In-Between Societies: Romanian Urbanites and Their Cultural Demeanour (I)

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Introduction

Definitions of the city evidenced structural differences among towns from the beginning of urban sociology. Weber created the dichotomy Occidental versus Oriental cities. The latter hosts familial, tribal or sectarian identities (1921) that transform the urban cultural image into a mosaic. In 1925, it was already suggested that 'the body of customs, and traditions' define the city (Park 1967: I). In these settlements, urban behaviour seems determined by 'previously established, comprehensive and interdependent conventional understandings' (Redfield 1973: 38) or 'cultural beliefs' (Sjoberg 1955) in these settlements. Such towns, also characterized as 'orthogenetic', mark the early phase of urbanization, in opposition with the 'heterogenetic cities' (Redfield and Singer 1969), where industrialization changed the general patterns of living. Moreover, the initial function of cities was diagnosed as both cultural and well connected to a surrounding rural zone (Wheatley 1971).

For the last century, the constant rural population inflows reinforced the socio-cultural traditional system in Romania. A recent study on the attractiveness of cities synthesized the thematic approaches on the determinants of migration flows, and suggested a direct connection between the urban amenities and labour market conditions, on the one hand, and population growth in cities, on the other hand (Buch et al. 2013). The issue of rural reactions in the urban context was less focused on, although attention has been drawn to the fact that 'our social life bears the imprint of an earlier folk society' ever since 1938 (Wirth: 3). However, such a perspective can only be fertile in countries characterized by pre-industrial civilizations and a conservative social structure (Sjorberg 1955: 445).

The rural-urban dynamics has been depicted as the obverse and reverse of a single coin (Balandier 1985: 173) or as a "two poles" structure (Wirth 1938: 3). Such patterns of living were considered to be "integral parts of the definition of a certain type of socio-cultural unit in which the pre-industrial city is a focal point"

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(Foster 1953: 163). Furthermore, even technological progress dims the line between urban and rural specificity. Socio-economic changes facilitate a symbiosis (Fribourg 1987: 155) that suggests a complementary relationship between villages and towns (Agergaard et al. 2010: 5). This article aims at contributing to urban cultural studies by providing some systematic empirical evidence on the preservation of beliefs and gestures against impersonal environments, such as hospitals or public spaces. These "folkways" and "mores" (Sumner 1906) have an impact on everyday behaviour and offer clues on the ingrained cultural identity of urbanites.

Such pressure exerted by traditional knowledge on a secular type of environment indicates that Romania (and other South-East European nations) is still characterized by a rather rural society. Even its capital, Bucharest, was depicted as "semimodern"; it is a town that hides an indefinable rural characteristic, and the European capital that obeys the village the most (Karnoouh 1994: 34). This socio-cultural phenomenon is nevertheless different from countries with a long urbanization history, such as Greece, where urban practices have been elaborated and rationalised in order to "become adapted to the countryside" (Sant Cassia and Bada 1992: 236).

For the time being, the inherited cultural data have not been explored in connection with the social behaviour of urbanites. The concept of practices only covered repeated social gestures that establish a sort of individualized family tradition (Finch 2007), leaving aside the folkloric dimension of behaviours. Levitt and Glick-Schiller have though remarked the identity value of maintained customs in transnational families; their awareness of belonging to a distinct culture is opposed to everyday routine (2004). Actual customs and superstitions that build up group consciousness have not been yet analyzed, since such an approach requires ethnographic instruments of investigation, considered by Glick-Schiller as most appropriate for the study of transnational migration (2003: 100).

Nevertheless, in the case of internal migration, two complementary concepts, *ways of belonging* and *ways of being* (Levitt and Glick-Schiller 2004), may describe rural mental or physical reactions and urban demeanour, respectively. The following sections of this study reveal the dynamics of urban behaviours as an interminglement of traditional and modern reactions, in accordance with the context. Urbanites obey the social norms of the city (specific clothes, a more literary pronunciation), but they also interrupt the flow of quotidian acts with "cultural components that are used to construct strategies of action" (Swindler 1986: 273). Although they may seem to be "ways of life that are lagged behind the social majority, the defining type of industrialization, even behind the notion of modernity" (Roncayolo 2002: 183), rural gestures suggest the complex layer structure of urban identity.

