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Author: Constantin Bărbulescu

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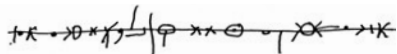
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“Some Weak and Ill Beings.” The Topic of Race Degeneration and the Representations of the Corporality of the Rural Population in the Medical Discourse in Romania (1860-1910)



Constantin Bărbulescu

Lecturer at the Department of Modern History, Archivist and Ethnology Studies, Faculty of History and Philosophy, “Babeş-Bolyai” University, Cluj-Napoca

ABSTRACT

The article aims at studying a particular aspect of the image upon the corporality of Romanian peasants in the last decades of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th. The physicians are the creators of this discourse and image. They place an important topic on the public agenda: native race degeneration. In this particular context the image they portray upon the peasant, including his corporality, is an extremely dark one. The physicians' peasant is an undernourished, alcoholised, sick being and, thus, on the verge of physical decadence.

KEYWORDS

body, peasantry, 19th century, physicians, race degeneration

For Romanian historiography, the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century represent a fortunate, almost triumphal, period in the evolution of modern Romania. In seven decades, Romanians achieved in turn all the national ideals of 19th century: in 1859 the first Union – Moldavia with the Romanian Principality; in 1866 the constitutional monarchy; in 1877 Romania obtained its Independence on the battlefield; in 1881 it was proclaimed a Kingdom and, finally, in 1918 – The Great Union. One would have expected these progresses to be perceived accordingly in the era, and so they were; nobody could have ignored them. Nevertheless, to the extent the contemporary researcher has become familiarized with this era, he / she could not help noticing that in the second half of the 19th century, Romania had not been exempt from the negative phantasms of the progress. At the time, the evolution of Romania was seen a little bit different by

its contemporaries, with lights and shadows where the fears and phantasms of a society in forced march on modernization path were hiding. But the catastrophic visions and the national apocalypses sometimes put their imprint upon contemporaries who acted on the strength of them offering them a reality. The phantasms are as real as any social fact and must be treated as such. The evolution of modern Romania could not be understood by disregarding them.

The foundation of the Romanian national state at the middle of the 19th century is in keeping with the broader process of edification of nation states in South Eastern Europe. One by one, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania turned from provinces or states vassal to the Ottoman Empire into independent entities. They all continued the process of Europeanization and, implicitly, of modernization after having gained its independence, but at a different level and with different means. That process was more





or less successful due to the fact that they all started with an enormous handicap: the lack of a consolidated *bourgeoisie* and in the territories south of the Danube even the lack of an agrarian elite, complementary with a huge peasantry mass that made the national social body. So, the stake of modernization in this area of Europe was not only the implementation of the European liberal political model, but also the transformation of this huge rural mass into modern citizens of the nation state. Hence the interest of the elites in this space for what was called in Romania “the rural issue”.

In Romania, “the rural issue” was in the middle of ideological debates of the second half of the 19th century and did not take only the shape of the “agrarian matter”, as we would expect; the latter was only one of the facets of “the rural issue”, the most debated and, thus, the most important one.

The interest of the intellectual elite in the matter of the peasantry was multi-shaped: let us remember that the middle of the 19th century meant the discovery of folk literature and the decades that followed, the feminine elite mostly adopted the holiday peasant costume that they significantly called “national”. The peasant thus became the “national element” by excellence; the peasant is identified with the Romanian citizen. Under such circumstances, it was easy to understand the interest of the medical body in the native peasants’ living conditions (“hygienic” ones as they named them). The peasant was a leading figure of the medical discourse in Romania, especially towards the end of the century when the medical body became “Romanianized”. Until 1875, when the first cohort of physicians formed at the Faculty of Medicine of Bucharest University graduated, higher medical studies could be attended only at foreign universities. Most of the physicians practicing in the United Principalities until 1870 had been foreigners. In the past decades of the century the ratio changed dramatically; on October 1, 1898, there were no less than 966 Ph.Ds

in medicine practicing their “art”. What is important is that more than two thirds were Romanians. (Felix 1899, 340). In 1898, as I was saying, the medical body had already been Romanianized, a fact that would have a huge influence upon the medical discourse we are about to analyze.

