**Annex 2:** Caloric intake of vegetal and animal origin of food rations, determined – according to the methodology employed by the Social Research Institute of Romania – as average annual values, in 1938, for 50 families, consisting of 263 people residing in 12 villages from Transylvania [values are expressed as daily unit of consumption] (source: Georgescu, 1939: 315)

|                             |                                |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <b>Total (%)</b>            | <b>100.0</b>                   |
| Animal origin (% of total)  | 24.6                           |
|                             | Meat 4.5                       |
|                             | Animal fat 10.3                |
| Animal origin (% of total)  | Milk 7.0                       |
|                             | Cheese 2.2                     |
|                             | Other animal products 0.6      |
| Vegetal origin (% of total) | 75.4                           |
|                             | Cereal 64.1                    |
|                             | (of which corn) 33.5           |
|                             | Vegetable oil 0.5              |
| Vegetal origin (% of total) | Sugar 0.9                      |
|                             | Fruit 2.3                      |
|                             | Dried vegetables, potatoes 5.6 |
|                             | Fresh vegetables 2.0           |
|                             | Other vegetal products 0.1     |

**Annex 3:** Average value and type of household expenses, made by 33 peasant families from the Suseni commune, Dâmbovnic plasa, Argeş County, in 1938-1939 (source: Moldovan, 1942: 453)

|                 | Gas, firewood, matches, soap | Books, journals, icons, church donations | Food products | Beverages | Clothing and footwear | Total |
|-----------------|------------------------------|--|---------------|-----------|-----------------------|-------|
| Lei / household | 1,402                        | 657                                      | 750           | 332       | 3,698                 | 6,839 |
| % of total      | 20.5                         | 9.6                                      | 11.0          | 4.8       | 54.1                  | 100.0 |