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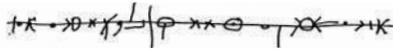
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# What Do Peasants Want? Equality and Differentiation in Post-Socialist Moldova



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## ABSTRACT

This article addresses several aspects of the “agrarian question” that have remained unanswered in the historic territory of Bessarabia and the post-socialist Republic of Moldova. Drawing on recent ethnographic fieldwork, national calculations of household poverty levels and consumption patterns, and the legal dimensions of property distribution, I reveal the degree to which “peasant” desires for both social equality and differentiation remain poorly understood by social scientists and policy makers. I conclude with a preliminary sketch of some aspects of the contemporary moral economy in the villages of the southeastern portion of the county

## KEYWORDS

Bessarabia, Moldova, poverty, moral economy, land reform

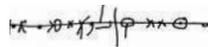


## Introduction

As the editors of this volume point out in their introduction, in recent decades, some of the most eminent historians and social theorists have declared the peasantry “dead” and the “agrarian question” “solved” by definitive technological changes in agricultural production and markets.

The countries of southeastern Europe, however, as well as several other regions of the world, continue to have high rural populations engaged in agricultural activities primarily for household consumption. The desires, activities, and strategies of these populations, therefore, remain socially, politically and economically relevant. In the following pages, I use ethnographic data drawn from fieldwork in southeastern Moldova, during 2009-2010, to explore some aspects of the contemporary “moral economy” that shape economic decision-making at the individual and household levels and

that also contribute to patterns of social differentiation (and its obfuscation)<sup>1</sup>.



## The Agrarian Question: Solved or Re-formulated?

During the second half of the 19th century, the “problem” of the peasantry was a generalized one across Europe, as politics and science attempted to chart the course of impending economic and social development. In fact, there was not one problem to be resolved, but several which varied in importance by region, country and interest group. In some countries, such as England and Belgium, the peasantry was already quite small, and the “problems” of industrialization were more acutely felt. In contrast, rural issues could become central to the national debate where there was less industrialization. In the Romanian lands, for example, the productivity of the countryside was of great concern to elites who profited from the export of grain, while early social scientists drew at-

1) Fieldwork in 2009-2010 was conducted under the auspices of the research group “Economy and Ritual” at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. I gratefully acknowledge the institute’s support; however, the analysis and interpretations presented here are my own.

tention to the poverty and disease suffered by the peasantry (Muşat 2011). Moreover, early solutions to the problem, such as the Romanian land reforms of 1864, generated further problems (e.g. Chirot 1976, 1989).

The attention of national governments, political parties, intellectuals, social reformers and urban society was thus drawn to the countryside as a problematic area that required intervention by understanding and changing the habits of the “peasants”. Generally speaking, peasants across Europe were considered to be “backward”: often ignorant and uneducated; having low standards of health and over-succumbing to preventable diseases (Roberts 1951); pursuing inefficient means of crop production, over-working the land and often weakening their long-term profitability through partible inheritance (Stahl 1980); pursuing self-exploitation by accepting market prices below the cost of production (Chayanov 1966); and supporting conservative political agendas that furthered their disenfranchisement (Kotsonis 1999). As indicated by the above-citations, the peasantry of Bessarabia fit nearly all of the general descriptors.

In the Romanian lands, the problems of the peasantry were often described as the *chestiunea agrară* (see Muşat 2011, 1), but, across the European political spectrum, the particular phrasing of an “agrarian question” remains most commonly associated with Marxism and other specifically socialist agendas. The phrase, made famous by Karl Kautsky’s *Die Agrarfrage* (1988 [1899]), refers most concretely to the question of rural class dynamics under the influence of capitalism. European Marxists were concerned with understanding what role the peasantry would play in the impending revolution. As described by Alavi and Shanin (1988), the concern was both theoretical and pragmatic; not only were Marxists seeking to better understand the laws of economic-political development as they applied to agriculture and rural areas, in part to foster revolution, but they also sought to expand their political base into the countryside. For Kautsky

and others, “the agrarian question” was thus one about class formation in rural areas: would the peasantry also be polarized into two classes - a rural proletariat and capitalist farmers - by processes that paralleled those described by Marx for industrial workers?