I have mentioned that 1859 does not represent only the beginning of the national fulfillment of Romanians but, in a few decades, it started to have a different significance. For doctor Codreanu, physician in Tutova County this happened only in 1880: “The year 1859! This is the year since most of people here started to count the era of a regenerated Romania, of happiness and consolidation of the Romanian state, in one word the era of «reorganization» and this year, too, *this year, 1859*, is the year when the great mortality, the death from the face of earth, the decrease and physical degradation of Romanians started!” (Manicea 1880, 35-36) It is the beginning of the end. But even earlier, in the previous decade, physicians started to draw a physical portrait of Romanian peasant in darker and darker touches. Doctor G. Obedenaru, the Romanian specialist in what will later become malaria, was the first to tackle the subject. His peasants, ill of “miasmatic debility” were not in a very good shape: “Women, children and a great deal of men’s faces are of a particular and characteristic yellow color. They have little muscular force (little strength); they are very lazy, but this is a laziness that nobody will have the right to impute, because this laziness is the result of the illness, the result of true poisoning, because the miasmas that got into the body from the air are a true poison. Feeble people have such little strength that even when they sit in one place they try to sit so as not to get tired. They do not sit but lay, *as if they were lazy*. Look in the countryside where many women are gathered together and you will see that they do not sit right, but leaned forward and on their knees, or with their back against something; they do not keep their head up right, but leaned to one side;

they do not move their eyes rapidly from one spot to another, but they stare much time at the same spot, they watch it for a long time and only slowly move their heads and eyes to see other things; finally, they keep their arms down; fallen as if they were made of cloth. We do not talk here of the peasant women from the mountains, that are red, tough, healthy but we talk of the women from the plains, the yellow-faced ones" (Obedenaru 1873, 8-9). The severe look of our physician, born in Bucharest, having done medical studies in Paris, a person who had seen it all, did not comprehend anything: a simple women's get-together by the side of the road as you can find today all over rural Romania, was turned into a clinical case. It was clear that doctor Obedenaru's peasants had not assimilated the new corporal codes of the contemporary bourgeoisie. The text was written at the beginning of 1871 and would enjoy exceptional success: it was part of the small treaty upon fevers that had a first edition in French in 1871 (Obédénare 1871), followed by a Romanian edition in a renown scientific journal – P.S. Aurelian's *Revista Științifică* – immediately taken up by the newspaper *Românul* (July-August 1872) and finally republished in 1873 as a volume in 5000 copies distributed for free "to all authorities in the country" (Obedenaru 1873, 2). In 1883 a new edition of 5000 complimentary copies for the same authorities came out (Obedenaru 1883, 2). We deem it to be the most popularized Romanian medical writing at the end of the 19th century.

Towards the end of the eight decade, young physician Nicolae Manolescu got the position of district physician in Buzău County for a brief period. When he settled in Pătărlagile, he came into contact with the rural world that he was called to manage from medical point of view. He was invited to a... "wedding, important enough to gather many people. I could see an important number of people from all walks of life and I have seen the unexpected at a wedding: on half of 58

lads, I saw dwarfing, discoloration and wrinkling, malnutrition giving teguments the expression of premature ageing and their movements that of a languid juvenile stimulus. These were more apparent as at the dance a shepherd of the son of an inn keeper or mayor was bouncing, making the ground tremble. In this wedding picture, the female sex generally lacks juvenile and development expression to a greater extent, and all children are feeble. I have hardly seen any old people" (Manolescu 1879, 553). The wedding picture revealed to doctor Manolescu the same anemic, underfed, ill peasants... with few exceptions.

Even Jewish physicians, like doctor M. Roth, described Romanian peasants in the same way: "If we look at our peasants, they give the impression of people who carry the germs of hidden cachexia; the color of their face is not brown as that of a sunburnt person, but it is earthy (dark earth), an icteric shade; the mucus skin's anemic; the eyes lack any brightness or sharpness; the overall look is indifferent and tired; all the movements of his body are faint. (...) His peasant woman is an old young woman from early age; work, malnutrition, chronic maladies have already imprinted the stigma of premature ageing; at 30, she is humpbacked, livid-faced, withered and neither she, nor her husband reach old age" (Roth, 1880, 133-134). If for doctor G. Obedenaru the peasant's physical decline was due to a precise pathology, doctors Nicolae Manolescu and M. Roth made a step forward and the same description became the typical image of the Romanian peasant. During the War of Independence, nobody in the medical body described them anymore as robust and healthy beings. From then on, the peasant world was a world of poverty, of physical and moral suffering, of illness and, thus, of death. All the positive physical characteristic of the peasant were pushed somewhere in the past, anyway, before 1859.

