

MARTOR



Title: "Social Structure and Land Property in Romanian Villages (1919-1989)"

Author: Cornel Micu

How to cite this article: Micu, Cornel. 2014. "Social Structure and Land Property in Romanian Villages (1919-1989)". *Martor* 19: 133-148.

Published by: *Editura MARTOR* (MARTOR Publishing House), *Muzeul Țăranului Român* (The Museum of the Romanian Peasant)

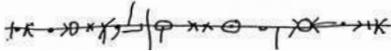
URL: <http://martor.muzeultaranuluiroman.ro/archive/martor-19-2014/>

Martor (The Museum of the Romanian Peasant Anthropology Review) is a peer-reviewed academic journal established in 1996, with a focus on cultural and visual anthropology, ethnology, museum studies and the dialogue among these disciplines. *Martor* review is published by the Museum of the Romanian Peasant. Its aim is to provide, as widely as possible, a rich content at the highest academic and editorial standards for scientific, educational and (in)formational goals. Any use aside from these purposes and without mentioning the source of the article(s) is prohibited and will be considered an infringement of copyright.

Martor (Revue d'Anthropologie du Musée du Paysan Roumain) est un journal académique en système *peer-review* fondé en 1996, qui se concentre sur l'anthropologie visuelle et culturelle, l'ethnologie, la muséologie et sur le dialogue entre ces disciplines. La revue *Martor* est publiée par le Musée du Paysan Roumain. Son aspiration est de généraliser l'accès vers un riche contenu au plus haut niveau du point de vue académique et éditorial pour des objectifs scientifiques, éducatifs et informationnels. Toute utilisation au-delà de ces buts et sans mentionner la source des articles est interdite et sera considérée une violation des droits de l'auteur.

Martor is indexed by EBSCO and CEEOL.

Social Structure and Land Property in Romanian Villages (1919-1989)



Cornel Micu

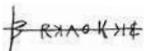
Lecturer at the Faculty of Letters, University of Bucharest, Romania

ABSTRACT

The article compares two different cultural meanings of land property: the modern one, developed in Western societies in the context of modernization, and the traditional one, which still prevails to some extent in Romanian villages. I argue that in the traditional environment of Romanian villages, land was rather the collective property of groups (mostly or families), regarded less as merchandise to be sold or bought and more as a survival mean.

KEYWORDS

Land property, modernization, collective property, merchandise, survival mean.



Introduction

The collapse of socialist regimes led to a resurgence of the concept of “private property”, considered one of the key ideological elements of the newly-emerged democracies. Even the “reformist” regimes, such as the Romanian one, which strived in the first years to create a “human socialism”, as defined by Ion Iliescu, the president at the time, recognized the need for private property and used different strategies, from reconstruction of property rights to privatization, in order to promote its development.

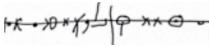
This article deals with a specific form of property, namely land property, and the social and economic factors that shaped the attitude of Romanian villagers toward land. I argue that the concept of “property”, as it was introduced in Romanian legislation during the 19th century, was appropriated for socio-economic structures developed following the modernization process in Western Europe. It was less compatible with the traditional social and economic relations specific to the Romanian rural area, so it had little practical

relevance for the peasants.

Throughout the article I will focus more on the social and economic structures specific to the Romanian rural area during the interwar and communist period, in an attempt to show that the cultural definition of land property reflected by field interviews was closely connected to the realities of the peasants’ daily life. To this purpose, I will make use of interviews collected in the summers of 2006 and 2007 in Bordei Verde commune, situated in the South-Eastern part of Romania, statistical data and documents from the local archives.

The main hypothesis which I will try to validate throughout this article is that, in the case of the Romanian rural area, land is culturally defined more as “means of subsistence” and “social connector” rather than as an economic asset or means of production. To this effect, I have structured the article in several parts: the introduction of the main used concepts in the theoretical section, a concise description of historical specificities of national policy toward agriculture in Romania, a short presentation of the studied area and, in the last two sections, the role land played in Bordei Verde during the in-

terwar period and to which extent this role really changed following the collectivization of agriculture.



Theoretical background

In this article I will make use of two main theoretical concepts. The first one is the distinction between peasants and farmers as social and economic categories. They are used in this article based on the distinction drawn by Eric Wolf, according to which the peasants represent the social category practicing mainly subsistence agriculture, with most of the outcomes consumed inside the households, hence the term “subsistence”. In contrast, most of the production obtained on a farm is sold on the market and the farmer actively takes part in the economic exchanges at the social level (Wolf 1998[1965], 2-4). This distinction should be regarded as an ideal type in the Weberian sense, since even the peasants may sell some of their products on the market and the farmers may even consume some of them. Nevertheless, the pattern of production is oriented toward subsistence in the first case and toward market in the latter.

The terms are also connected to an evolutionary perspective, with the market agriculture being associated with modern societies and the subsistence one with traditional ones. Indeed, the high degree of urbanization in contemporary societies and the substantial growth of population require a growth of hectare yield and, subsequently, an investment of capital difficult to obtain by subsistence households. Following this evolutionary aspect, one can see changes in the political status of the two categories, with the peasants being most often a subordinated group, subject to taxation from other social categories in order to meet the nutritional needs of a given society. In contrast, since they are engaged in exchanging the products on the markets, farmers enjoy a higher status, equal with the other social and economic categories, or, given the sensitive nature of the food market, even better be-

cause of the support programs developed by modern states. On the same line of thought, which tends to value more the farmers as a modern socio-economic category, the introduction to this volume by Ștefan Dorondel / Stelu Șerban presents the attempts of the newly-established South-Eastern European states to transform traditional peasants into “farmers” and “citizens”.

Such a distinction is closely connected with the wider definition of “property” in anthropological literature, where “property in the most general sense concerns the ways in which the relations between society’s members with respect to valuables are given form and significance” (von Benda-Beckmann and von Benda-Beckmann 2006, 14). Such relations are highly dependent on the social and economic context in which they are constructed and, hence, under the wider term of “property” one may find different cultural constructs, dependent on the social and economic structure of a given society. Among these constructs, the most known is native to Western Europe which has spread relatively recently to the rest of the world: “a piece of native theory implicit in Western property concepts: it emphasizes <rights> or entitlements and sees the subject of property relations as inherently right-bearing; hence the prevailing language of property rights. A final pseudo-theoretical element is that if property involves persons, things and their relations – the standard anthropological conception – then those persons and things are clearly bound, have integrity and are easily recognizable as separate kinds of entities” (Verdery and Humphrey 2004, 5).