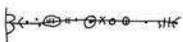
Throughout most of the 20th century, the “agrarian question” remained an important one in Marxist-inflected peasant studies, only to disappear from the intellectual, political and policy agendas of rural and agricultural development shortly before the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union (Leonard and Kaneff 2002). In recent decades, it has been declared that the “agrarian question” has been “solved”. The laws of capitalism now apply equally, it would seem, to industrial and agricultural production, and class has become politically irrelevant in both urban and rural areas. Yet, other observers note that many aspects of the “agrarian question” remain unsolved or have even reappeared under new conditions: family farms persist in even the most industrially-developed systems of agriculture (McLaughlin 1998); and peasants have re-emerged on the political scene, not as classes within national systems, but as “indigenes” on a global scale (McMichael 1997). In Europe, the collapse of state socialism ushered in land reforms that created family farms across Eastern and Central Europe and the former Soviet Union (Hann 2003); and “peasants,” who were reified as a social category under socialism, persist as a symbolic category even as they are being legally re-defined as “farmers” (Leonard and Kaneff 2002).

The “agrarian question” in its narrowest formulation might well be considered irrelevant in light of political and economic history. Indeed, communist movements and socialist states have generally met their demise, and global capitalism has thoroughly created and shaped large-scale agricultural production. But “solving” the “agrarian question” in this way sidesteps the broader questions that it embedded about social differentiation in the countryside and how it is connected to both political interests and



household economic strategies.

In this paper, I therefore argue that the “agrarian question” need not be abandoned because of its initial political and theoretical ambitions. To the contrary, as the peasantry is uniformly declared dead and “peasants” are re-labelled “farmers” by development agencies and economists everywhere, it becomes all the more important to raise the question of whether urban / rural differentiations have truly been overcome. Are “farmers” fully enfranchised vis-à-vis the state and market and on an equal footing with urban professionals (see Diković, this volume)? Or do rural communities still need to be understood on their own terms? In short, I suggest turning the “agrarian question” from a theoretical one to an ethnographic one. In the immediate context, this means that the question becomes one about the social identity of “peasants” themselves: who are they? how do they organize their social, economic and political affairs? what do they need? what do they want? how are they likely to go about achieving their desires? In the longer view, however, making the “agrarian question” an ethnographic one also serves to reconfigure the theory to confirm with observable data as Kautsky originally sought to do.



### **Differentiations among Peasants in Moldova**

Today’s Republic of Moldova consists of two historically distinct territories. Between the Prut and Nistru Rivers, lies the majority of historic Bessarabia; Transnistria, which lies east of the Nistru River, had no administrative identity until the formation of the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR) within the Soviet Union in 1924. For the sake of accuracy and simplicity, I have narrowed my account to the Bessarabian portions of Moldova. Contemporary Moldova, and Bessarabia with it, shares in the social history of Romania, Russia and the Soviet Union. The political

dimensions of this history are relatively well-documented (e.g. Clark 1927, Dima 1982, Dobrinescu 1996, King 2000), but little attention has been given to the history of social and economic conditions under either Romanian or Russian rule. The most accessible information about Bessarabia’s social and economic conditions from the mid-19th century until the end of the Soviet period appears only in comparison with other regions (e.g. Hitchins 1994, McAuley 1979) or in wartime assessments of the region’s prospects for integration within the Romanian state or, correspondingly, of the prevalence of Russian and Soviet irredentism (e.g. Kaba 1919, de Martonne 1919). Although detailed treatments of economic and social history are lacking, the picture that emerges is one of both regional and local level diversity among the peasantry.