This image of rural corporality in the medical discourse could not be



understood outside the ideological context that simultaneously conditions and generates it. More precisely, the image of the peasants' physical decrepitude was in direct connection to one of the fears and phantasms that would haunt Romanian society, but also after that: the degeneration of the Romanian race. Initially, when I was not fully familiarized with the medical discourse of the era, I had the impression that the topic of race degeneration was one of the themes of this discourse; that physicians talked about race degeneration as they talked about peasants' bodily and clothing hygiene, about their dwelling and food hygiene, as they treated the matter of alcoholism, but I was wrong. The theme of race degeneration was a generator of medical discourse; if, in the past three decades of the 19th century, there was an explosion of hygienist literature in Romania, this was due first of all to the physicians' belief that the race degenerated and something had to be done for its regeneration. In order to counter it, the evil needed to be defined – in our case, “the hygienic evils” of the peasantry – and to be studied.

But let us go back. We have seen that after 1870 physicians drew attention to the process of race degeneration that was firstly perceived in the physical decay of the Romanian peasant. But degeneration was never individual; it was a disease of the social body with symptoms and specific causes that physicians tried to identify and circumscribe. On a different occasion, together and with the help of physicians from the second half of the 19th century, we have followed the birth and evolution of this phantasm. We have started naturally with the symptoms or the manifestations. In other words, we were interested in the elements physicians took into account when they asserted bluntly that the Romanian race had degenerated. First of all, a population degenerated or was in state of degeneracy when it suffered from a demographic standpoint. Romanian physicians acted as occasional demographers and, using

statistical data, competed during the eighth decade of the 19th century to “prove” that the population of Romania had decreased or, in the most fortunate case, was stable. All of this, obviously, corroborated with the reproduction of “foreigners”, especially of Jews. The catastrophic demographic scenario of the era could be briefed as follows: the Romanian population decreased while the Jewish population increased. For this research, we were less interested in the physicians' demographic analyses.

Much more relevant for our case was a different form of manifestation of race degeneration which was not of a demographic nature. As everywhere in Europe, the statistics of conscription were used to prove the state of degeneration of native races. Romania was not an exception. The data offered by recruitments, or the statistics of conscription, offered information pertaining to physical anthropology (waist, thoracic perimeter, weight etc.) or to pathology (less on causes of illnesses) focused on an age group of the male population. This data was interpreted as a very good index of what military physician Z. Petrescu called “the military aptitude of the population of the country” (Petrescu 1880, 3) and doctor Iacob Felix named “the physical qualities of the population” (Felix 1897, 15). Of course that the military aptitude of the physical characteristics of the population was inversely proportional to the state of race degeneration. In Romania, conscription started in 1864, though it wasn't carried out by military, but civilian physicians; only in 1869 were military physicians used for the first time in the process of conscription. One of these doctors, Z. Petrescu, was the father of the statistics of conscription in Romania. In 1869 he was appointed recruiting physician in Vâlcea County; he noticed with surprise the complete lack of any work on statistics, any memo related to the recruitment process “not only in the district where I was, but in all districts of the country; because, after having finished



the operation of recruitment, while trying to present the results of the mission I was assigned to, I could not find in the archive of the civilian sanitary service any work that would serve as comparison" (Petrescu 1880, 4). After 1869, the medical commissions of recruitment were composed of civilian physicians and only in 1874 were they entrusted to military physicians. This time doctor Z. Petrescu would succeed in obtaining statistical data from all recruiting physicians in order to provide the statistics of recruitment for 1874 for the entire country. The work published in 1880 put together the statistical successes of Doctor Z. Petrescu, who didn't seem too alarmed. In Vâlcea County, in 1869, he found "very aged people, though still very healthy, robust and full of life (...) the mountain man is brave and cheerful, and the mountain woman vigorous and cheerful. The reader may object that I am in contradiction with the statistical result of my tables and may say he sees too many youngsters exempted on the grounds of feeble constitution. It is true, but this contradiction is nothing but apparent; because, if we consider the 382 young men with so-called «legal» exemptions, we will notice that these lads were the most elitist, the most robust, as they were in reality, we will see that for the medical selection, only the greenest, weakest lads remain, in comparison to those exempted. Of the remaining lads, I could still find 359 young, very healthy and robust recruits. Of the 686 young men who presented themselves, 205 had a *feeble constitution* exemption are not lost people, as some may imagine" (Petrescu 1880, 8-9). We can, thus, see the pitfalls of such evaluations and get an idea regarding the manipulations it could bring about. When he was appointed recruiting physician in Prahova County in 1874, when the demographic waters had been "fully troubled", doctor Z. Petrescu saw a population that seemed "to be in satisfactory hygienic conditions as may be seen from tables of exemptees for illness and infirmities; because there are but very few cases of this

