

HOUSEHOLDING.

STRUCTURE AND CULTURE IN THE ROMANIAN RURAL SOCIETY

Prof. Vintilă Mihăilescu, Ph. D.

The paper addresses, by an anthropological approach, the topic of long lasting culture of rural Romanian households and its present time forms. The ethos of the good householder seems to be still important for a large part of the rural population (and probably not only) of Romania. Proposing or even imposing some kind of convergent meaning for human action, it is nevertheless contextual: the traditional household, the diffuse household and mere householding are but three possible "ideal relations" trying to achieve this goal in rather different social contexts, following a more or less common meaning of action through different kinds of interactions. Households are the partners of weak state in nations with a strong rural past, trying to oppose individual networks of security to the collective feelings of insecurity. In a way, the symbolic centrality of households stands for the evanishing centrality of the state and not yet emerging centrality of the market.

A case study

Let's first take a look to a household.

V.N. came in Tismana, a large village in the center of Romania, in 1971 as a skilled worker and married a woman from the village. The first three years, as he says, he did not know what to start with – meaning beside his job in a small industrial unit near the village. He tried gardening, but it did not work. Then he started a bee culture and begun to sell the honey – and it worked very well, in one year his honey getting even the first prize at an international competition in Germany.

His wife was working in a local traditional carpets manufacture. The nuns from the Tismana monastery were teaching the women how to weave and a former "bourgeois" tradesman was hired (after some years of prison) by the party's local leader to run the enterprise. They become a quite prosperous manufacture, selling their carpets in many foreign countries. N's wife was a kind of team leader, distributing the materials to the women who were working at home.

Together, they developed their household and started to build a new house, "bigger than the doctor's one" and, "probably, with the first bathroom in the village". In one year, they lost all their bees so that N. tried to help

himself out by buying some cows and selling their milk. But it was no more the same thing.

After 1990, the family tried several “business”. The carpet manufacture went broken but N’s wife, given her former position and relations, could still get some work, from time to time. In 1998 she died. Their daughter went to Austria, where she made a white marriage and tried different jobs in order to make some money. This period of her life is not very clear and his father is not very willing to speak about. Then she came back and is now living with a boy friend and her two children in the family’s house. The son tried also a lot of things, went several times in Germany, where they have a relative, bought two small trucks in order to start a commerce but was cheated so the father had to pay all his debts. He is also living with his wife (who is working in the next town) and his children in the family’s house, helping here and there, doing some small jobs once and then and still dreaming to have his trucks.

Together, they are running a small “agro-tourism” business, using their big house to this purpose. When they have clients – which is not at all often –, all or a part of the family is moving in the old house or sleeping in the neighborhood. The daughter is cooking and the others are helping when needed. As for most of the similar initiatives in the country, the “management” is something in between hospitality and public service, with changing prices and attitudes following the relations with the guest-clients. But this important “non-farm” activity deserves a closer look.

The daughter and her friend also have a small bar and share with the father a small shop in the front of their household. They are selling on credit, as all the other tradesman in the village, always scared to lose their money but still forced to cope with this general credit system imposed by poverty (and by the concurrence too) and made possible by propinquity relations. Some times, debtors from the neighborhood are paying their debts by helping N. in his farming activities. For one year, they closed everything, because it was no more profitable.

N. is still having his job and working in the household. After buying some land, he tried to build a trout stock farm with a neighbor, but he failed, one of the reasons being that he run short of money, having to pay his son’s debts. Now he dreams of building, almost by himself, a swimming pool in order to attract more tourists, but he has not yet the money for it.

When asked what he would prefer, a job not very well paid but sure or one less sure but very well paid, he definitely opted for the first: “So I am more secure and, you see, I have a lot of other things to do beside my job”

(what is the case of more than 80% of the Romanian rural population). When asked what he thinks about doing things by oneself or in a team, helping each other, he opted for working together with other people willing “to push in the same direction”. “I couldn’t manage to do in these last years what I did when my wife was still alive and we helped each other”. For him, a household is a kind of team too: one can not be a householder just by oneself, so he does not perceive himself as a “good householder” any longer, after the death of his wife and the rather divergent opinions and strategies of his children – with whom he nevertheless goes on living under the same roof and work together. “To be a good householder means to achieve what is needed for a man’s life, you know, to have a house, a cow, well, everything you need.” And this “you can not go through by your own”!