When it was initially incorporated into the Russian Empire in 1812, Bessarabia’s peasantry was largely free. Unlike in Russia, landless peasants in Bessarabia were personally free and could move at will. In addition to villages that were composed of peasants who leased land from monasteries or landlords, two other types of villages (*răzeși* and *mazili*) had been established during the Ottoman period when Bessarabia was still part of the principality of Moldova, which eventually became a foundational part of Romania in 1859. In *răzeși* villages, the peasants owned land, but paid no tax; they were obliged only to perform military service. The *mazili* were yet more privileged; they had received land as compensation for previous military service and had been released from service to the state (see Hitchins 1994, 241). Under Russian rule, bonded serfs also appeared in Bessarabia until their emancipation in 1861, while land-grants to foreign colonists in southern Bessarabia expanded the types of free peasants.

At the turn of the 20th century, successive reforms in Romania and Russia meant that both countries had ceased to legally recognize distinct estates in rural areas. The various types of peasants that had once ex-

isted were combined into a singular “peasantry”, and early sociologists and rural economists joined agronomists in attempting to define social differentiations in rural areas. When Bessarabia returned to Romanian rule during the interwar period, studies revealed several levels of differentiation between peasant households based on their ownership of land, animals, tools, patterns of hiring workers and ability to meet their own needs from working their own land (see Hitchins 1994, 339-40). Such studies, in particular, assessed the correlation between the size of landholdings and self-sufficiency in an effort to identify the prevalence of abject poverty along with patterns of social stratification and stability.

The results of early sociological and economic research in Bessarabia revealed a profound disjuncture between the region’s productive capacity and the population’s poverty. John Kaba’s report on the state of agriculture in Bessarabia in the first year of re-unification with Romania noted that between 60-80% of the land was suitable for agriculture, but the rich soils were under-fertilized (and only by manure) and worked with excessively primitive tools (1919, 15-17). Kaba attributed lower than normal crop yields during the war to the ravages of war itself; the Bolsheviks, he noted, had destroyed the more advanced machinery of large land owners. But he also found that land reforms undertaken in 1918 by the Romanian government had little impact on the structure of ownership and were “very unsatisfactory” (22). Budget studies conducted in the 1930s would conclude that the majority of peasant households across Romania (including Bessarabia) could not supply their own basic food on holdings that averaged fewer than three hectares (Hitchins 1994, 341). After the 1918 reforms, some 42% of Bessarabia’s peasant families had less than one-half hectare and, therefore, almost certainly could not aspire to self-provision. It is these landless and nearly landless peasants who aroused Kaba’s concern because they had evidently sold their new land holdings or their numbers were increasing through

other processes (1919, 22); either way, poverty connected to landlessness had possibly been worsened by reform. Earlier reforms taken during Russian rule seem to have maintained a social structure between 1905-1918 in which more than one-third of families fell within the range of self-provisioning (later documented at 3-10 hectares), approximately one-quarter could produce a surplus for local sale or export and fewer than 7% of the families could be considered large landowners with more than 50 hectares of land. Moreover, the 1918 reforms also aimed at reducing the holdings of the few landholders to fewer than 100 hectares through state purchase and limited the purchase of new land to 20 hectares (Kaba 1919, 23).

Yet land reform alone was not enough to produce a prosperous peasantry. By the 1930s, even households with the 3-10 hectares necessary to produce adequate food found that the costs of doing so outstripped the value of production (Hitchins 1994, 341). The response of individual households to the dilemmas of land ownership varied and certainly included efforts to send some members to engage in various forms of wage labor. Yet, as Chayanov (1966) had documented across Russia during the later imperial period, peasants in Bessarabia and elsewhere under Romanian rule also engaged heavily in “self-exploitation” by limiting their consumption of food and being satisfied with inadequate clothing and substandard housing. As a result, they suffered from preventable diseases and childhood mortality at extremely high rates. By most measurements, peasants in interwar Romania - Bessarabia included - were among Europe’s poorest. The social differentiations observed within peasant communities were economically-coded, but almost all peasants appeared disenfranchised by objective criteria.

