

# THE COUNTRYSIDE IN THE ROMANIA OF THE 21<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY: RELEGATED PEASANTS BETWEEN MARKET PRODUCTIONS

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## I. INTRODUCTION

After the fall of Nicolae Ceausescu's regime in December 1989, the leader of the National Salvation Front Ion Iliescu began to foil Romania's communal agriculture in January 1990, nearly a month after the Decembrist revolt and before the first presidential elections post-dictatorship on May 29, 1990. This first stage of land reforms promulgated in 1991 aimed at agricultural and rural politics that most Romanian governments tackled during the last decade in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In doing so, these governments used certain guidelines like dismantling the associative and communal system, privatization and land restitution; and Romanian land subsumption according to the neoliberal logic of the markets (Abrahams, 1996; Lerman, 1999; Meurs, 1999; Cartwright, 1999, 2000 & 2001; Verdery, 1999 & 2003; Aligica & Dabu, 2003; Luca, 2007 & 2010; Dropu, 2007; Hatos, 2007; Díaz-Diego, 2013a). As a consequence, Romanian agrarian sector of the 21st century has seen how productive and socio-economic differences in agriculture have increased throughout the whole country, mainly in Southern Crisana, Banat and in the fertile Danube plain.

As a way of analyzing, describing, and reflecting over the reasons and socio-agricultural consequences of the growing and particular dualization of the Romanian agricultural sector, among other considerations of Creswell (et al. 2003, 2004 & 2007), Onwegbuzie (et al. 2006 & 2007) and Discroll (et al. 2007) regarding the advantages of complex methodologies to deal with the study of sociocultural phenomena, we have decided to articulate a mixed methodology integrating quantitative and qualitative perspectives through a combination of statistical, ethnographic and geographical methods and techniques, considering gathering, analyzing, and triangulation of geo-referred and statistical data, obtained mainly from the Romania's National Institute of Statistics, and ethnographic data from the participant observation and the open interviews with Romanian farmers, technicians, and politicians during the field work conducted in Romania and Spain in the period of 2008-2012.

## II. ROMANIAN AGRICULTURAL CONTEXT

Romanian agricultural challenges are numerous and not always easy. For example, we can refer to lack of cooperation and social agricultural capital improvements (Sandu, 2013) also a lack of local initiative, extreme beliefs in foreign solutions (Frunza and Voicu, 2003), the small size of agricultural exploitations (Hirschhausen-Leclerc, 1994 y Mihailescu, 1997), a bigger family bond weight regarding economic objectives, referring to the real price of land renting (Hatos, 2004), migration from countryside areas to national big cities, or abroad (Constantinescu, 2003; Bleahu, 2004a; Sandu, 2004; Voicu, 2004), persistence of family agricultural exploitations, which produces opposing interests (Mihailescu, 1997 and 2006) or the high poverty risk associated with family agricultural exploitation (Chrica and Tesliuc, 1999, and Tesliuc, Pop and Tesliuc, 2001, Alboiu, 2009) among others.

We also need to add, to what was previously mentioned, other difficulties related to communication and energy infrastructure, advanced population aging, villages isolation, difficulties in secondary education, lack of medicine specialists, lack of services, increment of poverty, not many opportunities for small business people to have access to bank loans (Swinnen and Gow, 1997; Sandu, 1999; Tesliuc, Pop and Tesliuc, 2001; Voicu and Pop, 2002; Dan, 2004; Voicu, 2004 and 2005; Díaz-Diego and Márquez-Dominguez, 2009 and 2011), etc, which certainly demotivates young people, who see the urban world as a place with better life opportunities.

This complex group of factors, being insufficient human and environment resources use and management one of the most outstanding factors that the country has now, they have produced an unbalanced agricultural system, with big differences among land owners, the size exploitation, and farmers' incapacity to compete against big companies neither in land surface, performance, technology, access to supplies nor prices, production, and knowledge.

