TWO LEGACY SYSTEMS FOR CENTRAL EUROPE AND THEIR INFLUENCES ON MENTALITIES

Dr. Tomás VAŠUT, Praga
tomasvasut@hotmail.com

Abstract:

The present study emerged by chance. Five years ago, I worked as a translator to prepare the publication *„Casa din Carpaţi" ("The House in the Carpathians")*, an ethnography book dedicated to traditional arhitecture, in Czech Republic. We had to study the ethnography papers refering to household and traditional families. In Monica Budiş' published studies from The Ethnography Institute of Bucharest; I discovered, among other things, an interesting fact – the tradition of inheriting the land and the parental house was diametrical different of the one I had known in the Czech Republic. First, I considered this thing interesting, but marginal and insignificant. The following five years spent in Bucharest, as a Czech language lecturer, I grisped myself with lots of conseqences that should be also seen in our modern society. My point is, not even having been a specialist in ethnography, that the subject is very little debated, an interdisciplinar anlisys should be done, because any type of inheritage of material goods must mark the mentality of the society.

Keywords: legacy system, East Europe, West Europe, traditions.

The differences between the East and West of Europe are much debated. We call the area where those spiritual, economic schools meet, the Central Europe. Among other things in the Central Europe we find two systems of heritage for the rural traditional household. We could have as examples the situations in Czech Republic and Romania. In Czech Republic, the house and the entire parental household is inherited, traditionally by the eldest son. The parents are moving into a separate house in the son's household and are supported by him and the other brothers are rewarded

BDD-A4125 © 2007 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:50 UTC)

by the eldest son. The other model, applied traditionally in Romania, was based on sharing the land, equally, and the youngest son were to remain into the parental house, which he would inherit after his father's death.

At the first inspection, we may observe two significant differences: the Romanian tradition is older, probably original, inherited from ancient times, when the extensive exploatation of land was possible, and because of an underdeveloped agricultural technology with a limited productivity, it was important for the entire people to have an equal chance of survival. There was an archetype form, the folk tales had proved that; here we find well preserved the principle of parental house inheritage by the youngest son: the kingdom's heir is not the eldest son, who is vain and mean, but the youngest son, who is constantly a listener, a generous and a simple man. (cf. *The Story of White Harap,* by Ion Creangă, *The Sturdy Praslea and the Golden Apples* by Petre Ispirescu).

It is very interesting that the folk tales mentioned before, have the same idea in the Western Europe, too. Everywhere, in folk tales, the youngest prince wins. The tradition of heritage had separated from this model. The extensive system was followed by the model that made possible the growth of agricultural production, decisive for medieval economy. The equality was followed by the growth of production which was not only conditioned by the invention of modern technologies. One of the conditions of accumulation was a big household, undivided. In addition, this system was conditioned by a developing market in the economic system, where the cities and states were able to absorbe the excesive agricultural production and the work force from the states.

In fact, we could see that both inheritance systems were nothing but rudimentary ways of survival. The differences must be found in the societies where they were practised. The system in Romania was good for an underdeveloped, poor and little organised society, where there was no market and everybody was forced to aliment by himself – with equal chances from their parents, from the beginning. For that they needed an indispensable thing – space, spare land. When there were no reserves they created the west-european model: other kind of dynamism from every household was requested, by exchanging goods this household joined, willy-nilly, the competition to the others. Therefore, a dynamic, powerful householder, a responsible and well trained young man was needed. It is very interesting that this inheritage system, created for a much better organised society, but even for a lower world, where no new sources for an extensive household were available, arose a society not so dynamic or progressive, but also liberal, democratic, that represents Western Europe.

By those changes, Western Europe confronted with an additional complication which probably became a big advantage, after this was solved at the right time. As we mentioned before, in the West European system, parents after the household cession, had to be taken care of by their eldest son, who was the master of the house. This thing demanded a real contrat between generations. And another thing: the parents had a real

BDD-A4125 © 2007 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:50 UTC)

personal interest in their sons' well breeding, especially towards individual responsibility. For the other system, where the father remained to control the household until his death, it was more important that his son to be more obedient than a responsible man. Thence, it was not so necessary to be well breed, but to have an unconditioned respect towards their parents' generation.