exemption (190) compared to the enormous number of examined youth (3,048) and even those had only minor infirmities" (Petrescu 1880, 21). Regarding the analysis of recruiting statistics, in 1874, at the level of the entire country, the general picture was less loaded with negative nuances because it seemed that, during their fieldwork, not all recruiting physicians had seen a hygienic situation as happy as the one presented by doctor Petrescu: "these tables easily show that diathesis, constitutional or hereditary morbus were very rare in the mountain locales: on slopes and very frequent in plain locales: in *plăși*" (Petrescu 1880, 39) that confirmed the stereotype of the mountain peasant's superior physique compared to that of the plain peasant. Let us remember the descriptions of the rural population of the plains made by Doctor G. Obedenaru. In 1880 Doctor Zaharia Petrescu's writings did not contain the word "degeneration". In the same year though, Doctor C.I. Istrati fully used the recruiting statistics to demonstrate the state of degeneration of the Romanian population. He was not as optimistic and serene as doctor Petrescu, whose statistical data he would interpret in a reversed sense. Furthermore, Doctor C. I. Istrati benefits from recruitment data statistics for 1879 "due to General Inspector Davila's benevolence" (Istrati 1880, 115). This way he could compare the statistical data for Vâlcea County for three years – 1869, 1874 and 1879 – and for the whole country for two – 1874 and 1879. And the different personal remarks of the recruiting physicians in 1879 proved to be an extensively used resource. Doctor I. Nicolescu, recruiting physician in Muscel County, describes the physical aspect of the few tens of cases of height exemption: "For the lower height of 1.54 meters, 37 young men were exempted, 5 looked like they were 7-10 years old!"; doctor Spiroiu would tell doctor Istrati that in the same county "in the townships of Nucșoara and Corbii several recruits in their twenties were brought in their mother's *arms*, so small, ill and degenerate were they!" (Istrati

1880, 138-139). Faced with such testimonies and images, there was no need for further evidence: the population of Romania was in “a state of malady, sufferance, decay, degeneration, death” (Istrati 1880, 139). Nevertheless, Doctor C. I. Istrati was fiercely trying to prove scientifically that the image he suspected and he was convinced to be true was also real. The recruiting statistics fully helped him. In 1879, Vâlcea County was no longer what it had been in 1869: all the indices for the recruits’ health state were low – exemptions for infirmities went from 105.6‰ to 168‰; the exemptions for disability and incomplete development were on the same rising trend: 245.5‰ (1879) compared to 177.4‰ (1869) (Istrati 1880, 118). The situation was alarming. But maybe Vâlcea was an unhappy particular case, maybe at the level of the whole country the recruiting statistics offered positive signs. The hope was in vain – the whole country followed Vâlcea County to doctor Istrati’s great despair: “what is enormous, what is nowhere but here to be seen, is the huge number of feeble constitutions; 185.2 in 1874 and 177.9 in 1879. The difference is small and all the more insignificant as the numbers for incomplete development went in two years from only 74.1 to 214. That is three times more!... (...) Thus, the total number of weak and badly developed recruits was of 259.3 in 1874; six years later, this figure went to 392.3 more with one half. What does this prove if not the sickly state, if not the physical degradation, our race degeneration!” (Istrati 1880, 123-124). There was no point in continuing on this path as the demonstration had been made and the conclusion drawn. Doctor C.I. Istrati had no doubts; for him the statistics of recruiting was perfectly uniform at the level of the whole country; for him, between 1869 and 1879, all recruiting physicians had evaluated uniformly the cases of disability or incomplete development; this was his main argument; the exigency of the recruiting physicians did not increase in the interval mentioned, just the physical reality

of recruits in front of them was degrading.