The present article extends this account to consider the importance of traditional knowledge in the lives of urbanites and proposes a new method to explore urban sociology, by conveying ethnographical instruments into obtaining socio-culturally structured narratives. The paper opens by presenting the context of the study, the methodology and theoretical background of the proposed concept. The next section argues that rural behaviour emerges spontaneously in post-socialist urban settlements and compares Romanian empirical evidence with similar international data. The third and last section assesses the motifs and contexts for traditional practices and beliefs after presenting the interviewing technique in detail.

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The Study

This article draws on data from a post-doctoral research project conducted between 2011 and 2013. The approach evidenced the impact of urban life on the retention of childbirth customs and superstitions put into practice years or decades from the moment urbanites left their rural birth places. In the end, the data gathered from twenty-three urban informants chosen for their opportunity to have experienced folk knowledge, whether mediated through parents, or directly. Interviews and participant observation were much more diverse than expected, providing information on everyday behaviour, medical folklore, wedding and funeral practices, outlook on life, and even folk literature. The youngest informant was 26, while the oldest turned 74 this year. The shortest period of exposure to urban patterns is of seven years (in the case of the youngest subject), and the longest is fifty years. Ages vary from the twenties to the thirties, forties, fifties and sixties, and the shortest time spent in an educational institution is eight years.

Besides the 23 urbanites (only three of them men, the predominant number of women being explained by the specificity of the childbirth theme), I interviewed 20 more subjects from villages, all women. Whenever possible, the urban informant recommended relatives or childhood friends still living in the native place and never confronted to the urban way of life. The exact questionnaire urbanites had to answer was used with actual peasants, in order to see what changes in their practices, how they are modified and reflected upon. Equally, participant observation added more information to the study. This mirror-technique of collecting data was helpful to reveal what changes when villagers become exposed to the urban way of living.

Seven subjects were college graduates, another seven are retired workers (from a factory that produced synthetic fibres, a wine producing company or from constructions), four women have shop assistant jobs, and other three are nurses, two subjects are retired secretaries, one is an assistant manager. Two women are technicians (chemist and dental) and other two are engineers and work as accountants, one is a scientific researcher and a man produces radio shows on Romanian traditions. Only one informant was unmarried, all the others have spouses and children. Like most of the Romanians, the subjects are raised Orthodox Christians. None of the informants is a Gypsy. Such heterogeneous social characteristics prove once more that traditional memory is active, though dissimulated. The investigations on urban behaviour in Romania (and in other countries with a similar socio-historical background) should therefore consider the cultural pressure exerted by a previous rural existence.

As demonstrated in the following, urbanites use a traditional "repertoire" (Hannerz 1969: 186–188), although they dissimulate traditional education. The second generation is much more adapted to the environment, but still accepts the pressure coming from a cultural family heritage. Only pragmatism and rational thinking can be mentioned when it comes to the third generation of city dwellers. Still, the socio-economic features of the Romanian society lead to an ongoing process of rural to urban migration. Therefore, the community is continuously enriched with individuals who bring along traditional habits and a specific way of reasoning.

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Behavioural variations based on the length of town living have not been obvious during our participant observation and interviews. However, urbanites that spent decades in the urban environment learnt to dissimulate their cultural attachment, and they became more circumspect before expressing their traditional convictions. The urban influence is manifested primarily on a material and psychological level and does not affect the cultural education urbanites received in their first years of life, thanks to the "enduring effects on those who hold it" (Swidler 1986: 281). A better physical comfort is obtained, but urban psychological pressure causes "defensive and protective practices" (Goffman 1959: 13) that preserve the socially expected image of a town inhabitant. All these strategies had to be surpassed during the interviews with subjects that have been living for a longer time in a city than in a rural zone.