The abject poverty documented in Bessarabia during the interwar period was proclaimed to have been overcome in Soviet Moldova. Economically-based differentiations were initially leveled through deportations and collectivization. Soviet rule also



officially reduced the complexity of pre-war social categories to three: workers, intellectuals and peasants. By the Brezhnev period, the republic had gained the reputation of being “a little piece of heaven” renowned for its abundant production of fruits, vegetables and wine. In comparative terms, Moldova remained one of the poorer republics of the Soviet Union and, certainly, the poorest among the European republics (McAuley 1979). But Moldova’s population also benefitted from Soviet policies that did not determine poverty lines, but rather established “normal” levels of consumption (McAuley 1979).

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### **Land Reform, Poverty and Hunger: New Sources of Differentiation**

In the post-Soviet period, the newly independent Republic of Moldova undertook de-collectivization and the privatization of land as part of the broader political processes of de-Sovietization. Land reform occurred later than in neighboring Romania and garnered far less political and scholarly attention. The architects of land reform in Moldova did not champion private ownership or restitution over concern for actual economic repercussion. Rather, they anticipated the possibility that privatization would rapidly produce social inequality and sought to avoid such an occurrence. Current legislation continues to promote and protect small land-holders and household agricultural activity against large land owners and commercialization. Most of the relevant legislation is specifically related to land ownership, but it is worth noting that social benefits are also scaled to promote household agricultural activity: those who own land are not eligible for unemployment benefits even if they have no other sources of income.

Legislation facilitating de-collectivization was passed in 1991 and 1992, but most redistribution took place during the National Land Program of 1998-2000 (Gorton and White 2003, Csaki and Lerman 2001). All individuals who were registered as working for

or pensioned from collective farms (including in the services, such as the kindergartens) in 1992, received a full share of land that included village-specific quantities of arable land, orchard and vineyard. More complex formulas were applied for distributing land to state employees (e.g. teachers, administrators, doctors) that took the land holdings of their immediate family members into consideration. In effect, the distribution of land provided nearly all village households with members born before 1976 with the means of provisioning their own food. The equal size and type of shares was intended to preserve social equality whether the food and wine produced on the plots was consumed by the producers themselves or sold on the market. Other legislation introduced throughout the 1990s and 2000s restricted land sales to prevent foreign sales or the consolidation of large tracts by commercial owners (Lerman and Cimpoieş 2006).

Such equal distribution of land, however, hampered efficient farming on two fronts. First, individual owners often complained that their land was distributed in multiple parcels, making it difficult to farm individually. Second, “leaders” of the agricultural cooperatives which rent arable land from villagers complained that the large fields suitable for mechanized farming of grain formed through such rentals were still pocketed by parcels that had not been rented to them. By the late 2000s, the Ministry of Agriculture had been charged with re-organizing the distribution of land in select areas to encourage more efficient agricultural production (Guțu, Gorgan and Guțu 2009). Great care was being taken, however, to ensure that landowners were satisfied with the new allocations.

The result of these reforms on social differentiation in rural areas is unclear. From the perspective of poverty statistics, rural areas have become universally and deeply impoverished in the post-Soviet period. National statistics have improved greatly since 1999-2001 when some 90% of Moldova’s entire population fell below the poverty line



(Laur 2005). Since 2004, individuals with regular employment generally cross the poverty threshold; but, in rural areas, few individuals have such employment. Even in 2010, employed individuals in rural areas rarely achieved the income-levels necessary to bring a household across the poverty line (National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) 2011).