This understanding of “property”, which I will describe through the attribute “modern” because it is connected to the development of the modern world, was directly connected with the emergence of capitalism, where the transfer of goods (including land) gained importance, and led to a redefinition of the way in which social relations around goods were constructed (Wolf 2001[1983], 259, 261-262). It was associated with the need to register the right of property through



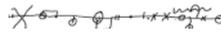
deeds in order to prove ownership in the eventuality of transactions, and the tendency to personalize the rights, in order to ensure that the eventual selling negotiations took place between as few persons as possible (Verdery and Humphrey, 2004, 2-5).

Yet, in the case of Romania, both meanings associated to land, as “means of subsistence” and “social connector“, are hardly compatible with the Western perception of property since it makes it very difficult to really differentiate between things and persons as separate entities. Therefore, the general conceptual framework of this article would be a neo-Marxist one, according to which the economic relations constructed around culturally defined objects (in this particular case land), deeply influence the meanings granted to them. The perspective that I propose is that of cultural materialism promoted by American anthropologist Marvin Harris, for whom particularly relevant for understanding culture are the relations of society with the environment (the etic aspect of culture), which Harris defines as “cultural infrastructure”, compromising the modes of production and reproduction. They are the foundation of social structure, consisting of domestic and political economies of a society, on top of which one can find the superstructure, represented by emic behavioural and mental aspects of culture (Harris 1979, 46-54).

Both cultural materialism and the distinction between peasants and farmers based on their dominant production mode show that, in order to realize what the peasants understood as “land property”, it would be a good idea to take a closer look at the role that land played in traditional peasant communities. This may seem strange, since the definitions of property are to be found predominantly in the collections of legal texts mostly published by the state, sources which are easier to come by than the local social relations in the village. Nevertheless, following anthropologists such as Erich Wolf or John W. Cole, I argue that the peasantry has its own history, which does not necessarily overlap with the wider, canonical national history (see Ștefan Do-

rondel and Stelu Șerban in the introduction to his volume). Instead, due to the fact that they are not entirely integrated into the modern capitalist economy, the peasants’ history is rather locally determined, integrated into a system of dependence on the local land owners or political elites.

One may argue that the best way of finding out the meaning of land property for the peasants would be just to go out and ask them, an enterprise which I undertook during two stages of field work in the summers of 2006 and 2007. Nevertheless, the importance of national and local history for anthropological studies is hard to deny, as peasant communities have their own history and are influenced to various degrees and ways by the national history (Șerban and Dorondel 2004, 46-50). Furthermore, a historical perspective may bring insights into the process of transformation of culture throughout the time under the impact of global and local factors. It would explain why, despite the expansion of modern capitalist system throughout the world, the peasants continue to exist as a social and economic group closer to the traditional societies.



State attempts to transform rural areas during the 20th century

In the areas which entered into the capitalistic sphere of influence later on, the Western concept of property replaced the native or traditional concepts due to its association with important topics in modern political thought: civil government, citizenship, etc. A good example in this regard is the study of Kaiti Aroni-Tsichli in this volume, according to which the purpose of the 19th century agrarian reforms in Greece was to create a nation of small owners who would support the power of the newly-established monarchy. In the case of Romania, the concept of “property” gained use at the beginning of the 19th century. It started to be applied to the economic and social relations constructed around land, in the first constitutional texts,



namely the “Organic Regulations” in 1831-1832, although only in reference to the land estates owned by the nobility (boyars); it was first applied to the peasants through the agrarian reform law in 1864 (Müller 2010, 209-211). Although an important part of the political discourse during the last two centuries, it overlapped social realities that were not entirely compatible with it. This was noticeable even at the level of legal doctrines, which made a distinction between “small” and “large” property, reflected by interwar legislation regarding the sale of “small” property gained through the agrarian reforms and the distinction between “estate owners” and “peasants” applied by the communist regime (Micu 2012, 81-82 and 84-85).

This dual form of land property partially reflected the traditional political differentiation between “boyars” and “peasants”, which were social categories constructed based on their access to land usage. Yet, its persistence was not associated only with a traditionalist, conservative perspective regarding social relations, but also with the modern formula of “Staatsnation”, widespread in Europe in the 19th century. In this regard, the study of Christian Giordano in this volume emphasizes the role of agrarian reforms as instruments of territorial policies which pursued the strengthening of national cohesion and unity of the new states that emerged in South-Eastern Europe during the 19th century.

Nevertheless, if state land was associated with social and national policies, for the peasants it was in the first place the way of ensuring their basic subsistence needs. A hint about the pragmatic nature of intra-family relationships with respect to land is shown in the study of Andrew Cartwright in this volume. The key role land plays in ensuring basic subsistence means is particular to traditional societies with reduced social mobility and low urbanization rates (Roberts 1951, 40-47; Mitrany 1968, 415). With most of the population living in the rural area and land by definition limited, a strong competition for it as the sole means of survival results. In the particular case of Romania, the first half

of the 20th century was characterized by an overall growth of the rural population and a slow pace of urbanization. The economic model promoted before the great economic depression (1929-1933) focused on economic protectionism, which slowed the rate of industrialization and creation of new jobs in the cities (Murgescu 2010, 250-260). The great economic depression led to the contraction of the industrial sector which further amplified the problem during the ‘30s.

Meanwhile, the agrarian policy focused on the development of subsistence households, in an attempt to calm the social unrest in the countryside (Roberts 1951, 31). Both agrarian reforms implemented during the first half of the 20th century distributed small plots of land, 2.3 hectares in 1921 and 1.3 in 1945 (Axenciuc 2000, 100-103), in order to be enough for everybody, with little concern regarding the economic efficiency of the newly-created households. In the long run, as shown by Jennifer Cash’s study in this volume, the plots were too small in order to eradicate the poverty in the villages. The development policy during the first half of the 20th century encouraged the peasants to regard land as a “survival mean” and even the political discourse of the period emphasized the role of subsistence households for the development of Romanian agriculture (Madgearu 1999[1936], 75-85). Besides, the slow industrial development and low urbanization rate meant that there was a very limited internal market for agricultural products, while the taxation of grain exports and high prices of agricultural implements determined the average household to specialize in subsistence production (Mitrany 1968, 434-440).