This system was much effective and practised in rural circumstances, where the dynamism of the society was permanently controlled by the elders' generation, and where no rapid changes were expected. They were continuing the tradition; the parents knew their duty towards their children, and the children, without any special effort, learnt all they needed to know, technology, virtues, by living with their elders. It is natural that many customs remained for the younger generation as a duty, but they did not realised they needed this custom or not. This was a social model, that Professor Silviu Angelescu called „the civilisation of shame", in an issue about this subject. Without much conscience, that requires a certain amount of training; it is not so important what I think, but what others say, that is what the elders say. But in this case, the contract between generations was not really necessary, if every father was a sovereign in his household until his death.

For the modern period, the dynamism of west-european tradition, among other auspicious facts raised a rich and well organised society. The reference should not be placed only in the West of Europe, but also on Romanian teritory. We should talk about the „saşi" from Ardeal. One of the conditions of economic power for this community was, without any doubt, the possibility of keeping inside their autonomy on the Transilvanian territory, the west-european model of inheritance. If we stay in Romania, we may observe that the tragedy of year 1907, among other, was probably induced by an old not-reformed system which reached its limitations.

By all means, there had occurred many consequences; we could not say that a system only generates poverty and the other is destined to wealthiness, there is only a predisposition to a certain system in peculiar historic conditions. In addition, beside the German model (practised also in the Czech Republic) and the Romanian one, in Central Europe were different solutions, hence we could mention at least two tipical examples of inheritance practised in opposite social conditions. The so called „Valahia Moravă", the Eastern Czech Mountains, represented continuously one of the most remote and poorest parts of the country.

The fact that here the West European inhertance was applied went to the following consequences: the eldest son inherited the entire household, but in case of the low fertility of the soil and the lack of the market, he would not have any money to reward the youngest brothers, who, consequently, remained in their brother's household as servants. And they were not only servants; they did not have any financial resources to procure their own land, they could not marry and have a family. Another solution can be distinguished for some Hungarian villages in Transilvania. Here the tradition requested sharing the land among all brothers equally. In order not to divide the

BDD-A4125 © 2007 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:50 UTC)

wealthy households, the families had few children. We could give as an example a wealthy village from Ardeal Vişţea (near Gherla), where the custom was for a familz to have onlz one heir-child. Both solutions had as a result the decreasing of birth rate – the reasons were a poor soil that could not feed a numerous population and the competition for preserving the standard of living, which requested keeping the entire household. It is very interested that these models, in fact regional exceptions, are in accord with the tendencies from European society: postponing the weddings and the decreasing of birth rate on the continent.

As we could see, both inheritance systems were never a universal solution for the society. However, those systems were able to create two mentalities and a social different dynamic. Let's take example in history. The Czech Republic as a western part of Central Europe, where the german type of inheritance was applied, was not a very rich region. Although this inherited the west-european structures, it was extremely bad organised, distroyed or economic wasted by numerous long term wars and placed far from the comercial roads. Considering these conditions, it was not capable of a mass production for the market and it was always underdeveloped. The 19th century opened new possibilities conditioned by the industrial revolution, and brought a long period of peace; it was a structural and spiritual prepared society for the changes from the west of Europe. The Czech Republic, that became an industrial country, in almost a century, was not the only one to benefit of the railways; the market production also grew in the prevalent agricultural regions. Banat, a remote and destroyed area after the wars with Turkey, but also a systematic settler's repeopled area (settlers that came from the West of Central Europe), may serve as an example.

It is very possible that the Austrian politics in Banat had in view not only the ethnic change in favour of Germans, but firstly, social reorganizing, including the type of inheritance. At the same time, as Professor Silviu Angelescu mentioned, on its way to Independence towards the Otoman Empire, Romania promoted a series of social innovations that drew it near the west-european model. Because of the historical disturbances, most of these innovations did not last more than few decades, but the inheritance model remained completely unchanged, we may even speak about a social stability. The fact that the only necessary thing for the survival of Romanian society, that is the inheritance of the land, was so stable, it was for sure a positive circumstance.