Out of the 23 urbanites I talked with, Stela, age 58, and Mihai, age 75, posed mostly as rational modern people. The first often used impersonal expressions: "such things have happened before" and avoided firm assessments by doubtful presentations. Mihai even used words like "nonsense", "meaningless", and "sheer lies", up to the point where personal experience proved the contrary. For example, he is fully convinced that his mother provoked the abundant hair on his legs when she kicked off cats during her pregnancy.

What no longer adapts itself to the new socio-economical contexts disappears. For example, traditional midwives used to bury the placenta after birth with specific ritual gestures that were meant either to magically stop any other pregnancy of the confined woman, or to assure many more. Birth in hospitals abolished this custom and people no longer remember it. Secondly, hygienic cautions put an end to other practices, such as making a black sign out of dirt and spit in between infant's eyebrows to distract attention and avoid his being overlooked, or using menstrual blood to treat pyoderma in newborns. Nevertheless, "the adaptive potential" of cultural repertoires (Swidler 1986: 277) sometimes offers surprising examples. Magdalina, age 65, declared that she frequently heals her nephew by uttering therapeutic spells to him on the phone, and, despite the absence of direct contact, the child has his health restored. It is the common mind here that triggers physiological responses, the general conviction that customs and superstitions are still efficient.

Nostalgia is rather scarce in urbanites' discourses. Instead, an equally accusatory and resigned tone pervades the conversation when we discuss the youth's disobedience to rites. The incrimination is sometimes diminished by a self inclusion of the speaker. Nevertheless, Magdalina had severe accusations. She blames women in parturition for magically causing drought because they infringe ritual prescriptions and appear in public without having been subjected to specific religious services (*molifte*) meant to purify them from the sin of birth. "Defilement is never an isolated event. It cannot occur except in view of a systematic ordering of ideas" (Douglas 2001: 42). Ritual uncleanness still manages to censor social participation. Yet, awareness is being raised on this matter mainly by the first two generations of town inhabitants.

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A Socio-Political Outcome

The last census performed in Romania, in 2012, revealed that 54 percent of the population lives in cities. Proportions were far from being equal in 1930, when as much as 80 % of Romania was rural (Pascaru 2012: 226), an increase of 16 percents being achieved after 26 years, as we learn from Ruth Benedict (2002: 49). In the 1960's, the urban growth was substantial: 32,1 percent of the population lived in towns. In 1986, slightly more than half of the Romanians were found in urban settlements, and peak of this demographic movement being attained in 2007, when the urban population reached a percentage of 55,1 % (Ştefănescu 2010: 89).

These figures attest an interest for the benefits of urban life (larger incomes, greater comfort, more social opportunities etc.). Nevertheless, the fact that numerous towns have been artificially created (Istrate 2008: 77) indicates that the sociological profile of the inhabitants did not change at the same pace with administrative regulations. "Population ceased to be rural only from the residence point of view" (Ioan and Mihali 2009: 62); "considering that the 'urban' is largely a recent and incomplete communist creation, while the 'rural' may even comprise more people from the country than these indicators show" (Mungiu-Pippidi 2005: 318). 320 towns were officially recognized in 2011 in Romania (Pascaru 2012: 227), as many as 262 being declared in 1995 whether by changing the statute of villages or by founding new industrial towns (Istrate 2008: 76).

The political effort behind these socio-economical transformations is obviously related to the communist and post-socialist ideologies. Specialists speak often about "industrialization in force" (Istrate 2008: 76) that led to a merely "pretended modernization" of Romania (Ioan and Mihali 2009: 62). The same socio-cultural phenomenon is easily detectable in any other country that experienced a socialist government. The brutal relocation of peasants satisfied the political objectives of progress in official reports; however, social reality indicated a "rurbanisation", a substantial rural pressure on towns (Abraham 1991: 52). Traditional behaviour exerted its influence by a parochial type of community, by handmade objects meant to give a more familiar aspect to the stereotypical apartments (Ioan and Mihali 2009: 64) and by contrapuntal irruptions of magical gestures, such as rubbing money against the cheek, after the first sale of merchandise, in order to assure pecuniary success. The high frequency of such public reactions speaks about an ever more often traditional behaviour in private circumstances.

