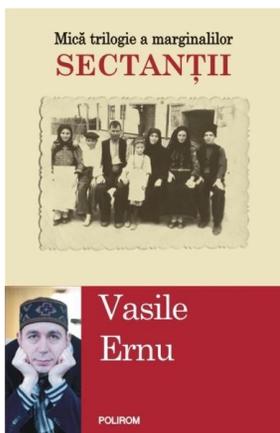


## Vasile Ernu, A short trilogy of marginals. The Sectarians (Vasile Ernu, Mica trilogie a marginalilor. Sectantii)



Vasile Ernu, *Mica trilogie a marginalilor. Sectantii*, Editura Polirom, Iasi, 2015, 370 p.

The book written by Vasile Ernu, *The Sectarians*, is the first volume of a broader study dedicated to marginal groups from a geographic region that is also marginal, the Budjak province. Budjak is nowadays part of Ukraine, a region bounded on the north and west by the Republic of Moldova, on the south by Romania, and on the southeast by the Black Sea. This region was historically governed by different states and is as a consequence very heterogeneous,

ethnically and culturally speaking. If *The Sectarians* investigates the religious marginal groups of the region, the other two planned volumes will study “the bandits” who act at the limits of law or even break it, and the “strangers” who are ethnically, culturally and politically marginalized.

Ernu's book is not an investigation of an emotionally neutral object. *The Sectarians* is for the most part the history of author's own community that he wants to say having in mind the archetype of the Five Books of Moses (the Torah, the Pentateuch). The book catches from the beginning through the author's option for a “biblical” structure. This is unquestionably an effective strategy of *captatio benevolentie*. But of course the author does not seek to carry out a comprehensive parallel between the biblical story and the history of his own community. However, the central messages of the Books of Moses can be used in order to decode each of the main sections of Ernu's book.

It has to be clearly said from the beginning that we are not speaking about a religious history book but an

anthropology book that can be of interest not only for those preoccupied with religion but also for those interested in sociology, economics or politics.

The first section (*Genesis*) describes the “powers” that sit at the base of a community that perceives itself as “the chosen one”. It tells the story of “the family’s first Patriarch” (p. 25), Kulaki, a merchant who came from Transylvania and settled in the south of Bessarabia, his conversion and the establishment of a new sectarian faith. This “sect” – which is also the denomination the author belongs to – is the fruit of a triple influence: from various religious groups hostile to majority church in the Tsarist Empire at the end of 19th century (Raskolniks, Bezpopovtsy, Molokans), from the German evangelical community inhabiting Budjak area, and from the New Testament’s Israelites sect whose initiator was Joseph Rabinovich, the promoter of Judeo Christianity.

The second section (*Exodus*) presents the difficulties the “chosen” community went through in its short existence and the survival strategies it developed in relation with the oppressive state and the world in general. These strategies are a kind of “Flight from Egypt”, that is detachment and disregard of state power. From Jewish pogrom in Kishinev in 1903 that adversely affected the community, going through the Bolshevik Revolution that initially seemed to bring more

freedom for sectarians, continuing then with the interwar period that was one of the hardest period for minority faiths, and culminating in World War II and the subsequent Great Famine, the second section discusses the community’s rules and survival system “conceived in relation to three areas: the state, the majority faith, and the secular world, simply named ‘this world’” (p. 142.)

The third section (*Leviticus*) basically shows that the persecution suffered under various political regimes was in a religious sense beneficial to the community. As Moses teaches Hebrews that compliance with “laws” in a fallen world can lead to the re-harmonization of the relation between God and His creation, so do the community’s religious institutions, which teach its members that suffering is a test and persecution a chance to strengthen their own belief. So has to be understood the author’s statement according to which Stalinism was “the last golden age of Christianity” (p. 151). Stalinist persecution had beneficial effects on the community in a religious sense: on the one hand, deportations offered the consolation that they, the sectarians, do the right thing in a fallen (anti-religious) world, and on the other hand displacement enabled contacts and development of communication network with other marginal ethno-religious groups. In a way, says the author, Khrushchevite period was harder for the community than the

Stalinist one through the obstacles imposed to liberties of faith and expression (pp. 174-5).

The fourth section (*Numbers*) recounts significant events that have as protagonists the author's close family members and their resistance strategies against regime through work and professions practiced within community. Work in community (that in the case of author's father actually means calculation/numbering, him being an accountant) is similar, suggests the author, with the Jews tribulations after leaving Egypt (counting, preparation and difficulties of the road to the Promised Land).

The fifth section (*Deuteronomy*), besides presenting aspects of daily life in the community (women's role, free time, religious education etc), makes at the same time a kind of evaluation of the past and the future of the community in the context of post-communist freedoms. Unlike the "optimistic" message of the Old Testament in which Moses looks back "over a century of history" and prophesies the spiritual rebirth of the nation of Israel in the Promised Land, Ernu's book seems to transmit a counter message: "The Promised Land" was in the past and seems to be hopelessly lost. This is the message "Uncle Sasha" – who immigrated in Romania in the 60s – send among the final lines of the book: "we all died happy and will die happy because we lived and saw heaven

that you probably will no longer have and understand" (p. 365).

The book is not, however, only a history of author's own community told after a biblical model. The history of his sectarian community is the background or the pretext for a series of philosophical, historical, social and political reflections. Such reflections are, for example, those referring to the study of marginal communities in understanding history (see p. 109 et seq.) or the issue of theological education in orthodoxy (see p. 344). The book also introduces the reader into a world less frequented, namely the religious groups from the territory of the former Tsarist Empire that remained faithful to pre-Nikonian practices and rituals. It shows a region – Budjak – which although located in the proximity of Romania and being temporarily part of it, is nevertheless so little known by Romanian readers. Likewise, the book brings into question little studied topics such as the oscillating relations between Bolshevik power and religious sects. Interesting from this point of view are the pages that touch upon the Lenin and Putintzev's speeches regarding sectarian practices and institutions (pp. 89, 94-107). Last but not least, it is worth mentioning the pages that describe the anti-communist sectarian dissidence, especially the protest of 1966, and its marginalization in post-communism.

Vasile Ernu's book belongs to a mixed genre both in terms of

methodology and in terms of style. Ernu combines in this book his personal experience (emotions, feelings, affection, memories), testimonies collected from community, and information taken from edited sources. The book also combines what is personal and subjective with what is objective, resulting a work that is situated at the intersection of academic, journalistic and literary style. This is a reasonable choice taking into account the author's intention to offer a work of religious, social, political and

economical anthropology of the community in which he was born and rise until adolescence. Furthermore, it makes it accessible to a broader public. Accessibility and a mild humor, which we meet frequently in this book, are additional reasons that recommend the book, whose reading, I think, help us better understand the author's personality – and also a way of life – that here is both subject and object of investigation.

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