Approaching the household

How should we approach these facts and what can we get out of them? There is no clear-cut distinction between farm and non-farm activities or even between concurrent non-farm strategies. Our actors are now “placed” in one household – as three distinct families – but used to be “displaced” when the mother was working in the village, the father in the town and the children were abroad, but still connected with their family home. In what sense can this be considered a “rural” social unit?¹

It seems that we can and should address households as units of analysis – in as far as the behavior of the “rural actor” seems to be embedded in his household activity – but under the condition of taking a closer look to what we really mean by *household* and how “rural” it still is.

From Sumner Maine to, say, Keesing, anthropologists rather agreed on the fact that kinship and propinquity are two distinct principles of organization. Family and household have thus not to be confused, even they might largely overlap sometimes. Further on, households (or rather co-residential or domestic groups) mean more than spatial propinquity. “Generally the term refers to a set of individuals who share not only living space but also some set of activities.” In this respect, “Bender’s (1967) separation of families, co-residential groups, and domestic functions is useful to the extent that it prods

¹ In another village where I worked, the population almost doubled each week-end (meaning almost three days a week) by the relatives coming from town where they were working in order to get involved in different farming activities and getting their “shares” out of this involvement. What should then be considered the “real” population of this village?

the ethnographer to explicate the exact nature of the social unit he is labeling a family or co-residential unit and to describe precisely the functions it performs rather than assuming them or leaving the reader to fill in with his own cultural assumptions.” (Yanagisako, 1979, pp. 164-165) In this respect, we have to take a closer look at the Romanian household (*gospodarie*) in order to understand its relations to both kin and propinquity. We also have to identify its functions in the distribution of responsibilities of the village as a whole.

Further distinctions proved to be less consensual, but we can not go here into these important “details”. We will just stick to the fact that kin and domestic groups being the problem of social anthropology – and thus of “social structure”, more interest was spent on the history and diversity of household’s *structure* than on household *culture*. In this respect, “Schneider contends that the study of kinship as a symbolic system must be undertaken if we are to produce cross-cultural comparisons of kinship rather than cross-societal comparisons which divorce components of behavior from their symbolic meanings. (...) By abstracting normative rules from concrete, observable actions (which includes verbal statements), the anthropologist derives the system of symbols and meanings pertaining to kinship relationships. Because it directs us to conduct thorough investigations of native conceptual categories, symbolic analysis produces richer and more precise ethnographic accounts than do analyses that fail to interpret social units and actions within their relevant context of meaning. (...) A further advantage of analyzing kinship as a symbolic system lied in its ability to help us make sense of the diversity in family and kinship organization within a single society. Geertz & Geertz (1975) employ the analytic strategy of differentiating the cultural dimension of kinship from its social structural dimension to bring together ‘as aspects of a single structure of meaning’ what seem to be ‘puzzlingly irregular and contradictory’ Balinese kinship customs and practices.” (Yanagisako, op. cit., pp. 192-193)

Coming back to our issue and keeping in mind the distinction between kinship and propinquity, we might then consider household, in a given context, as being a distinct meaningful set of relations, with sets of people acting to rich common meanings through more or less convergent means. But, in doing so and trying to be coherent with such an approach, we also should be explicit on a methodological choice. Considering households as a kind of symbolic game, a set of meaningful relations, we are focusing on the *game* rather than on its *players*, on *relations* rather than social *actors*; to put it

briefly, we are constructing *ideal relations* rather than *ideal types*, closer to the structural interactionism of network approach, but with deeper interest in social interactions as symbolic practice.