During the communist period the approach toward agricultural production was radically different, as the regime emphasized the importance of merging the land in larger units of production. By the mid-‘60s, most of the land in Romania was worked by two forms of enterprises: collective and state farms. The state farms were managed by state-appointed managers, financed by the Ministry of Agriculture and using exten-

sively mechanized technology. The collective farms consisted of associations of land owners, working the land together and sharing the harvest. A specific aspect was the fact that they granted a small plot of land to their members, in order for them to practice subsistence agriculture. The distinction between the two forms of enterprises was legally reflected by the distinction between two forms of property: "state" and "collective" property (Lipan, 1977).

The agricultural policy during the last three decades of the communist period was little researched by historians, who focused more on the process of collectivization (Dobrinu and Iordachi 2005; Iancu et al. 2000; Kligman and Verdery 2011; Roske et al. 2007). Nevertheless, some general trends of this period are supported by sources and / or field interviews: a growing state control over collective farms, the usage of state monopoly in order to drain value from the collective sector and use it for industrial development, the slowdown of internal rural to urban migration and a gradual worsening of living standards in the countryside (Micu 2012, 104, 213-215). Especially important for this article are the policies promoted during the '80s in order to preserve the working force in agriculture. They were deemed necessary because the slow rate of mechanization and the tendency of rural population to migrate toward cities or other economic sectors led to shortages of labour in agriculture (Shafir 1985, 95-104, 143).

The available statistical data support the idea that the decline of living conditions in the villages was actually a part of the national policy. This indicates that the communist regime regarded the rural population rather as peasants (a subordinated category) than as farmers (fully integrated citizens). Such a policy is reflected by two different sets of data: the proportion of income spent on food by the rural and urban population and the differences in rent paid to these categories.

The first one represents the proportion of income spent by peasants (members of the collective farms) and wage earners on

basic commodities such as food and drink (table 1). The data show they spent more of their income on basic commodities, which meant that generally they earned less than city workers. The variation between the two closest intervals, which indicates how the expenses for basic commodities varied on short term, proves the existence of a national policy deliberately disadvantaging the countryside. The villagers managed to partially close the gap with the urban area during the 1970s, as the expenses of basic commodities diminished in the former at a higher rate than in the latter. However, this tendency reversed during the 1970s, in an interval when the economic crisis experienced by the Romanian communist regime did not affect the general living standards. It closed once more between 1980 and 1985, most probably because the crisis firstly affected the more market integrated urban area, and widened again during the last years of the regime, due to the enactment of the new legislative measures to boost the agricultural production after 1982.

Table 1: Proportion of income spent on basic commodities (food and drink) for wage earners and peasants (INS 1990, 131)¹

	1960	1970	1980	1985	1989
Wage earners	53.0	48.9	45.6	50.1	51.1
Variation between the two closest intervals (%)		-7.74	-6.75	+9.86	+1.99
Peasants	74.4	65.8	63.7	66.9	69.9
Variation between the two closest intervals (%)		-11.56	-3.2	+5.02	+4.48

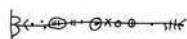
1) For the peasant category, the table includes also the products made in their own households. The variations between intervals were calculated by myself.

The second category of data concerns the rent paid during the communist regime in the rural area (table II). Rent is an important component of modern societies which rely on it in order to ensure material support for the elderly population. For the purpose of this article, it is important because a high enough rent would affect the perception of land as only means of survival and also the traditional practice of children taking care

2) In the sense that it affected an important part of the population.

of the parents in exchange of land. The rent system as monthly sums paid regularly to retired workers appeared in Western Europe at the end of 19th century and was generalized in the interwar period. In Romania a large scale² system of social insurance was developed during the communist regime. Nevertheless, table 2 shows that the rents paid to the members of the collective farms were substantially lower than the ones paid to the workers, which meant that rents played only a marginal role in the villagers' life.

Data is especially relevant if one takes into account the fact that both the rent and wage levels were established by the state, according to the principles of a planned economy. In fact, as I will show in the section dedicated to the specific case of Bordei Verde, this deliberate policy of regarding the inhabitants of villages as "inferior" played an important role in the preservation of the traditional cultural patterns, which valued land as a mean of survival.



Particularities of the studied area

Historically, most of Brăila county (including Bordei Verde commune), was directly administrated by the Ottoman Empire from the 16th century until 1829. This peculiarity affected the land distribution during the 19th century: due to unclear or inexistent property rights, great estates were distributed not to private owners, but to different autonomous establishments, such as "Eforia Spitalelor Civile", the foundation administrating the public hospital system in Romania. Therefore, at the beginning of the 20th century, estates with more than 100 hectares

represented 73.2 percent of the arable land and the ones up to 10 hectares 26.1, making Brăila the county with the highest ratio of great estates in the Old Kingdom (Axenciuc 2000, 126-127).

Another peculiarity of the area was the low population density in the first half of the 19th century. This facilitated the migration of Transylvanian shepherds into the region, a group which traditionally used the swamps around the Danube as seasonal grazing fields for their flocks. As a result, at the end of the century 67 percent of the inhabitants were emigrants from Transylvania or other regions of the Old Kingdom (Mihăilescu 1933, 89). A second wave of migration took place during the '30s, following the interwar agrarian reform. As the county still had a low population density, inhabitants from more populated nearby counties such as Buzău, where there was not enough land to grant to the whole entitled villagers, received land plots in Brăila.

Statistical data indicates that the state itself had little influence in the area before World War I: of the total rural population of 88,954, even the official information registered 2,192 persons without any citizenship and the literacy rate was of only 49% for men and 23% for women (Vasilescu 1906, 112). The mayor's office archive in Bordei contains no less than seven requests for identity documents coming from people whose birth had not been registered and needed a birth certificate in order to register their marriages (DJBAN/PBV 5/1926). All requests were filled in 1926, by people in their twenties, a fact which shows that at the beginning of the 20th century the Romanian administration had little information about the population

Table 2: Rent values for the urban area, the members of the collective farms and the individual households during the communist regime (INS 1990, 126-127)

Average monthly rent	1950	1960	1970	1980	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989
Urban area	–	576	755	1124	1473	1505	1524	1556	1665
The members of the collective farms	–	–	61	184	232	238	245	253	261
Individual households set by peasants	–	–	–	100	120	121	123	125	127

in the villages, let alone the land.