High-rates of labor migration abroad might seem to suggest (as does the international media) that Moldova's peasants are on the brink of starvation, but socio-economic survey data seem to indicate that the majority of labor-migrants belong to the "middle classes" (Goerlich and Luecke 2011; cf Baumann, Malcoci, Paglietti 2009). Although migrants self-report that their migration was "necessary", it does not seem to have been a choice of desperation, but rather one economic strategy among others intentionally selected to maintain or improve existing standards of living. Similarly, in my own research, I have repeatedly encountered assertions that national and international reports of poverty misrepresent the state of affairs in the countryside: rural areas are poor, indeed, for lack of employment and access to cash income, but no one is "dying of hunger". The plausibility of this assertion is borne out in the results of my survey research on household self-sufficiency in the village of Răscăieți in southeastern Moldova during 2009-2010 (Cash forthcoming a) and the more extensive calculations of agricultural economist Martin Petrick (2000).

Petrick calculated that it is possible for a household with an average land share to produce most of its own food and a surplus that can be sold (2000). In market terms, comparing the "price" of labor and other inputs against the "value" of total production, agriculture is not rentable. Yet Petrick found that households that undertook agriculture with a view to sustaining themselves succeeded in doing so; the market costs did not actually make it impossible for them to farm successfully. How they succeeded, however, was a question that could not be answered by considering only the

economics of agriculture; it would have required a broader analytic scope. My ethnographic research produced similar conclusions to those of Petrick; even households in a village with substantially smaller holdings than the national average could successfully self-provision. But, by 2009-2010, while most households engaged in some gardening, few households actually attempted to achieve full self-sufficiency in food.

Instead, most households assume that it is not possible to survive without cash income and actively seek ways to acquire cash that do not involve the sale of agricultural produce. As for their land, most households rent their parcels of arable land to village "cooperatives". These cooperatives, generally considered to be smaller versions of the former collective farms, are run by a single individual (i.e. lider) who hires a small staff of accountants, specialists and workers to cultivate wheat and sunflowers. In return for their land, landholders receive a government-set payment in cash or kind, regardless of the cooperative's actual profits. Almost all cooperatives pay landholders in kind, which means that villagers are guaranteed a fixed quantity of wheat and oil without having to work their land. For most households, these payments in wheat are enough to supply their annual bread intake (Cash forthcoming a). With their remaining land parcels (i.e. vineyard, orchard and home garden), most households invest enough labor to produce their annual supply of wine and meat, but they are less uniform in their dedication and capacity to produce and preserve adequate fruits, vegetables or dairy products. In general, villagers have allowed vineyards and orchards to become overgrown when there are no additional possibilities of selling surplus fruit or grapes to bulk buyers. Interestingly, the households that do attempt self-provisioning do not rent all of their arable land to the cooperative, but retain all or some of it for additional vegetable production. Aside from these generalizations, household strategies regarding land acquisition and use are highly variable.

Re-opening the “agrarian question” in post-Soviet Moldova thus promises to present some interesting findings. In its original and strictest version, the “agrarian question” was concerned with understanding how class dynamics in the countryside would affect political development. More broadly, the “agrarian question” was asked with a view to creating legal and economic structures that would stave off rural discontent, improve agricultural productivity and improve peasant well-being in various combinations. The “agrarian question” has, thus, normally been one concerning the potentially negative and disruptive effects of increasing socio-economic differentiation in the countryside, while “answers” sought to expand or restore equality.

In historical perspective, post-Soviet Moldova might well be seen as having produced a level playing field for peasants engaged in household agricultural production. Moldova’s rural population is now relatively homogenous in terms of land ownership. Every household is now a “peasant” household with just enough land to ensure survival, and the state protects them against a variety of forms of “capitalist” exploitation. Those who are determined to survive from small plots of land succeed and even produce a surplus. The successive reforms undertaken by multiple states since the mid-1800s have now succeeded in guaranteeing Moldova’s population with “subsistence” (see Micu, this volume). But subsistence may not be all that villagers want. Villagers commonly complain about the lack of markets: for land, produce or agricultural products. Without such outlets, there seems little motivation either to work one’s land productively (even for one’s own self-sufficiency), or to abandon it entirely by selling it. After a decade of de-collectivization, poverty is widespread in rural areas, but few households are really “starving”; equally, few are truly wealthy; almost all are scrambling to increase their cash income from non-agricultural sources; and investment in expanding agricultural activity is one of the

few identifiable keys to improving a household’s overall well-being<sup>2</sup>.