In the ninth decade of the 19th century, other military physicians would take the path drawn by doctor Istrati. One of them was battalion physician Ioan Dănescu who in 1886 defended a Ph.D. thesis in medicine dedicated to medical demography and geography. His sources were the recruiting statistics which after 1879 were complete and covered the whole country. His analysis focused on five years’ time: 1879-1883. What did the recruiting statistics reveal to doctor Ioan Dănescu? Apparently, a normal physical situation of the recruits if their height was taken into account – 1.65 meters and a thoracic perimeter of 85 centimeters: “the vigor of our population is still strong enough (...) *the race endures*” (Dănescu 1886, I). “Looking at the height of the statistical average, the general image proved to be a positive one; but when delving into details, the image lost its shine, it was troubled by the slough of the pathological image of the rejected. Rickety constitution and incomplete development alone were the causes for 10,000 young to be rejected; and all of a sudden, the excellent qualities of our race started to weaken” (Dănescu 1886, II). When compared to the statistics for 1874, the image of the physical qualities of the population got even darker: if in 1874 the number of rejected youth was 6,317, by keeping the proportions in the five year’ analysis, the number of rejects should have been 31,585 recruits; nevertheless, it was 1,383 units higher. In conclusion: “medically speaking, the country’s military aptitude is on a downwards slope” (Dănescu 1886, V). There was only one step to the complete disaster that our physicians would do when he would see that, for example, the township of Iugurul in Muscel could offer only two recruits in five years (Dănescu 1886, unpagged). In conclusion, after six years, doctor Ioan Dănescu answered doctor C.I. Istrati’s rhetorical question (if the Romanian race degenerated or not) with “Yes! With great sorrow, we must be convinced that the Romanian race in

our country is undergoing a process of degeneration and at quite an alarming speed" (Dănescu 1886, VII).

In two years another military physician urged by "the success of my comrade's thesis (...) dr. Dănescu" (Gugea 1888, 11) chose to focus his Ph.D. thesis on the impact of height upon the statistics of recruitment. The time interval of the analysis was the same as that of his mentor: 1879-1883. As you may suspect, the results were similar. The thesis doctor Th. Gugea started from was that there was a connection between the proportion of those exempted from military service on the grounds of minimum height, the sanitary status of the population they came from and race degeneration: "In the counties where short height is frequent, dirt is greater. In our country, all these faults in the physical constitution of the population cannot be justified through racial differences, because even if there are parts of the country inhabited with heterogeneous elements, our personal observations lead us to assert that all these elements are in good state of development and that physical degeneration by causes of local insalubrity does not touch but the native population" (Gugea 1888, 18). And doctor Th. Gugea came across the same problem as doctor Ioan Dănescu: the average height in the five year' period invalidated the thesis that the authors fiercely proved: "the figures of my statistical table give the average of 1m65cm. To a number of 224,972 young, as have been medically examined, from 1879 until 1883 and even further on, higher statures are figured with tenths of thousands until 1m 70cm. We could say that our material of selection is in excellent condition and that we just have to cultivate it, favoring its conditions of development" (Gugea 1888, 28). Nevertheless, our physician could only be worried because he knew, no matter what the statistical tables showed, that the Romanian population was degenerating; and then he placed this degeneration wherever he could, that is, in the mountain counties where the exemptions for stature

were more numerous: "the population of our mountain natives has started to degenerate a long time ago, because the inferior heights of 1m54 cm have already reached the maximum proportion of 70 to 1000 and, together with some plain counties, a minimum of 30 to 1000" (Gugea 1888, 39). I personally did not understand if the minimum proportion of 30‰ exempted from military service on stature grounds represented a reason of concern for doctor Th. Gugea and, thus, a positive parameter of race degeneration. One year after dr. Gugea's dissertation, in 1889, his younger colleague, Nicolae Soiu dedicated his Ph.D. to a question of medical demography. Even if the coordinator of both theses was dr. Zaharia Petrescu, the works were in fact, as conclusions, quite different. Doctor Nicolae Soiu was, like his coordinator, an optimist; nothing could convince him that the race had degenerated: neither the great number of rejects on the grounds of stature insufficiency, because reduced stature was wrongly associated with precarious hygienic conditions of the population that offered such recruits: "if tall height would be rightfully considered as representing vigor and health it would naturally follow that short stature be a criterion for feeble constitution and physiological misery; in this case, it is obvious that the proportion of small heights and that of infirmities should go hand in hand" (Soiu 1889, 42), nor statistical data that he presented infirmed this theory. Doctor N. Soiu was in fact the adept of Broca's theory that showed that height was more a characteristic of the "race" than an index of the recruit's physical development. The great number of recruits rejected by the recruiting commissions could not prove anything either since at 21st years old "the development of the body is not finished" (Soiu 1889, 61); nothing could soften doctor Soiu.