The fact that the land was concentrated in large estates meant that the state administration had in fact very little power to directly influence the villages as compared to great land owners. Therefore, the local elites consisted mostly of people who had worked with / for estate owners before World War I. Such is the case of Manta and Motoc families in Bordei Verde, whose members are mentioned as mayors no less than 13 times in the documents issued by the Mayor's Office in Bordei Verde during the interwar period. Yet, people from both families occupied key positions in the local administration even before the agrarian reform in 1921: Milea Manta held the office of mayor from 1913 (DJBAN/PBV 5/1926) to 1919 and Apostol Motoc in 1899 (DJBAN/PBV 5/1919, 12).

The land seems to have been more of a last resort to survive, a means to satisfy the basic need for food in a society that had fresh memories about famine, rather than a road to gain elite status. This perspective is reinforced by the fact that, during the 19th century, landownership was not guaranteed by the state because of the estate owners' power (Chirot 2002[1976], 203-207) and the lack of registration to prove the property.

During the communist period, Brăila county retained a strong agricultural importance. The collectivization was relatively swift, without noticeable incidents and was finished at the end of the '50s. Thereafter, the regime focused on the development of irrigation systems and embankment of the swamps around the Danube, in an attempt to increase land productivity and to gain more agricultural terrain. The exploitation of limited oil resources in the area diversified - to a certain extent - the possibilities of employment for the rural population, but the agriculture remained the most important economic sector.

Bordei Verde was established as a village in 1855 when 108 inhabitants were granted land by "Eforia Spitalelor Civile". In 1906 it had the status of commune or basic division of the Romanian administrative system, with

a total population of 1,873 souls that inhabited two villages, with a church and a school as main institutions (Vasilescu 1906, 157). Bordei Verde retained the status of commune between 1917 and 1989, although it faced several reorganizations. In 1989 it consisted of three villages: Bordei Verde, Constantin Gabrielescu (or Șcheaua) and Lișcoteanca.

During the '30s, a great number of colonists moved into the part of the village that is today still informally known as "Vintilești". The relations between the locals, or "cojani", as they defined themselves and the colonists or "munteni" were initially tense, leading sometimes to fights (Bănică n.y., 87; G.D. 2006). The communist party exploited this situation during the collectivization period by using the colonists as agents of the new regime, a policy which stressed even more the relation between the two communities. Harmony came slowly, due to two different processes. Firstly, there was the intermarriage between the two groups (N.D. 2007). Secondly, the collectivisation managed, not without problems, to bring people together in the collective farm. However, some distinctions were maintained during the communist period, at the beginning by creating two collective farms (one for *cojani* and one for *munteni*), which were not merged until the '60s, and then by maintaining different brigades of *cojani* and *munteni* which continued to work separately (M.F. 2006).

In Bordei Verde the collectivization took place without noticeable resistance (Bănică n.y., 122-123). Initially, two collective farms were established in the village, although some interviewees mentioned attempts to create a third one (I.J. 2007). The existence of more than a collective farm is also mentioned by a respondent from the Lișcoteanca village (R.N. 2007), so, most probably, during the '50s between three and five collective farms functioned in the commune. After the collectivization was officially declared concluded in 1962, the regime slowly merged some of the existing collective farms and strengthened its control over them through the establishment

of a National Union of Collective Farms. In 1989 only two collective farms existed: one for Bordei Verde and Constantin Gabrielescu villages and another one for Lișcoteanca.



Meanings of land during the interwar period in Bordei Verde

The traditionalism of the Romanian villages was expressed by the importance of personal relations in daily life. The villages preserved strong traditional aspects of social and economic relations, dominated by personal contacts that acted as a social net in time of crisis, and land was an important aspect of these, as it regulated relations between generations. Children inherited parents, which gave them identity and social status, but in turn they took care of the parents once the latter reached old age. Land, a material good in a society with little use for money, was a tangible commodity suitable to be passed on to the next generations. The modern concept of personal, clear-cut property relations, was developed in societies which offered other possibilities of living aside agriculture, such as jobs in the industrializing cities, or / and different social structures that took care of the poor. The development of asylums in Western Europe, noticed by Michael Foucault in *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, was an answer to the destruction of traditional social networks following the industrial revolution and reconfiguration of cultural attitudes toward property.

In contrast, sources in the local archive show that the community or state support in Bordei Verde was almost inexistent at the end of World War I. The “social” expenditures from the local budget were kept at a minimum: for example, in the fiscal year 1919-1920 only 300 lei were spent under the “public assistance” column, for the help of orphans, war cripples, widows and old persons. As compared to the total expenses of 14,242.75 lei the sum represents around 2.10 percent, much less than the total expenses

for the lighting and heating payments for the mayor’s office’s, which amounted to 500 lei (DJBAN/PBV 1/1919, 80-81).

In this context, when neither the community, nor the state could be relied on for help, the relationship between generations was based on splitting the land among the inheritors the moment they became adults through marriage. Therefore, the land was the most important asset when it came to marriage, as a way of ensuring some economic stability to the young married couple that had no other possibilities to make a living except for the land (M.Z. 2007). Besides, it provided also a form of social insurance for the parents, since the children were expected to take care of them later.

The economic value of land, as means of production and commercial asset was limited. Land provided the basic food needs for a family and was important in establishing social relations with other groups or families. In this regard, I would refer to the study of Jennifer Cash, who shows that in present Moldova most households still try to avoid selling agricultural products and seek other ways of obtaining cash. Nevertheless, land was not the main income source and the possession of a larger surface of land was not compulsory a sign of social power.

For the specific case of Bordei Verde, I consider the relation between “munteni” and “cojani” as relevant for the role of land in the social structure of the villages. At a first glance, one could consider that the conflicts that followed the arrival of colonists and their subsequent inferior position in the village fits a classical scenario of the poor immigrants facing the rejection of the richer locals. Yet, this was not the case as the surfaces of land belonging to the colonists and local were equal, in light of the 1921 agrarian reform. Indeed, through the 1921 agrarian reform, the state granted the peasants either whole plots of five hectares or “completion plots”.