Besides other more theoretical reasons, there are also at least two good practical reasons in using ideal types or categories: a) “types” and “categories” have a great “visibility” (everybody can imagine a “peasant” or even a more analytic type such as “subsistence peasant” and can understand what is meant by farming or non-farm activities); b) this enables policy “addressability”, strategies that can be oriented toward clear (or supposed to be so) categories of beneficiary and/or activities they want to influence, promote, etc.. But it also undertakes some risks: real people are usually “trans-categorical” (this being even more true in less structured, unstable contexts, such as transition for instance) and their strategies are to a large extent “game strategies” rather than “players strategies”, producing and reproducing social networks of distinctive social games. In this context, it is assumed that household is such a social game and it should be approached in terms of “ideal relations” rather than focusing on ideal social actors or typical social structures.

The Romanian household (*gospodarie*): history and diversity

“Social forms can take so many different aspects that attention to the functions of institutions can often illuminate social history better than a comparison of forms.” (Chirot, 1976, p. 154) In this respect, a closer look to the responsibilities of householders in different contexts might be more adequate than considering the *gospodarie* as the typical Romanian rural unit and listing its particularities.

The reference social organization of the Romanian villages was the *obste devalmasa*. In its archaic form, this communal village was “an association of family households, based on the common share of a territory, where the community as such has anterior and superior rights in respect to the households, rights that are performed through a leading institution called ‘obste’. [in fact, the more or less totality of the grown up members of the community, acting as a “primitive democracy”]” (Stahl, 1959, p. 25) As such, “Romanian communal villages were apparently territorially rather than family based units from a very early period.” (Chirot, op. cit., p. 153) Compared to the better known *Zadruga* structure, “in Romania, the village as a whole was communal, not the extended family.” (idem, p. 141) Of course, it had to face

the same material and political conditions as villages in other parts of the Balkans. According to Mosely, these were mainly three: the need to mobilize labor to conquer the Balkan forest, the persistence of insecurity of life and property and the existence of a heavily pastoral economy (Mosely, 1953/1976). It also had to distribute common village responsibilities, such as distribution of property and work, communal functions and mutual help. But all these “village responsibilities are emphasized far more than kin responsibilities” (Mead, 1976, p. XXIV), so that in the *obste devalmasa* there was no need for large domestic, kin-based, groups or households: “within the [Romanian] village, families were considerably smaller than in the zadrugal areas.” (Chirot, op. cit., p. 141) In fact, as a rule, the *gospodarie* is made of the parents and their unmarried children, the youngest of which will stay in the parents’ house and inherit it.

This organization lasted in its more or less primitive form as late as the XXth century in some remote counties of Romania, but these were just exceptions. With important differences in time and space, between the XVI and the XIX centuries the *obste devalmasa* went through a long process of dissolution. “When a communal village was divided, land was allocated to the several large ancestral families who made up the village. The forefathers of these extended families were assumed to have been the sons or brothers of the village founder. Thus, a village would be said to ‘walk on X number of old men’ [*sate umblatoare pe mosi*]. The land would be divided into X number of equal strips. Each extended family [the Romanian name is *neam*, which can hardly be translated by ‘extended family’] then divided its own lands and gave them to the individual nuclear families [in fact, to each *gospodarie* of the *neam*]. This was done in the same way so that as many equal strips were created as there were nuclear families. Division was not always equal, for certain richer or more powerful families could impose an unequal division. Also, extended families with few descendents could hand out larger individual strips than those with more descendents, so that an individual’s placement within the village genealogy was crucial.” (Chirot, op. cit., 142) Unable to share rights and responsibilities any longer, the communal village will hand them over to the “clans” (*neamuri*) for a better administration of communal property facing inner inequalities and external rapacity: “the key reason for the division of communal lands was protection from exploitation by rich natives or outsiders.” (Chirot, op. cit., p. 149) This new distribution will be settled after long debates about the number of clans the communal village should be divided in, this genealogies being just instruments of

customary law (Stahl, op. cit.). Kinship thus becomes important in order to legitimize the new territories of the village.