## III. EXPLOITATIONS AND AGRICULTURAL LANDS

Regarding the amount of agricultural exploitations, 14.02% has been lost in less than one decade. The number 4,485,000 of agricultural exploitations in 2002 decreased to 3,856,000 during 2010, more than 99% of "non-legal entity exploitations"<sup>1</sup> which stand for small individual exploitations. There has been only a small increase in agricultural exploitations on behalf of those which show a natural commercial interest, which were made up of 23,000 farms in 2002 and today represent 31,000 of the exploitations (INS, 2012a).

Agricultural exploitations in Romania are divided into non-legal entity and legal entity. In the former group we find individual exploitations and family exploitations, the first represent 99.07% of Romania's exploitations, and the second group barely reaches 0,13% of the farms.

Within the individual exploitations, which happen to be the majority in Romanian agriculture, around 80% work with the minimum incomes derived from their own land production. These people dedicate most of their time to work the land since there are no other profitable possibilities to work on. They barely live off the little they can produce.

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1 In Romanian: *exploatațiile agricole fără personalitate juridică*.

Economically speaking, this group reaches poverty levels since sometimes they barely pay some invoices and leave some of the incomes for food.

A percentage of 61.39% of Romania's total land surface is used for agriculture, this information permits to assure that Romania is a country mainly devoted to agriculture. Romania's arable land comprises 9.4 millions of hectares, which represent 64.26% of the agriculture land and 39.45% of the total surface. The second important assets in Romania's agriculture is its pasture. This land comprises 3.2 millions of hectares, which represent 22.47% of the agriculture land and 13.80% of Romania's total surface. Regarding extension, the remainder lands are meadows, comprising 1.5 millions of hectares, representing 10.45% of the land, and 6.42% of the whole country. Next comes winery, utilizing 213,430 hectares (1.46% of the agricultural land, and 0.90% of the whole Romanian's land) and finally, fruit lands which cover an extension of almost 200,000 hectares (1.36% of the agricultural land extension and 0.83% of the national one). These two assets, winery and fruit lands, have reduced the amount of land use during the last decade, during 2000 and 2010 21.61% of winery and 22.01% fruit lands have disappeared. On the other hand, arable lands have maintained and even increased 0.25% to the detriment of meadows, that went down to 4.44% being cultivated, abandoned or used for dwellings.

#### **IV. EXPECTATIONS AND AGRICULTURAL YIELD**

Cereals keep using 67% of the total cultivated area, especially wheat and corn, although this area has ideal weather conditions and enormous potential, it only reaches low and uneven levels year-on-year. For example, wheat production obtains 3,660 Kg/ha when its potential is 5,500 to 7,000 Kg/ha. On the other hand, corn production obtains 4,000 Kg/ha when it could obtain 8,000 kg/ha. Evidently, this decrease is related to its minor use of technology and professionals due to undercapitalization and also not enough private and public investment. Even though, Romania continues to be one of the most productive countries in EU and second in Eastern Europe after Poland, which shows its evident potential in growing and capacity.

Difficulties in the agricultural area also influences productivity of labor, 4 times lower than Austria, 4.5 times lower than Germany, and 6 times lower than France, not considering food production capacity per farmer, which in Romania's case, gets to feed 3 people a year compared to the other European farmers who get to feed 20 to 30 people in the same period (Bulgaru, 2008a). In economic terms, 40% of the actively productive population produces less than 12% of National Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and less than 13% of its Gross Value Added (GVA) (Leonte, Giurca and Campeanu, 2002).

If we add to what was previously mentioned above, the constant price increase, we are talking about a broken agricultural profitability in terms of the market because Rural development strategies proposed at the Cork Conference (1996) and Salzburg (2006) have been diverted, especially in rural and urban environment inequality through an integrated convergence, economic diversification as foundation, also prioritizing environmental sustainability, the required public subsidiarity, the simplification of negotiations, short and long- term territory plan, the speeding up of economic investments on population and territory, political negotiation changes in development and a constant evaluation of the process in order to correct diversion and eventualities.

An incapacity of the Romanian government and the peasantry have been detected here to have access to European funds devoted for development. Both show serious problems to access to the needed capital to deal with its own inversion in rural development projects. This incapacity has been widely commented on among technicians and politician in Romanian administration, but few of them have publicly referred about it.