According to the sources in the local archives, most of the peasants in Bordei Verde had, in 1921, less than five hectares of land

(see table 3). In interpreting the data, one should take into account the fact that the land was granted only to adult males. In most cases that meant either family heads or unmarried youngsters who were over 21 years old. The standard measure for the amplitude of the land-granting process is in this case the families and not the individuals. The data basically covers the whole population of the commune, as in 1919, according to the registers of the local budget, there were 1,349 inhabitants and 261 families in Bordei Verde village and 776 persons and 197 families in Constantin Gabrielescu village (DJBAN/PBV 1/1919, 34).

Table 3: Data regarding the land needed for land granting in Bordei Verde commune (1921) (DJBAN/PBV 1/1921, 40)

a) Bordei Verde village

Inhabitants	No.	Owned ha	Needed (Ha)
Up to 5 ha	46	60	170
Nothing	274	–	1370 (with the school plot)
Total	320		1540

b) Constantin Gabrielescu village

Inhabitants	No.	Owned ha	Needed (Ha)
Up to 5 ha	27	32	103
Nothing	144	–	720 (with the school plot)
Total	171		823

Of course, the numbers represent estimates proposed by the local mayor and shouldn't be considered entirely reliable. Most probably, at least some of the families worked more land than included in the official statistics, and hence, after the reform, ended by using more than five hectares. Yet, this situation is representative for a reality observed in other case studies: in order to gain usage of more land, one needed the social connexions and status, which shows that, in the end, land usage was determined by one's social capital and not the contrary (Verdery 2003, 213-216).

Therefore, the land was not the element

that ensured the dominant position of the "cojani", but rather the fact that they were better socially connected than the newly-arrived colonists. Actually, interviews with the descendants of colonists showed that in some cases entire closely related family groups left their villages and moved to the colonization area, in order to maximize their social capital (G.D. 2006).. The importance of social connections and the specific aspects of "rural moral economy" still persist, as shown Jennifer Cash's study in this volume.

A hint of the role played by social connexions in determining the amount of land one could have worked is provided by a report issued by the Mayor's Office in 1926 about one hectare of corn arbitrarily cultivated by an "unknown person" on the communal pasture (DJBAN/PBV 4/1926). Yet, Bordei Verde village is located in a steppe region and I find it difficult to accept that the villagers become aware of the corn field only after it had been sowed. Most probably, the "unknown person" was allowed to tile that parcel by the local elites, and his deed was "discovered" only after the mayor had been replaced (actually, the report was issued shortly after a new mayor took office).

This example shows that the access to land, and probably other factors of production, was determined by one's social connections and status. Therefore, despite the fact that every family owned certain parcels of land, their access to other parcels, which were either not registered or parts of the communal land, was not regulated through the usage of property rights. The interesting fact about the case quoted above is that the author of the deed was never discovered. As it is hard to believe that no one knew who tiled a part of the common pasture, it seems that the usage of communal land was not considered misbehaviour, as long as the mayor was the one deciding who should be entitled to use it. Such cases were not particular to Bordei Verde; Liviu Mantescu's study in this volume shows the existence of the same pattern of conflict between the traditional property regime and the newly

state-defined one in Vrancea region.

Nevertheless, the examples quoted above tell very little about the effects of the interwar agricultural policy over the cultural definition of “land property”. In both cases one may argue that such instances are representative for the relations constructed around land in the traditional society of the 19th century, which was transformed by the agrarian reform in 1921. Indeed, social connexions were especially relevant for the 19th century, when, due to the existence of large estates, access to land depended on the relation between peasants and land lords. After 1921 peasants became owners, so they should have enjoyed their property rights and stop constructing such a complex system of social relations around the land.

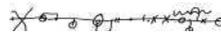
Yet, I argue that the interwar agricultural policy rather contributed to the preservation of traditional social structures and, implicitly, to the cultural definition of land in two ways. Firstly, it emphasised the role of small, subsistence-oriented households and secondly, due to the weakness of the state bureaucracy, it didn't manage to really implement its long term objectives.

In the first case, the general taxation policy and attempts to discourage the concentration of property created an economic environment in which it was very difficult for the small households to engage in systematic trade. The effects of the national policy were amplified by the global context, as the decline in agricultural prices that had started in 1928 and continued during the great economic depression, augmented the risks associated with product trade on the markets and discouraged the usage of paid labourers or of investments in technology. In fact, throughout the entire interwar period, the agricultural income represented at most a third of the whole household income and the rest consisted in other income sources, such as wages and or small enterprises (Stănculescu and Ștefănescu 1941, 252).

An aspect which is less noticeable at the national level, but better reflected by the local history, is the effect of state intervention-

ism promoted during the interwar period. The agrarian reform in 1921 can be regarded as an attempt to replace the role played by estate owners in villages with state bureaucracy. This was reflected by the State's attempts to avoid a reduction of overall agricultural production through interventionist policies by rationalising agricultural practices according to modern standards. Unfortunately, as state bureaucracy in the villages was underdeveloped, this strategy granted more power to the local elites and increased the importance of traditional social connections.

In the case of Bordei Verde, this is best expressed by a document reflecting the activity of the local commission in charge of the modernization of agricultural production patterns (DJBAN/PBV 4/1935, 227). In this particular case, the commission decided that the corn on the commune territory was ripe enough and allowed the villagers to start harvesting it. The document is relevant for the interventionist policy promoted during the interwar period, but the most striking aspect is the fact that the members of the commission were: the mayor, the priest, the school principal, the public notary, the tax collector, the commander of the local gendarmes post and... the medical agent. Besides being the local notabilities, no other quality recommended them as better suited than the average peasant in determining if the corn was ripe enough in order to be harvested. This is a good example of how modernization policies may rather support the persistence of traditional social and cultural patterns, according to which social relations and status in the community are more important than the professionalization or wealth in the individuals' daily life.



Limits of the communist transformation

The importance of local elites against the background of inefficient attempts of state interventionism continued during the communist period. A topic less approached by



the studies regarding collectivization is the complex relation between the kulaks and the communist party. Despite the fact that the official ideology presented the kulaks as enemies of collectivization, the party didn't allow them to join the collective farms until 1956 (ANR/CC of PCR 93/1956, 97-98), a decision which shows that at least some of the kulaks were ready to cooperate with the regime. This actually makes sense if one takes into account the fact that the local elites were the most aware of the importance of social and political connections and, most probably, considered them more important than the land. Case studies, such as the Hâreseni village, in Braşov county, where all nine members of the first collective farm leadership owned more than ten hectares of land during the interwar period (Kideckel 2006[1993], 88) further support this hypothesis. In the case of Bordei Verde, the only list of kulaks which I have identified has 19 names, among whom four are listed as members of Communist Party or Ploughmen's Front (DJBAN/PBV 24/1950, 119).