Economic aspects (Hann 2003; Nicolescu 2011; Pickles 2010; Pine 2002; Verdery 1996, 2005; Voiculescu 2008) or political implications (Arfire 2011; Holy 1996; Horvat and Štiks 2012; Wanner 1998) in direct connection with national identity (Berdahl 1999; Galasińska 2006) are a frequent object of investigations on post-socialism. Approaches to the cultural development focused on consumers (Eglitis 2010; Forrester et al. 2004; Humphrey 1995; Young and Kaczmarek 2008) or everyday life (Humphrey 1991; Ries 1997) but did not analyze the evolution of folk knowledge.

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Although a certain decline of rites has been noticed (Kideckel 2010: 151) in Romania, consistent ethnographic data reveal just the opposite. The following example is relevant, because it presents a rather strange custom performed both in the socialist period and afterwards: the alms given for self-redemption while being still alive. A book published in 1986 considers that people who stage their funerals and make offerings for their afterlife are part of a "peasant society torn by exodus and broken families" (Andreesco and Bacou: 158), since adults do not trust their own offspring to fulfil the ceremonial gestures. Moreover, reviews of this book rushed into interpreting the active ancient custom as a sign of desperation to live under a Communist reign that left no other hope for the citizens than life after death. Thirty years have passed, and people continue to deliver themselves from the power of sins by organizing requiems or by offering food, animals or domestic items together with ceremonial formula, all over Romania. A thorough analysis recently performed by Ion H. Ciubotaru concludes that the custom, as irrational as it may appear, is in fact an old belief put in place by "prudent people" (2014: 419), and political or economical changes did not affect it. A similar remark can be made for urbanites' behaviour, whose appearances are only social masks. Superstitions and rites of passage suffer only few alterations over the decades because the secularization of the Romanian society is only at its beginning. As a consequence, both reconsideration of the post-socialist perspective as being no longer adequate (Humphrey 2002; Verdery 2002) and a critical approach of the "tradition-modernity tandem" (Lankauskas 2015: 241) are helpful during the urban culture investigation in Romania.

Gail Kligman spent more than a year doing fieldwork in one of the most conservative ethnographic zones from Romania 37 years ago. Her important work on the socio-cultural context of specific funeral customs also diagnosed political effects of the "Marxist-Leninist regimes" (1988: 257). The keenness of the sociological remarks made the book a bibliographical landmark, but decades have passed and the present day reality, found both in Romanian villages and in towns, gainsays the prognosis. An argument for this remark is the so-called state intervention in "Christmas traditions (rites and carols)" in the socialist period, because they were "directly associated with religion" (Kligman 1988: 259). Today, such practices reveal a certain reduction, but they are still active and widely spread even in urban areas. The explanation lies in the fact that spiritual heritage changes slower than the socio-economy history, hence material acculturation precedes the cultural one (Abraham 1991: 240; Kligman 1988: 270), as well as in the tolerance shown by the Orthodox Church.

The examples given by David Kideckel as arguments for the dissolution of tradition still manage to offer proofs of the old social pressure. His subjects declared repeatedly that it is a shame to decline the proposal to become a Godfather (2010: 151). Moreover, the expensive funerals were motivated by cultural beliefs:

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> Although a lot of money is spent, it is not good to change tradition. If you choose not to do something, people laugh at you. You would rather pay, than hear people talking behind your back (2010: 153)[1].

The traditional community censors funeral customs in order to make sure that the deceased received all the ritual alms and he/ she would not come back from the dead to punish the entire village. Shame and fear represent important psychological indicators of the influence from the traditional social system.