Certainly, they kept an old mentality, too, a psichology concieved for the society, archaic, strictly rural, and the era of modern changes that came from Western Europe also brought the necessity of another type of social dynamic. Let's not forget what we remarked: the west European model was conceived for a world without any available reserves. The society should have been changed in order for this world to be more bearable. Without any doubt, the problems of present-day Romania can not only be explained by the consequences of the last unsuccessful reform, finished after four decades in 1989, but also by continuing the archaic mentality. I want to give some instances from personal experiences, in order to be more concrete. As a lecturer, I

BDD-A4125 © 2007 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:50 UTC)

noticed that the students do not represent a collective with the meaning of a group of individualities, but an „*obcină*", a quiet collectivity where the collective responsibility towards the professor is represented by the group's chief, in fact a kind of bailiff. My intention is not to criticize the level of scholarship in Romania, I very well know that everywhere are problems and dificulties. But I was very surprised by the way the students get their marks and diplomas. It is in fact something very similar to the traditional inheritance practised in Romania: it is not so important if the children had good results, they get an equal chance, wihtout any difference between them. The student prolong their youth in The Czech Republic, too, in the case of responsibility's lack I would rather speak about an extended childhood, a fact also noticeable to the craftsmen: the one who thinks he is an obedient child, do not feel guilty or responsible, even though he makes mistakes. The responaible may be a chief or a client, and a chief a client or a pedagogue can not control; he should execute a permanent observation. It is only natural that this kind of system may never be too effective.

On the other hand, children know better what their expectations are: they will have time anyway, they will learn by working. I realised that by noticing how the Romanians elect their leaders: as for the inheritance there was no assignation of the economic power towards younger generation, there is also no transference of the competences for a common hierarchy in any firm. The chief is not helped by the trained staff, capable for their level to come to a decision less important – the ohe who comes to a decision is the chief himself. On these terms, they may not apreciate the capability, the responsibility or loiality, but they request that the employee to be obedient and subdued. „*Thinking in Romania is a crime*" wrote in the seventies Dumitru ţepeneag, but if, instead *crime* we say for example *mistake*, as the time goes we can see that what we said it is not only valid for the comunist dictatorship and that it is much harder to change mentalities; not only hard, but extremely dangerous. We may once again refer to an interesing idea in Professor Angelescu's study presented at the Colloquy of Târgovişte, such as at the opposition *creator (creator) – colportor (newsmonger)*, culturally speaking, we should add a new term: *colportor (newsmonger) – interpelator (questioner).* If any *creator* may represent a west European model, in our case, a well educated and responsible heir, and *colportor (newsmonger)* means, firstly, continuing the tradition, which requires lethargy and reproduction, then *colportor (newsmonger) – interpelator (questioner)*, is the second type without any tradition, unprepared, mazed and incompetent, whose decisions are followed by a catastrophe.

It is only natural that, after the inovations of Modern period came from the West, in Central Europe the societies that had social structures already adopted for generations, to acclimate better; but the system of Romania, which initially, assured survival in specific conditions, became so contraproductive that in certain periods, in fact, it produced poverty. The problem is that not even the enrichment of the society, in which they believed in the nineties, do not take us, immediately to a profound

BDD-A4125 © 2007 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:50 UTC)

change: if everything goes relatively well, we do not need reforms, the system may only be compromised, at crises. Then, a real fact is true: only a well organised society should be able to endure the history's moments of crisis. Besides that, the success of inheritance systems, lays not only in their dynamism, but also in the stability of these principles, for they form the mentality of the society which is extremely resistent towards any rapid change. And for the period we live in, it is a substantial fact that there is no free society, no fre man without learning, a good sense and resposability.

But let's go back to fairy tales. The entire Europe may know that the one that is successful in fairy tales is the youngest brother, but in reality, they adopted a tradition in which the throne was inherited by the eldest son. It was natural, it was only one throne, by dividing the country, it would have become a prey fot the neighbours, and where the system of firstchild was adopted the succession fights between brothers brought the weakness of the state and decline. It ie very interesting that Western Europe applied this royal principle to simple peasants: every homemaker should behave as a little ruler. Although this may seem revolutionary, we should think about the Christian tradition and we should discover that, in fact, there is nothing new. Here it is, exactly, as the fairy tales end: the one that, after many adventures (a way of learning), inherited the country (meaning – the land) rushes to get marry – and in the Christian churches in all Europe, the bride and groom go from childhood to royal state. There is still a question, if a society may also go from a state to another. We could also find the answer in fairy tales: the third prince, the youngest, is not an individual hero, but an archetype, a model for the entire younger generation. And the fairy tales also tell us a very important thing: the third generation has a chance on condition that the preceding two generations had at least tried.

Traducere de Dana Camelia DIACONU

BDD-A4125 © 2007 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:50 UTC)