Social connections were important especially during the '80s, against the background of growing state interventionism in the peasants' daily life. N.D., interviewed in 2007, remembered the problems he had with the local authorities because of a horse he had bought: *"I had bought a horse and because of it I was summoned to the prosecutor's office, during Ceauşescu's rule; they accused me of theft. Some police colonels came, announced by the mayor... they called me once, they called me twice (...) I went to see the commander. The commander told me so: <The horse must disappear within 30 days! If you keep it, you will have to transport five tons of manure with it every day!> so I sold it!"* Interesting to notice it is the fact that the police invoked no law in order to "convince" N.D. to sell his horse, which shows that, in the end, he had to capitulate under the pressure of the local authorities.

Yet, C.B. has different memories about the same period. Despite the fact that sacrificing big animals, such as cows or calves,

was an offence against the law, punishable by prison, he admitted that he had sacrificed numerous calves, for himself or for other villagers (C.B. 2007). As for the possible consequences of his actions, the interviewee seems to have been perfectly aware of the risks: *"During Ceauşescu's regime, they would have thrown you in prison! Oh, my God! I had some courage! One must have some!"* (N.D. 2007). Such practices were by no means limited to the case of Bordei Verde, as shown by Liviu Mantescu's study in this volume.

C.B. may have been more courageous, but he was not the only one to break the law. He recollected that he would butcher calves not only for himself, but also for the priest and the commander of the police station. The calves were, thereafter, with the help of the policeman, declared as stolen and, of course, the thief was never found. C.B. was better integrated into the local social networks. He was a "cojan" - living near the centre of the village - that had worked his entire life for the collective farm, in the animal breeding sector. In contrast, N.D. was "muntean", living on the outskirts of the village. His life trajectory was also different: he started to work at the local collective farm, but during the '80s he found a job as a driver at the local oil exploitation, an episode which determined a conflict with the president of the collective farm.

Yet, one may notice that, despite the fact that the social networks preserved their importance, the social relations constructed around land and, implicitly, its cultural definition changed as the land was merged into the collective farms. Indeed, at a first glance we may argue that the large agricultural enterprises created through collectivization cut the link between the peasants and the land and transformed them into agricultural workers, receiving a wage at the end of each month. In the next pages I argue that the collective farm was more than a state "capitalist" enterprise, such as in the case of state farms, and that the relation between peasants and land was more complex than the



3) According to various respondents, the process of determining someone's work share was rather complicated. The basic unit of measurement was the "norm", and various tasks accomplished inside the collective farms were quantified in "norms", according to their difficulty (corn harvesting, for example, was considered one of the most difficult works and one would get more norms for it). The accomplishment of a certain number of norms was registered as a "day of work"

4) Everybody agreed that they have the option to choose money or agricultural products as payment for their work. Yet, in most cases the respondents talked more about products than money..

one between workers and their work place.

Besides their different legal status, several functional elements differentiate a collective from a state farm. The first and the most important one is the fact that the members of the collective farms didn't receive wages. Instead, their work was measured in norms or "days of work"³ and, at the end of the year, the farm's profit would be divided to each according to how many "days of work" they had had. The yearly share one was receiving consisted in money and agricultural products⁴. The latter could be further divided into two categories: alimentary products, among which oil and sugar were mostly mentioned, but sometimes also cheese or honey and grains, mostly corn and wheat. Interesting to notice is that the respondents mentioned the grains more, so they seemed to consider that more important. They were used to feeding the animals in the households which consisted in pigs, sheep and poultry. Large animals, such as cows and horses were subject to restrictions regarding their trade and were difficult to keep as they required more food during wintertime. During the '80s, as they ceased to bake their own bread at home, some of the wheat was exchanged for tickets which gave them the right to buy bread from the collective farm's bakery. Besides the products, villagers were granted yearly a small plot of land and they chose what to grow on it. Most of the respondents told me that they preferred to have corn on these small plots, in order to be able to feed more animals.

Another important peculiarity of a collective farm was the low mobility of its workforce. Although in certain instances they used day labourers, it was rather difficult for persons outside the commune to join a collective farm. Because they had no land to bring in, their membership needed to be approved through a complicated procedure which required an agreement from the general assembly of the collective farm. Furthermore, it was very difficult for the presidents of the collective farms to fire their members, as according to the last published statute of

the collective farm (UNCAP 1972) the only possibility to leave was as a punishment measure decided by the general assembly. As a result, the working relations inside the collective farm remained very informal, possibility varied from farm to farm and preserved some traditional elements. Villagers mentioned that each year they would receive certain plots of corn, which they had to weed out several times until they harvested them. Sometimes very complex negotiations took place in order to determine which parcels one would get, since the ones that had been worked better in the past were easier to weed out. This preserved somehow the idea that the right to use certain lands was important in the daily life.

The relation with the collective farm and, implicitly, with the land remained very personalized, dependent on the local social networks. Despite the fact that land ceased to connect the generations through the system of dowry like in interwar period, some examples of the role played by the collective farm in the personal relations between children and parents appeared in the interviews. Such were the agreements according to which the children worked in place of their parents, the latter taking care of their young grandchildren in exchange (S.C. 2007). In this particular case, the work in the collective farm connected the two generations, as the mother, too old to work, took care of her grandchildren at home while the daughter worked in her place.

A more interesting aspect, although less analysed by the specialized literature, is the informal role of the collective farm in supporting the elders of the village. Although it was by no means an official policy, one interviewee hinted to the existence of a special brigade, consisting in older villagers, who got easier tasks (R.N. 2007). Such cases may not have been a general rule, but they were not incompatible with the working environment of the collective farms.

Yet, two aspects of the communist period are especially relevant for the preservation of traditional connections between land

and survival. One is the failure of planned economy, which became especially noticeable during the '80s; the second one, the slow rate of modernization of production patterns in agriculture and the subsequent policies to stop the migration of labour toward other economic sectors.

