THE ‘PEOPLE QUESTION’

In 1847 the East-Central Europeans attending Michelet’s lectures at the Collège de France heard their mentor’s uneasy reflections on the unhealthy divorce between the “privilégiés du loisir, du savoir” and “les hommes du travail”, between the intellectual elites and the workers.69 Around the same time, Rosetti described himself as the defender of the villagers and of the small artisans against the “ghosts of the feudal past.”70 Ledru-Rollin steered the French provisional government towards adopting universal suffrage in 1848. The Romanian provisional government of 1848 steered clear of universal suffrage, but practised a type of plebiscitary and ritualistic politics which secured it wide popular support throughout the events of 1848–9 and even beyond. Moldo-Wallachian pamphlets at the time imported and disseminated French theories of the contractual nation and the ‘sovereignty of the people’, yet, as shown, in practice the electorate remained limited and universal suffrage was only adopted in 1918.71 The June Days in Paris and the aborted work of the Property Commission in Bucharest in August 1848 are only two examples of how the ‘people’ was ‘betrayed’ by its intellectual leaders in that crucial year of European history. The historian and radical forty-eighter Nicolae Bălcescu condemned the failure of the provisional government to deliver on its promise of making the Romanian serfs not only free men but also property-owners. “The revolution of 1848 was a revolution for the people, not a revolution by the people”, he wrote in 1851. The initially enthusiastic people who embraced the cause were subsequently betrayed by a “weak government” of “burghers and educated young men”.72 In spite of this, the level of popular support for the revolution was constantly high,

69 Cf. Part One, p. 47.
70 Ibid.
even though statistics are patchy and a great number of sources speak merely of “many” people, “crowds” and “significant numbers” of participants. Numbers of peasant delegates – three per village – arriving in the capital, Bucharest, ahead of the arrival of the Ottoman envoys in July 1848 ranged between “a few hundreds” and 12,000–15,000, according to widely disparate contemporary estimates. The tsarist commissioner Alexander Duhamel estimated in January 1849 that “the peasants…enthusiastically embraced the cause of the revolution; most probably, around ninety per cent of the population is now in sympathy with the artisans of the troubles and the disorders.” Other witnesses speak of a crowd of some 40,000 people who reinstated the provisional government after the Odobescu-Solomon anti-revolutionary conspiracy. How could such support be explained? Did printed and spoken propaganda work better in Bucharest than in Paris? Or were the crowds in Wallachia more supine and easier to manipulate? Was the failure of the Property Commission due to lack of political will or to the pressures of Russian and Ottoman military intervention? Those were days of heady enthusiasm, and the peasant delegates arrived in the capital city with tri-coloured banners and talking of the “constitution.” Yet issues of franchise as well as of peasant dues and land ownership remained unsolved in the longer term, even after the former exiles had come to power. Although, as seen, peasants had their own representatives in the consultative assemblies of 1857, the Paris Convention of 19 August 1858 imposed a heavily restricted franchise. Only “a few thousand persons, mainly large landowners and the upper middle class”, had the right to vote. The Constitution of 1866 was also based on income and as a result, only some 20,000 individual out of 5 million could vote, a restrictive system which could not fail to have a negative impact on land legislation. The land law of 1864, which made peasants legal owners of their lands, failed to pre-empt the fragmentation of plots through inheritance and the gradual deteri-

74 Revoluția de la 1848 în Țările Române: documente inedite din arhivele rusești, ed. Ion Varta (Chișinău, 1998), 478, quoted in Marian Stroia, Între Levant și Europa modernă: impact extern și mentalitate tradițională în spațiul românesc (Bucharest, 2006), 194.
75 Berindei, Revoluția română, 169. Cf. Part One of the present study, p. 82.
76 Hitchins, The Romanians, 1774–1855, 293.