This form of social organization also disaggregated in different degrees and ways, the *gospodarie* being still, more or less, *devălmașă*, meaning that the members of the household have the joint possession of the household's goods due to common work in the household (Stahl, op. cit.), this property being divided in equal parts to the children at their marriage, with the last born staying in the parents house and taking over their part at their death. Responsibility and belonging thus shifted during time from the village to the familial household, only mutual help being left to the common practice of neighbors in the community.

Mainly with communism and its forced "modernization", these social units of the *traditional households* also split due to migration and other forms of geographic and social mobility. But most of their members still stood related to each other, in a kind of functional unit we may call displaced or *diffuse household*. These kind of social networks were sharing a kind of intermittent propinquity, with their displaced members from all over the country "coming home" from time to time, getting involved in some farming activities or changing services and goods between them and taking with them a large range of farm products. Those (usually but not necessarily kin members) who get involved (to a certain extent) in the distribution of work and redistribution of resources were part of this "diffuse household". The member of such a displaced domestic unit was thus a kind of shareholder, investing work and emotion, the "profit" of which was just redistribution of resources over his agro-industrial, rural-urban network. Differences between such networks were quite important, according to their demographic and social structure, but also to their strategies aiming to a more or less restricted social and local mobility (see David Kideckel, 1993, for a typology of these household strategies). Their diffuse nature made sometimes very difficult or even strongly biased the location of the members of such networks to urban or rural, worker or peasant categories. This explains what Gerhard Creed (1995) called "the domestication of industry" by rural-urban household networks. This also reminds us that the problem of specialization and professional differentiation we are facing now in post-communist countries has already a history behind.

It was claimed that such household strategies, coping with the constrains of communism aiming to the dissolution of peasant social organization – and thus their political relevance – finally reinforced peasants

family and kinship ties (e.g. Hammel, 1972). But this is true only to a certain extent, diffuse households building a kind of *selective kinship* – or just selective ties. “The diverse ways in which households positioned themselves in their efforts to take advantage of official and unofficial opportunities influenced their cultural choices and left them generally unable to form meaningful political alliances. The strategies households devised to get by and get ahead under the pressures exerted by the accumulative state also influenced their ability to craft wider networks of social cooperation.” (Kideckel, op. cit., p. 172) No more embedded in the community but not yet having the individual at its center, the ethos of the “good householder” produced to a large extent what we may call a “*molecularization* of the society”, with large amount of small centripetal networks, fighting for their short term welfare or just survival.

For these people, post-communism meant a brand new range of opportunities, most of them being also puzzling challenges. But it also meant the loss of security, unemployment being just one of the main causes. Agrarian and not agricultural laws, the lack of an agricultural model and of any coherent long term state policy in this domain (and even worse, its permanent instability), the implicit use of villages as an escape for urban unemployment, produced a shift of initiative from national to local (and even individual) level (von Hirschhausen, 1997), rural people having just to find their way out. And this is what (at least a part of them) did, re-activating their networks and re-shaping them according to the new context. We call all this range of different, if not divergent, strategies *householding*, meaning a set of minimalist but flexible strategies, networking available people and resources around one’s household welfare or just subsistence, depending mainly on age, local isolation and relational capital. It is a mainly self-reproductive system of relations, empowered by the lack of coherent alternative models and maybe even more so by the instability of the few existing ones. To some extent, these household centered strategies are the available means of building some kind of security and stability in an insecure and unstable social context.

Using the verbal form (householding) instead of the substantive one (household), aims to point to a fluidity of choices coping with instability of political, social and economic offers. It is not restricted to “domestic economy”, this being just embedded in a broader common life strategy. Based rather on *trust* than on *assurance* (Molm et al., 2000), householding strategies see networks and networking as their main resource, being thus

incapable or unwilling of broader cooperation or convergent efforts in the public sphere.

The “culture” of the household

The *gospodărie* has – and, to some extent, always had – a certain symbolic centrality in Romanian rural life. In this respect we can even speak, maybe, about a certain rural *ethos of the “good householder”*: for a peasant, the main meaning of life would be to achieve “what is needed” for a man’s life, the proper place for it being one’s house and the proper way being shared propinquity (usually but not necessary kin) relations. This ideal meaning was rather shared over time and space, giving a certain unity to different – or some times even divergent – ways of achieving this very goal.