The fact that the communist regime had a rather traditional perspective on the rural population, regarding them as a subordinated category of "peasants" and not an emancipated one of "farmers" is reflected in the differences in income between rural and urban areas presented above. The interviews showed that, generally, the villagers were aware of such a policy, as described by a respondent who quoted a saying popular back then: "*Our grain is beautiful (good) / But its ear points towards the state's silo!*" (C.Z. 2006).

In fact, the system according to which the income of the collective farm was distributed seems to have been specially designed in order to support traditional subsistence patterns: the members had the option to be paid in products, which the villagers transformed in food by breeding animals and consumed in the households. During the periods of economic prosperity the members of the collective farms could have opted to receive money instead of products. Yet, during the '80s, when food was scarce and rations were being implemented, it was more advantageous to be paid in products than in money.⁵ The subsistence production of the households complemented the scarce food resources they had access to and provided some even for the relatives in the cities.

One respondent revealed an interesting aspect of the communist period, namely the fact that during the '80s any kind of food rights was distributed through the collective farms. Back then S.C. enjoyed better food rations as a mother of three children, but the management of the collective farm decided not to grant her these rights because she had refused to come to work (S.C. 2007). In the end, she managed to obtain her extra rations only after she had petitioned Ana Mureşan, the leader of the National Asso-

ciation of Women.

The story of S.C. shows that during the '80s access to the basic means of survival was dependent on the work of the land. It is also representative for the problem of labour shortages in agriculture which was the reason why the managers of the collective farm tried to pressure her into working. The need of labour and the subsequent policies applied to preserve it in agriculture gave few options to the inhabitants of Bordei Verde. Until the '70s it had been relatively easy for peasants to move toward the cities and find work in other economic sectors, as the regime was actively promoting urbanization and industrialization. These trends were reverse during the '80s, when restrictions in changing the residence or work place were put into effect.

In this regard, N.D. remembered the difficulties he faced when trying to find a job at the local oil exploitation platform: "*I went to the oil platform because the money was not enough. (...) Now I have a criminal record because I couldn't get the papers to change my job. The platform needed men, but the people at the collective farm didn't let us go. I needed a notification from them that they dispensed with my work services. They should have written and given us the notification, but they wouldn't do that. In the end, I found the stamp, I sealed and signed the paper with it, but they eventually got us. I got hired on the 2nd of February in 1980 and in June 1980, I was brought before the court in Făurei (a nearby city with a legal court - a.n.). We were close to being sentenced to jail!*" (N.D. 2007).

Yet, despite his new job at the oil exploitation, land continued to play an important role in N.D.'s life. The oil exploitation offered a good wage, but the food was rationed and he was not allowed to buy it in the cities. Therefore, his wife continued to work for the collective farm in order to get her rations of food. According to N.D., there were even years when he used money out of his wages in order to pay labourers that would help him to work for the collective farm.

5) This would explain why everybody considered the products so important: most probably they remembered the last years of communism.



Conclusion

The legal difficulties of defining property during the 20th century reflected the real relations constructed around the land, which were actually very different than the ones in Western Europe. The field interviews collected in 2006 and 2007 in Bordei Verde showed that for the villagers the notion of “land property” was constructed around two key elements: “land as means of subsistence” which meant that selling it was unconceivable and “land as family property” whose usage and disposal concerned a whole group of individuals. In the case of “land as means of subsistence”, the small rents and lack of jobs in the villages forced the villagers to rely on the small plots of land in order to feed themselves and their family after the dissolution of the collective farms. The definition of land as “inheritance for the children” was best expressed by the short answer of a respondent questioned about the possibility of selling her land: “I won’t sell it because I have children!” (F.B. 2007). The idea is best reflected in the novel *Ion*, published by Romanian author Liviu Rebreanu in 1920, in which a poor peasant asks his father: “Why did you drink and eat my land, old man?” (Rebreanu 1966[1920], 82).

Throughout the 20th century, the Roma-

nian rural area retained strong elements of traditionalism, which generated a conflict between the legally-defined concept of “land property” and the real social and economic relations in the villages. The concept of property started to be used in Romanian legal practice during the 19th century as a new legal institution borrowed from the occidental juridical practice. In its occidental form “property” was used in order to define social and economic relations specific to modern societies, in which transaction of goods, including land, are common. Such a perception of social and economic relations was directly connected to a specific social background which didn’t really develop either in interwar, or in communist Romania.

In contrast, the field interviews collected in 2006 and 2007 in the Bordei Verde area brought forward two elements central to the concept of property, namely the “land as subsistence means” and “land as group or family possession”, which are rather incompatible with the expansion of land transactions. Nevertheless, a closer look at the agricultural policy promoted during the interwar and communist policy show that native perspective on property was more adequate to the social and economic realities of the Romanian rural area, which preserved strong elements of traditionalism until the end of the 20th century.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Literature:

Axenciuc, Victor. 2000. *Evoluția economică a României: cercetari statistico-istorice; 1859-1947* [The Economic Evolution of Romania: Statistical-Historical Researches; 1859-1947], vol. II. Bucharest: Editura Academiei Române.

Bănică, Ion. n. y. *Monografia comunei Bordei Verde, Județul Brăila* [The Monograph of Bordei Verde Commune, Braila County], unpublished work of the history teacher in Bordei Verde.

Chirot, Daniel. 2002[1976]. *Schimbarea socială într-o societate periferică: formarea unei colonii balcanice* [Social Changes in a Peripheral Society: the Creation of a Balkan Colony], traducere de Victor Rizescu. Bucharest: Corint.

Dobrinu, Dorin and Constantin Iordachi (eds.). 2005. *Țărănia și puterea: procesul de colectivizare a agriculturii în România, (1949-1962)* [The Peasantry and the Power: The Process of Collectivization of Agriculture in Romania, (1949-1962)]. Iași: Polirom.

Harris, Marvin. 1979. *Cultural Materialism: The Struggle for a Science of Culture*. New York: Random House.

Iancu, Gheorghe and Virgil Țărău and Ottmar Trașcă (eds.). 2000. *Colectivizarea agriculturii în România: aspecte legislative* [Collectivization of Agriculture in Romania: Legislative Aspects]. Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană.

INS (Institutul Național de Statistică [National Institute of Statistics]). 1990. *Anuarul statistic al României* [Statistical Yearbook of Romania]. Bucharest: INS.