It is important to notice that post-socialism did not mean resurrection of folk beliefs in Romania, as in the case of Siberian shamanism (Balzer, 1980, 1981, 1996). Customs and superstitions remained active throughout decades and adapted themselves to the new socio-economic conditions. Their relocation in urban settlements is part of this continuity and defines a profound aspect of the Romanian sociologic profile of towns. Theoretical framing of the present traditional memory starts with C. G. Jung's concept of "collective unconscious". The founder of analytical psychology invoked Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's idea of "collective representations" and the work of Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, who speak of "categories of the imagination" to define a specific cognitive feature of mankind.

> There exists a second psychic system of a collective, universal and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals. This collective unconscious does not develop individually but is inherited. It consists of pre-existent forms, the archetypes, which can only become conscious secondarily and which give definite form to certain psychic contents (1990: 43).

As empirical evidence will reveal below, rural reactions have a spontaneous strength to appear in urban contexts when least expected. They are caused exactly by this deep level of the human mind.

Previously to C.G. Jung, Émile Durkheim identified a "collective consciousness" that sums up all knowledge of the community. Jung assessed that the individual bears information that overwhelms him, while as Durkheim identified this irresistible force as social norms activated through imposed ceremonies and specific linguistic data (1995: 405). Urbanites frequently reminisce "what our elders said" and reckon they were right, more or less overtly. Both Durkheim and the book of Robert McCauley and E. Thomas Lawson indicate rituals as triggers of "automatic responses" (2002: 1) meant to obey group cultural patterns, since rituals are "a form of social interaction" (Geertz 1957: 52). Meda, one of our high educated informants, age 44, made a revelatory declaration for this theoretical aspect:

> you just can't help remembering things from childhood. I don't know why you remember them, I don't have an explanation. But when something is being done in childhood, with a certain ritual and in a certain form, it stays with you for the rest of your life.

Durkheim's disciple, Maurice Halbwachs, suggested that culture defines the individual through the group history he belongs to and calls this social pattern "collective frameworks of memory" (1992: 40). Thus, personal image is structured

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by society and traditional memories develop an identity importance, as Levitt and Glick Schiller observed when explaining why Poles still prefer Polish food after they migrated (2004).

Jan Assman also considers that cultural memory maintains group specificity, viewed as a "collective concept for all knowledge that directs behaviour and experience in the interactive framework of a society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation" (1995: 126). Nevertheless, Assman's distinction between cultural memory and "communicative memory" is dimmer when it comes to folk culture. Defined by Assman as everyday communication, "characterized by a high degree of non-specialization, reciprocity of roles, thematic instability, and disorganisation", communicative memory is similar to James E. Young's definition of "collected memory", namely as an individual, fragmented recalling of information that belongs to other group members (1993: XI).

Folk culture has a vivid spontaneity and emerges frequently in quotidian talk. Hence, communicative memory beneficiates on daily bases from "elders' sayings" that always prove their efficiency. More than that, whenever urbanites are relaxed they playfully insert fragments of folk songs or even charms, riddles, and proverbs into their small talk. Such cultural patterns test new incomers into the group thanks to their phatic value, and create a social cohesion between old members of the community.

Sanda Golopenţia's definition of "memory-communities" describes best the cultural exchange between urbanites as an "extended and polymorphic dialogism between insiders" (2001: 35). Since all members of the group know each other and trust one another, they all communicate among them and establish ritual contacts together (Golopenţia 2001: 36), urbanites behave rurally, despite their urban location. Urban acting becomes socially superfluous among family relatives, ex-peasants from the same village or work colleagues.

To be continued in no. 1/ 2017

Abstract

This article considers the role of traditional knowledge in the everyday life of Romanian urbanites by focusing on rural reactions and convictions displayed in urban settlements. The method is based on a comparative approach between the native places of subjects and their own actions and beliefs. Post-socialism did not eliminate superstitious reasoning, which continues to exist and even to assimilate modern devices to magic purposes. The article proposes that ethnographic evidence should be made use of in urban cultural studies of South-Eastern countries. The socio-cultural perspective contributes to a better understanding of the modernization dynamics.

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