Under such conditions, however, continued focus on the “agrarian question” is necessary. Moldova’s peasantry is not (yet) satisfied. They demand political rather than market solutions. And individual households are engaged in complex economic decision-making that has so far baffled the attempts of social scientists and policymakers to fully grasp, record or systematize. Once again the question of class dynamics in the countryside seems relevant, but somewhat changed. Now, the phrasing with respect to Moldova should be: how will patterns of social differentiation and dissent emerge or fail to emerge under formal structures that apparently privilege equality?



### **Moral Economy: Differentiation and Dissent**

In the final section of this paper, I do not answer the question of emerging differentiation and dissent directly. Many of the studies already conducted on the post-socialist transformations of rural areas have identified local, national and international factors that affect emerging patterns of differentiation along both class and ethnic lines. In his contribution to this volume, Andrew Cartwright reviews the initial discussions of privatization and restitutions, markets and the influence of pre-socialist social organization on the early post-socialist period. In comparison to the indistinct patterns of differentiation produced in the 1990s, since the 2000s, labor migration has produced the most visible and tangible forms of social differentiation. Not only does labor migration provide substantial income to individual households, but the differential access to labor markets experienced by national and sub-national groups (e.g. to EU and non-EU markets, or through preferential treatment of some minorities in kin-state scenarios) accelerates the processes of socio-economic differentiation (e.g. Anghel 2013; Stahl and

2) On the significance of investment in agriculture, see the report by Baumann, Malcoci, Paglietti (2009). Johannes Stahl (2010) has also produced a thorough study of differentiation between villages in post-socialist Albania that identifies income from migrant labor (but less so remittances) as essential to the short-term improvement of household and village well-being, as well as longer-term investment in agricultural productivity.

Sikor 2009). Thus, the different trajectories of labor migration should be expected to impact Moldova as well, and further study is certainly merited.

Instead, I turn to the problem of moral economy. The reasons for this are two-fold. First, because – so far – social differentiation in post-socialist Moldova has proved difficult to identify. As noted above, this may be a weakness in the methodologies that have been applied. But it is also, as I suggest below, the result of persistent leveling-strategies within rural communities that involve both the denial of difference and the redistribution of resources. The second reason is that even when the processes of differentiation are well-documented, they are not necessarily explained. What, after all, do peasants “want”: equality or differentiation? Or some of each, with certain boundaries and qualifications? Also, to what extent is the moral economy temporally specific and subject to change? What will cause the balance between the desirable or acceptable forms of equality and differentiation to shift?

As E.P. Thompson illustrated at length in *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), collective ideas of fairness and justice regulate the behavior of individuals and groups in matters pertaining to the economy. The moral economy of local communities is thus implicated in both the acceptance and contestation of new economic models or practices. In his own work, Thompson documented England’s slow and highly contested transition to market capitalism over a period of nearly 200 years. In the countryside of the 1700s, for example, all social classes held as immoral “any unfair method of forcing up the price of provisions by profiteering upon the necessities of the people (1963, 63).” Thus, well into the 1800s, widespread rioting was the dominant social response to the efforts of early capitalists to produce bread more cheaply by applying “market principles” to the purchase of grain, milling standards and sale of flour and bread. Initially, the law also supported the rioters, as did social and political elites.

The history of economic transition was thus one of gradual transformation, on multiple fronts, of the moral strictures on economic behavior in which social groups were also re-formed and re-distinguished in relation to each other, sometimes in wholly new configurations such as the “working class”.