And in this field the surprises came from where you least expected it: in 1893 nobody other than Doctor Iacob Felix was forced to admit "the weak constitution"



of the average Romanian recruit. Doctor Felix used a composite index: the ratio between height and thoracic perimeter; “a fact admitted in science” showed that if the thoracic perimeter represented half of the height plus two-three centimeters, this ratio was exactly the border between weak and normal constitutions; or, the average recruit in Romania was situated exactly at this limit: “more than 70% of the recruits examined had a thoracic circumference of 80 to 90 centimeters and the body height of 158 to 173 centimeters” (Felix 1894, 42). Moreover, Doctor Iacob Felix found in the recruitment statistics from 1891-1894 the conditions that allowed doctor Donath in 1894 to declare the degeneration of the population in modern states: “while the number of those recorded decreases, the number of those exempted for infirmities increases” (Felix 1894, 42). Did Doctor Felix reach in 1894 the conclusion drawn by Doctor Istrati in 1880? Hard to believe. After this avalanche of bad news, the general director of the Sanitary Service wanted to remind us the fact that “the statistics of recruits do not give an absolute image, but only a relative one of the bodily development and the physical force of the population, because at 21st years old the body is not yet fully formed, the growth of some organs does not stop at that age, and not only in Romania, but also in other countries for a great number of people the skeleton develops until 25 years old and sometimes even later” (Felix 1894, 44). Doctor Felix had more confidence in his own intuition than in the facts “admitted in science”. Over just two years in his report on sanitary status of the Kingdom in 1895 (published in 1897), even if the statistics of recruitment didn’t seem to indicate an improvement of the recruits’ “physical qualities”, Doctor Iacob Felix’s vision was more serene: even if in Romania the number of those capable of military service decreased annually, what “civilian and military hygienists in almost all European countries” interpreted as a sure sign of race degeneration, Doctor Felix did not hurry to draw the same conclusions

by distrusting the organization of recruiting lists and medical check-ups. And even though the ratio between the height and thoracic perimeter of the native recruit remained the same as two years before, the doctor’s conclusion was: “here, the statistics of recruitment have yet to confirm the fear that the physical force of population is diminishing, that the population is degenerating” (Felix 1897, 16), a conclusion he kept identical in his last report (on 1896-1897) published in 1899 (Felix 1899, 26). At the end of his career, a few years before death, Doctor Iacob Felix was fully confident in the physical qualities of the native population and he was convinced that Romania was on the right track. This was not the case of Doctor Victor Babeş who, in a conference dedicated to the regeneration of the Romanian people (November 1900), was convinced that the sanitary situation of Romania generally and of the peasant population in particular was critical. He was clearly a supporter of the thesis of race degeneration and could not forget, without giving too much importance, “a clue that Romanians’ vitality is low” which was exactly the result of recruitments: between 1890-92 and 1897 the proportion of “rejects” by the commissions of recruitment went from 5.6% to 8.3 % (Babeş 1901, 14-15). In the past decades of the 19th century we saw how the medical body gradually accepted the theory of race degeneration, a degeneration that could be seen better in the statistics of recruitment. We have also seen that not all physicians, some right from the top of medical hierarchy of the Kingdom, believed in this theory. Doctor Iacob Felix was one of them, but he was a special case. Doctor Zaharia Petrescu adhered to it only partially and unconvincingly. Nevertheless, many others, most of them I might say, were fervent supporters of the degeneration of the Romanian race that passed as axiom in the medical discourse of the era.

Apart from the statistics of recruitment we have seen and which didn’t offer positive numbers regarding the “physical features



of the population", data on peasants' corporality in the medical discourse appeared when the topics of food and alcoholism came into discussion. The food which was poor in products of animal origin, a real undernourishment, together with a frightening rate of alcoholism, could not but bring disastrous consequences upon the peasant's flesh and blood. And the medical discourse spread to the entire social body. Physicians, landowners, politicians, professors, all asserted the peasant's physical downfall. A.V. Millo, the great landowner in Moldavia, a good connoisseur of the peasant and his needs, as one "that has lived for 30 years, winter and summer, together with him" (Millo 1881, 8), could not but assert the full decrepitude of the rural population due to – so specific to Moldavia – alcoholism: "in order for somebody to have an idea of what awful marks brandy drunkenness leaves upon the peasant, one should attend a recruit's examination. In mountain villages, where 20-30 years ago the most handsome, the tallest and the most vigorous men existed, today you can only find midgets. Of 100 lads, 50 are not good for the military service, some are ill, some are skinny, and even those that are recruited no longer represent that beautiful race of the mountain people" (Millo 1881, 156). The old good times for the Moldavian peasant disappeared long, long ago.