Kideckel, David A. 2006[1993]. *Colectivism și singurătate în satele românești: Țara Oltului în perioada comunistă și în primii ani după revoluție* [The Solitude of Collectivism: Romanian Villagers to the Revolution and Beyond], traducere de Șerban Vaetisi. Iași: Polirom.

Kligman, Gail and Katherine Verdery. 2011. *Peasants under Siege: The Collectivization of Romanian Agriculture, 1949-1965*. Oxford: Princeton University Press.

- Lipan, Ernest. 1977. *Drept Cooperatist [Cooperatist Law]*. Bucharest: Editura Didactică și Pedagogică.
- Madgearu, Virgil. 1999[1936]. *Agrarianism, capitalism, imperialism: contribuții la studiul evoluției sociale Românești [Agrarianism, Capitalism, Imperialism: Contributions to the Study of the Romanian Social Evolution]*. Cluj-Napoca: Dacia.
- Micu, Cornel. 2012. *From Peasants to Farmers? Agrarian Reforms and Modernization in Twentieth Century Romania. A Case Study: Bordei Verde Commune in Brăila County*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Mihăilescu, Gheorghe. 1932. "Note asupra populației și satelor din Câmpia Brăilei [Notes on the Population and Villages from Braila Plain]". *Analele Brăilei [Annals of Braila]* 2-3: 83-93.
- Mitrany, David. 1968. *The land & the Peasant in Romania: the War and the Agrarian Reform: (1917-21)*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Murgescu, Bogdan. 2010. *România și Europa. Acumularea decalajelor economice (1500-2010) [Romania and Europe: Accumulation of Economic Disparities (1500-2010)]*. Iași: Polirom.
- Müller, Dietmar. 2010. "Conceptul de proprietate în istoria economico-juridică românească [The Concept of Property in the Legal-Economical Romanian History]". In *Istoria României în concepte. Perspective alternative asupra limbajelor social-politice [History of Romania through Concepts. Alternative Perspectives on the Social-Political Languages]* eds. Victor Neumann and Armin Heinen, 201-238. Iași: Polirom.
- Rebreanu, Liviu. 1966[1920]. *Ion*. Bucharest: Editura pentru literatură.
- Roberts, Henry. 1951. *Rumania: Political Problems of an Agrarian State*. New Haven, Yale: Yale University Press.
- Roske, Octavian and Florin Abraham and Dan Cătănuș. 2007. *Colectivizarea agriculturii în România: cadrul legislativ (1949-1962) [Collectivization of Agriculture in Romania: the Legislative Frame (1949-1962)]*. Bucharest: Institutul Național Pentru Studiul Totalitarismului.
- Shafir, Michael. 1985. *Romania, Politics, Economics and Society: Political Stagnation and Simulated Change*. London: Boulder.
- Stănculescu, P. and C. Ștefănescu. 1941. "Situația economică prezentă [The Actual Economic Situation]". In *60 de sate românești cercetate de echipele studentești în vara 1938: anchetă sociologică [Research on 60 Romanian Villages Carried out by the Student Teams in the Summer of 1938: a Sociological Enquiry]*, vol. II, eds. Anton GOLOPENȚIA and D. C. GEORGESCU, 237-262. Bucharest: Institutul de științe sociale al României.
- Șerban, Stelu and Ștefan Dorondel. 2004. "L'Histoire Orale entre Document et Recit. Continuïte et Changement dans la Societe Rurale de Roumanie". In *Peuples, Etats, Et Nations dans le Sud-Est de L'Europe*, eds Elena Siupiur et al., 45-82. Bucharest: Anima.
- UNCAP (Uniunea Națională a Cooperativelor Agricole de Producție [National Union of the Cooperatives for Agricultural Production]). 1972. *Statutul cooperativei agricole de producție, [The Statute of the Agricultural Cooperative of Production]*. Bucharest: UNCAP.
- Vasilescu, Nae A.. 1906. *Orașul și județul Brăila odinioară și astăzi. Schițe istorice și administrative [The City and the County of Brăila in the Past and in the Present. Historical and Administrative Sketches]*. Brăila: Întâia Tipo-litografie P. M. Pestemalgioglu.
- Verdery, Katherine and Caroline Humphrey. 2004. "Introduction: Raising Questions about Property". In *Property in Question. Value Transformation in the Global Economy* eds. Katherine Verdery and Caroline Humphrey, 1-28. Oxford, New York: Berg.
- Verdery, Katherine. 2003. *The Vanishing Hectare: Property and Value in Postsocialist Transylvania*. Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press.
- von Benda-Beckmann, Franz and Kebet von Benda-Beckmann and Melanie G. Wiber. 2006. "The Properties of Property". In *Changing Properties of Property*, eds. Kebet von Benda-Beckmann, et al. 1-39. Oxford, New York: Berghahn Books.
- Wolf, Eric R. 1998[1965]. *Țăranii [The Peasants]*, translated by Florin Tudor. Chișinău: Editura Tehnică.
- Wolf, Eric R.. 2001[1983]. *Europa și populațiile fără istorie [Europe and the People without History]*, traducere de Radu Săndulescu. Chișinău: Arc.

Archival sources:

DJBAN/PBV (Direcția Județeană Brăila a Arhivelor Naționale [The Brăila Subsidiary of the National Archives of Romania]), PBV (Primăria Bordei Verde [The Bordei Verde Mayor's Office]), Dossiers: 1/1919, 5/1919, 1/1921, 4/1926, 5/1926, 4/1935, 24/1950.

ANR/CC of PCR Arhivele Naționale ale României [The National Archives of Romania], Cancelaria Comitetului Central al Partidului Comunist Roman [The Head Office of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party], Dossiers: 93/1956.

Interviews:

C.B., b. 1939, man, Bordei Verde village, autochthon, interviewed in 2007

F.B., b. 1942, woman, Constantin Gabrielescu village, interviewed in 2007

G.D., b. 1919, man, Bordei Verde village, colonist, interviewed in 2006

I.J., b. 1929, man, Bordei Verde village, colonist, interviewed in 2007

M.F., b. 1941, woman, Bordei Verde village, autochthon, interviewed in 2006

M.Z., b. 1925, woman, Bordei Verde village, autochthon, interviewed in 2007

N.D., b. 1948, man, Bordei Verde village, colonist, interviewed in 2007

R.N., b. 1928, woman, Lișcoteanca village, interviewed in 2007

S.C., b. 1956, woman, Constantin Gabrielescu village, interviewed in 2007