In other words, one way to pursue the “agrarian question” in post-Soviet Moldova is to reconfigure it as a broader question about the transformation of the rural moral economy. Following Thompson’s lead, we might well expect that older “moral economies” continue to influence collective understandings of fairness, justness and proper conduct in the economic sphere, even as the country re-encounters capitalism. Such understandings also regulate the recognition, coding and display of social differentiation and the appearance and form of dissent. Moral economies operate, as Thompson so clearly illustrates (and Micu too, this volume), at the interface between law and collective practice. And we should expect that emergent forms of social differentiation and dissent are not merely mechanical responses to recent structural change, but linked to older social models and economies. To this end, I provide a few details collected in the course of ethnographic fieldwork:

During my fieldwork in Moldova since the early 2000s, I have found that the categories of “peasants” introduced by different states are still present in the social imagination. In central and northern areas of the country, for example, the old categories of *răzeși* and *mazili* are still widely invoked to distinguish the character of villages and their neighborhoods and to comment on political behavior. In the early 2000s, some urban intellectuals expected to see these villages become more entrepreneurial than others, but the evidence supporting such conclusions remains anecdotal (see Cash 2011, 141). Across the country, the Soviet classification into three social types (peasants, intellectuals and workers) is the most prominent in public discourse and effectively silences further discussion of socio-

economic differences.

In the southeast, during extended fieldwork in 2009-2010, I found that what might have been a class discourse was conducted in other terms. Even the use of “peasant” was avoided as much as possible, and families were distinguished on the basis of their members’ level of education or profession as “oameni simpli” (simple people) or “intelectuali” (i.e. teachers and administrators). Differences in wealth were discussed in absolute terms as “having” or “not having”, but even households that actually had very little were sometimes described as “having” because they were generous. Other adjectives used to distinguish individuals and their families were “muncitor” (hard-working) or “leneș” (lazy). Households might be nevoiți (needy), but still have the moral qualities associated with being gospodari; and they might be mai săraci (poorer) or mai bogați (richer), without differences in their moral evaluation. Normally, people avow that “noi nu suntem oameni bogați” (we are not rich people) and disparage individuals and families that think they are “mai sus” (above) others.

In this moral economy, part Soviet and part pre-Soviet, tendencies towards accumulation and differentiation are tempered by the superior morality ascribed to generosity and hospitality. Hard work, industry and good household management are idealized, but they must be displayed through acts of generosity. Those who “have” must “give” to avoid being labeled stingy and being threatened with social or supernatural punishment. In turn, the objective “poverty” of those who have little, but give generously, is normally overlooked in their social evaluation. At the level of ethnographic analysis, this dynamic of demonstrating sufficiency through generosity can result in the widespread distribution of bread and other basic necessities; but it also contributes to each household’s quest to be generous beyond its means. While such data is difficult to document through standard socio-economic questionnaires, it is more evi-

dent through the analysis of various ritual activities (e.g. Cash 2013). Demonstrating sufficiency through generosity perpetuates both collective wealth and collective poverty; and it may well keep villages relatively poor as large surpluses of wealth are invested in apartments or other urban holdings.

One particularly good example of rural moral economy can be seen in the relations of households that pay day-laborers with wine. As I have written elsewhere (Cash forthcoming b), this arrangement causes considerable discussion and concern among the households that hire day-laborers. In some respects, the relationship is one of straightforward exploitation. Households that hire day laborers are objectively among the better-off in a village: by hiring additional labor they are able to self-provision at higher levels and are, thus, among those who purchase less of the food they consume; in fact, they have a surplus of wine (and usually other food) which enables them to hire additional workers. In contrast, those who are willing to “work for wine” are among the most socially marginal and least well-off villagers: they often have little or no land and have rented what they do have to the cooperative; moreover, they have not sought other sources of cash income; and at least one member of the household is usually on the brink of alcoholism – i.e. in local terms, regularly incapacitated for work by the consumption of alcohol. By paying near-alcoholics in wine, some households benefit from nearly free labor and perpetuate their workers’ dependency on them. Not only do the hiring households exploit alcohol dependency, but they also contribute to foreclosing their workers’ opportunities to pursue other forms of livelihood: one man once complained to me that he was so busy helping others to prepare their gardens that he did not have the time to prepare his own. Yet the relationship is not so simple. The “exploiting” households point out that their workers demand wine as payment, even when they are offered something else; and that they also feed the workers who would otherwise not have food to eat. The rela-



tionship between the households is also one between “neighbors”. The people involved know each other well; personal histories and personalities are considered as well as economic needs (i.e. that the “workers” have often long been “weak” individuals who were unable to establish themselves independently); and workers often enough approach their “employers” for food, assistance and advice.