But at some point we would wonder if the whole medical discourse upon the peasant and the rural world presented this image of the fallen peasant corporality globally. In other words: for the entire medical body, was the peasant a physically weak being, as a sick person about to die? As we have already seen the statistics of recruitment, the entire medical body wasn't won over by the topic of native race degeneration, but only most of them.

We must wait for 1905 and Doctor Radu Chernbach's incisive pen, a physician from Huși, to have a real opinion against this trend.

He simply dismissed the entire medical

discourse upon the peasant food from doctor Constantin Caracas until the moment he wrote: "It is a wrong idea that the food of our peasant, understanding that of the diligent peasant – not quite the front-ranks – would be indigestible, bad and tasteless (...). Villagers have different kinds of very nutritional meals and, if they weren't so, how could we account for their exuberant physical health, the power of endurance to work united along with that solid power of the mind?" (Chernbach 1905, 433). A common sense assertion of just a particular situation of our physician? Hard to say; I would choose the first variant, but this was maybe my particular situation. Our physician continued his crusade and agreed, *horribile dictu*, even with the Lent! "A wrong trend in the public opinion has led many to condemn fasting; many who have written and talked about food, «gently» deploring the peasant who fasts, by saying that he degenerated because of fasting. A regrettable confusion has occurred because most of those who deplore the peasant's health have not studied the matter thoroughly" (Chernbach 1905, 434).

But whatever Doctor Chernbach would say in the first years after 1900, in the entire second half of the 19th century, the peasant's corporality was seen in extremely negative tones by the medical discourse. The generic peasant of the medical discourse was not a vigorous being forged in the sun and wind while working the land, but, on the contrary, an undernourished being, touched by the plague of alcoholism, tormented by multiple illnesses coming up from the most degrading living conditions possible. The physicians' peasant was a continuously ill person that medical commissions for recruitment more and more often rejected. As mentioned above, this image of rural corporality could not be understood other than as a facet of a more general social fear propagated by the medical discourse: race degeneration. And we must admit: the rural world of physicians did not look like the one of the other categories of intellectuals



of the era. For the latter, the peasant world created a separate discourse that composed an image so different from the one sketched by our physicians. In this discourse, the calendar customs and the one called “the life cycle” were testimonies of our Latin origin, the dirty coat of the peasant transformed into gorgeous holiday clothes that the elite ladies were not shy to wear, and the peasant’s home, the dirty one, became itself a true museum where the aesthetics of the carved pillars of the verandah added up to the even more aesthetic tissues on the *ruda*. The primitive peasant had turned into a native peasant. The paradigm of appearance

changed and together with it the image of the peasant (Mihăilescu 2007, 263-330).

At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, according to the public spirit in Romania, both images had co-existed and competed. For today’s reader it might seem strange to see such contrasting images of the same topic in the same era. The dominant culture passionately manipulated the image of the peasant, and this state of facts was just another facet of the “rural issue” that haunted (in the proper sense of the word) Romanian society in the second half of the 19th century.

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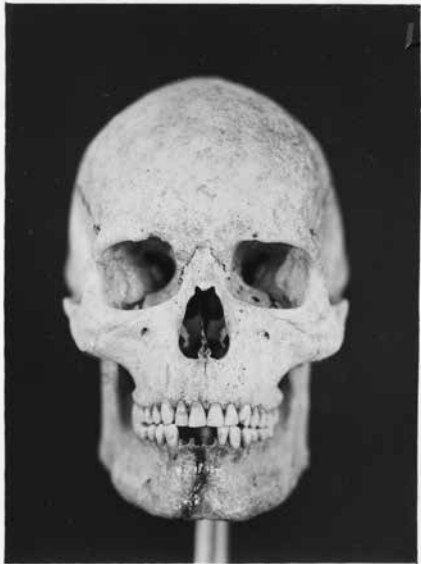
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22