The ethos of the good householder seems to be still important for a large part of the rural population (and probably not only) of Romania. Proposing or even imposing some kind of convergent meaning for human action, it is nevertheless contextual: the *traditional household*, the *diffuse household* and mere *householding* are but three possible “ideal relations” trying to achieve this goal in rather different social contexts, following a more or less common meaning of *action* through different kinds of *interactions*. If this is true, it means that understanding the behavior of “householding people” cannot be cut away from the meaning they project on their behavior and that orients all their behavior according to this meaning. To put it in other way, it means that distinct categories of activity and analytic categories of actors have to be approached and handled in and through the social games of householding they are parts of rather than *per se*. Most of these activities don’t have their aims in themselves and frequently don’t have the same meaning for the social actors and for the policy makers trying to sustain this or that activity. For a strategy maker, farm and non-farm activities, for instance, are and should be distinct, having distinct aims, following distinct logics and having distinct outcomes. For householders they may be just equivalent and changeable means of householding.

Does this mean that householding strategies are “irrational”? I hardly would agree. For rather unskilled people, using in a rather flexible way the opportunities under hand seems to me a rather “rational” way of reacting to a rather instable and insecure environment. Households are the partners of weak state in nations with a strong rural past, trying to oppose individual networks of security to the collective feelings of insecurity. In a way, the symbolic

centrality of households stands for the evanishing centrality of the state and not yet emerging centrality of the market – and in this respect, investing in non-functional and *ostentatious houses* is just a way of expressing this meaning.²

References

- CHIROT, D. “The Romanian Communal Village: An Alternative to the Zadruga”, in Robert F. BYRNES (Ed.) *Communal Families in the Balkans: The Zadruga. Essays by Philip E. Mosely and Essays in His Honor*, Univ. of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame – London, 1976, pp. 139-159;
- CREED, G. “Agriculture and domestication of industry in rural Bulgaria”, in *American Ethnologist*, vol. 22, 3, 1995, pp. 528-548;
- HAMMEL, E. A. “The zadruga as process”, in P. Laslett and R. Wall (Eds.): *Household and Family in Past Time*, Cambridge Univ. Press, London, 1972, pp.335-374;
- von HIRSCHHAUSEN, B. *Les nouvelles campagnes roumaines. Paradoxes d’un “retour” paysan*, Belin, Paris, 1997;
- KIDECKEL, D. A. *The Solitude of Collectivism. Romanian Villagers to the Revolution and Beyond*, Cornell Univ. Press, Ithaca and London, 1993;
- MEAD, M. “Introduction: Philip E. Mosely’s Contribution to the Comparative Study of the Family”, in Robert F. Byrnes (Ed.) *Communal Families in the Balkans: The Zadruga. Essays by Philip E. Mosely and Essays in His Honor*, Univ. of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame – London, 1976, pp. I-XVII;
- MOLM, L.D., Takahashi, N., Peterson, G. “Risk and trust in social exchange: An experimental test of a classical proposition” in *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 105, 5, 2000, pp. 1396-1427;
- MOSELY, Ph. E. “The Distribution of the Zadruga Within Southeastern Europe” in Robert F. Byrnes (Ed.) *Communal Families in the Balkans: The Zadruga. Essays by Philip E. Mosely and Essays in His Honor*, Univ. of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame – London, 1976, pp. [1953];
- STAHL, H. H. *Contributii la studiul satelor devalmase românești*, vol. II, Editura Academiei R.P.R., Bucuresti, 1959;
- YANAGISAKO, S.J. “Family and Household: the Analysis of Domestic Groups”, in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 8, 1979, pp. 161-205.

² In most of the post-communist rural settings, but especially in Romania and Bulgaria, ostentatious houses – or even whole villages – are well-known phenomena. Having a “proud house” turns frequently to the very meaning of one’s life or, at least, as a condition of not losing one’s face.