Under the conditions of a model capitalism, households might be concerned to keep their workers just alive enough to continue working. But, in rural Moldova, households that pay workers in wine feel a moral pressure to moderate their workers’ consumption of wine. Similarly, they might exploit their workers’ poverty further by charging them (in cash or with labor due) for the bread or other food they sometimes seek. But they do not; rather, they give bread freely, unaccounted and quickly “forgotten”, in accord – they say - with popular Orthodox customs. Similarly, religiously-infused ideas of showing honor and mutual respect through shared wine-drinking symbolically inverts the relationship at every meal partaken during a work-day. By serving workers wine, the better-off households become indebted; the sacrifice of labor can never be fully re-paid. For this reason alone, households that pay workers in wine are made uncomfortable by the relationship and try to periodically introduce other elements that modify the dynamics of dependency.

As in Thompson’s extended study of early modern England, the moral economy of present-day rural Moldova contains ideas and values drawn from a variety of institutions. The legal and ideological frameworks of prior states, as well as the Orthodox Church, are invoked in contemporary economic relations. What is perhaps most interesting is that the frameworks that supported socio-economic differentiation through the end of the 19th century seem to have been thoroughly abandoned and replaced instead with an ethos of shared wealth and shared poverty that is supported by the new legal

structure. Even those who seek social differentiation within this shared poverty cannot be certain of finding it (Baumann, Malcoci, Paglietti 2009).

~~БРАКОКІТ~~

### **Conclusion: Class and Status in the Countryside**

In light of the old “agrarian question”, what conclusions can be drawn about rural society in contemporary Moldova? Is it, as it professes to be, a moral community in which differences in material status and personal capacity are habitually leveled and equalized through social practices that function so smoothly as to be unseen and unnoticed? Or do the ideologies of self-sufficiency and equality combine with moral evaluations of people to mystify deep social inequalities? Did the land reforms of the past 150 years, and especially Soviet collectivization, definitively interrupt earlier desires for and patterns of social differentiation? Is the peasantry politically conservative, inert, or revolutionary? As these questions indicate, the “agrarian question” has not been resolved everywhere. Moreover, as the last section of this piece documents, the “agrarian question” cannot be answered only by marshalling economic and social data; such data must also be complemented by attention to the moral economy which regulates economic behavior and patterns of social differentiation.

In the introduction to this volume, the editors ask whether – in fact – there is something unique to the countryside that makes the “agrarian question” especially relevant to more general theoretical discussions? The ethnographic and historic specificity of each case presented in this volume would tend to work against such a conclusion. And yet, perhaps attention to moral economies would also help to draw out the theoretical contributions still to be made by the “agrarian question”. In Moldova, as in many other places, one further component of the moral economy is to be found in the widespread rural and urban assertion that “villages” are



particularly moral spaces. The morality and conservatism of the “village” is often contrasted with the immorality of modern urban life, and villages are looked to as models for their (traditional) ways of awarding status and respect. In this construct, villagers and the state share the task of configuring rural social relations as equitable and displacing inequalities to urban areas.

Yet in this effort, we must be careful not to romanticize the moral economies of rural areas. As Scott (1976) long ago pointed

out, the moral economies of peasants are rarely as egalitarian as they might seem; social arrangements are organized to ensure that villagers do not starve, and the result of ensuring the survival of the poorest may be considerable social leveling of those with access to greater resources. In this respect, moral economies can and do change with new social, economic and political opportunities, and with them – forms of social differentiation.

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