## V. PEASANTS, RELEGATED LOTS OF THEM

Romanian agricultural conversion from the communist system not only did lose job positions but also lost labor categories reconfiguration linked to this subject matter. In the early 90's, almost 95% of agricultural workers had a position of employed either in farming cooperatives or governmental farms, but after the economic structure reconversion of the country other forms of labor organization emerged like the autonomous ones, family workers, it means, people using most of their time exploiting family lands with no contracts or salaries in pursuit of their autocracy, this strategy is still essential to the precarious economy of many rural families. This underestimated way produces unreachable and sometimes avoidable numbers -due to its public announcement would bring the loss of certain social benefits- Romania's National Statistics Institute stated that 40,000 of agricultural workers may be part of unemployed family category (INS, 2006). Undoubtedly that is much big number.

The difference between salary-earners and non salary-earners is overwhelming, both during the economical expansion period in 2001 and the contracting labor period on. In the last years, the amount of salary and non-salary earners have been reduced, this does not correspond to a big number of salary-earners who have constantly remained in the same position during the last 15 years, but represents the constant drop of non salary-earners which is not similar to the agricultural exploitation destruction.

The number of salary-earners remains steady because it represents the number of people belonging to big agricultural exploitation companies, a sector that has had certain growth in the last decade, the mechanized labors have reduced their needs regarding manpower, while non salary-earners sector, more than 98% small owners group are not responsible for their own exploitation, and in many cases, with no generation relief, their aging; moreover their precarious economic of small exploitation, gives the number of people in employment in agriculture, it means the disappearance of family exploitations.

Evidently, one of the good reasons which agricultural exploitations have had some problems in generational reliefs is the dividends. There are not official numbers that would allow benefits related to small exploitation without big exploitation production distorting the results, while incomes from agriculture and compared to other areas, may indicate an important preliminary value to estimate peasantry precariousness. There is a need to signal that agricultural sector is one of the worst paid in the whole Romanian economy. An employed farmer earns as was previously mentioned above €234.55 as an average per month, while a haulage contractor makes 352.04 Euros a month, a miner €584, and finally a bank employee €740.60 a month (INS, 2012b).

With respect to the low incomes, Romanian country family difficulties in short-land proportions and poor technology stand out as the most difficulties these people have not had access to. During the socialist period of Nicolae Ceausescu and the restitution of land prop-

erties in 1991, the agriculture area has continuously been one of the fundamental pillars in Romanian economy and lifestyle in most Romanian families. The land distribution produced a complex situation for the new owners of land related with the micro fragmentation, alongside an economic crisis in Romanian agricultural production in the 80's took back advances, for example, in irrigation, mechanization, zootechny and vegetal technology, which has been an authentic Romanian agriculture "peasantization".

Although many private company technicians and public executive administrators linked to the agriculture give a huge importance to conservatism and peasantry passivity when it comes to explain the meager condition in which peasants develop their lives, showing a farmer persona of one unable to understand the world, wasting opportunities, and question them afterwards arguing that if they are not successful it is just because they do not want to.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

Since the restitution of private property and land distribution in 1991, but mainly in the first decade of the new century, Romanian agricultural sector has experienced a quick peasantry process in its structure, regarding size and exploitation management of the characteristics of the working families. At the same time, a small number of big farms, especially the ones located in potential agriculture growth like the lowlands of the Danube plain, have gone mechanized, improved technology and looked at the market production. This modern and competitive agriculture contrasts with a peasant agriculture that has been a minority during the communist period but socially extended nowadays, which intervention in the agriculture is minimum, is strongly influenced by self-consumption and linked to local market, produces few dividends and, although most resistance in front of the market instabilities, barely covers land workers economic needs. This unbalance effect coexists with rural areas far away from European standards regarding infrastructure, stuff, and public services which negative consequences are not quite ready by politicians, and management executives, like the unreal effect of the peasants immobility instead of the results with public planning and management in the agrarian sector.

