

# The Romanian Villages in Criș County between Survival and Hope

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**T**HE UNIVERSE of the traditional villages has remained, in the opinion of researchers, whether ethnographers, geographers, linguists or sociologists, a place where man lives in full harmony with nature and the cosmos. This triad (man, nature, cosmos) has shaped the customs, songs, laments, disenchantment spells, rhythmic shouts in verses, dances, costumes, crafts and many more, phenomena that defined the Romanians in this space. In the rural world, clear summer days were accompanied by the trills of larks, shaping the peasants' emotions, as well as their beautiful circle folk dances with rhythmic shouts in verses and party songs. Here, on this "low foothill," came to light the myth of "Miorița" (Ewe-lamb), that invaluable "axiological principle" which Nichita Stănescu called "the Romanian nation's anthem."

In the world of the traditional village, the days were long and the peasants' toil was endless, hardly did they finish one thing when another started. Their worries and concerns were so many and varied that they formed habits, behaviors and feelings that became a way of life. In the traditional village, daily concerns (cleanliness, food, etc.), land cultivation and stock farming were defining in shaping human character, affection, love and respect for all living things (plants or animals), the surrounding nature, traditions, the church and the cosmos. Peasants took care of their lands, trees, and animals as they took care of their offspring. All these were sacred to them, arousing deep feelings in their souls, making them better, more loving, more human in comparison to those living in the asphalt jungle. The charm of nature, their daily needs and their love for the land generated the steadfastness and behavioral beauty of the peasants, who, under divine inspiration, created a string of material and spiritual gems of popular culture.

On the streets of the traditional villages, every now and then would be heard a young man whistling or singing, a type of behavior which would not be considered out of the ordinary, as it represented a state of normality. In the city, passers-by would have frowned at them, considering them peculiar characters with deviant behaviors, contradicting the urban rules. One naturally asks oneself how citizens could enjoy such gestures when their souls are assaulted from all sides by sonic and olfactory pollutants, by street agglomeration and discomfort, verbal aggressiveness, work-related daily stress and more.

COMMUNISM WAS a utopian system, fiercely directed against the villagers, dispossessing them of their lands and forcing them to move to the city, turning them into production units, that is, into something completely foreign to their nature, and those who resisted were thrown in prisons or deported, in the best of cases. Neoliberal/corporatist capitalism does, basically, the exact same thing, except that everything is veiled by illusion of freedom.

Instead of creating the necessary conditions for them to remain at their ancestral hearths and live honestly from cultivating their lands, to which they are organically bound, village inhabitants were offered the gift of freedom, which has led to rural depopulation, mass migration abroad, their enslavement on foreign plantations. Is this really what Romanian peasants have aspired to? Those who have remained no longer have the chance to return to their roots and restore the broken community ties, so they adjust to the rules of the new system. These rules go totally against the material and spiritual practices governing the world of the traditional village, and for the Romanian peasants, the practices derive on the one hand from the sacred poverty, which paired well with them and to which they had to get used to, from their toiling in the fields and their wisdom in the face of life's and history's vicissitudes.

The realities of the new system are a vectorial result and can be likened to somatic maladies, identified for centuries, as well as to mental ones, more recently identified, and to those of a higher order, of the spirit, so to speak. In our opinion, these do not have a morbid, pathological meaning, they do not cripple, do not cause a disability, but only enhance the becoming of being. Thus, philosopher Constantin Noica remarked, "no neurosis can explain the Ecclesiastes' despair, the feeling of exile on Earth or of alienation, the metaphysical boredom as well as the feeling of emptiness or absurdity, the ego's hypertrophy as well as the rejection of everything."<sup>1</sup>

Constantin Noica<sup>2</sup> shed light on some of the great, often beneficial, disorders of the contemporary spirit, naming states and approaches as if they were maladies (the spirit itself has sometimes been called a malady of creation, when its glory was not seen). Well, such a state of malady with great social upheavals affects the contemporary villages in the Criș County, a state leading to concern and sadness, in the sense of the inability to build a future,<sup>3</sup> to despair, discouragement and, implicitly, to despondency.

The current situation of the villages bears the mark of despair, sadness and concern. They are going through an unprecedented material and spiritual state which makes them feel tired, devoid of energy, hope, vitality. In this state, they cannot enjoy the moments related to the occupational and craft activities of the past, the beautiful, romantic and lively ones related to holidays, customs, circle folk dances, corvées, quilting bees etc. Thus, contemporary Romanian villages are in the stage of survival, held hostage by oblivion, aged, depopulated and on the verge of extinction.

Our study is the result of investigations carried out in villages of the Criș County, villages torn between survival and hope. The state of crisis contemporary villages are going through is manifested both at an occupational and at a spiritual level. Today, "the Romanian villages are somewhat crucified between nostalgic idealization and practical abandonment, between traditional identity and precarious survival."<sup>4</sup>

In our opinion, the current state of Romanian villages presents certain malignant disorders (pathological processes of an increasingly serious nature), determined by the mutations occurred during the last decades at various levels (spiritual, social, occupational, residential, demographical, in the quality of life etc.). These disorders bear the mark of social phenomena and facts the villages never faced before during their long existence. Therefore, under the illusion of freedom, the Romanian peasants had to abandon their centuries-old practices and go into exile and live among strangers, leaving behind a suffering they could have never imagined.

Institutions, occupations, crafts, customs, material and spiritual creations which used to be landmarks of the rural world, have now been forgotten. The church and the school are institutions reducing their activities, the mayors are subservient to politics and serve less the interest of their citizens. The cultural centers were ruined by their former destination and lack of authenticity, the police station—decommissioned (based on a draft of the General Inspectorate of the Police, 2,834 communal police stations were closed, to merge with regional police stations), human and veterinary dispensaries—marked by time and lacking specialists as a result of the declining population and number of animals, the local shops (“Cooperativa,” village shops)—turned into clubs, pubs etc., post offices—with no location and reduced to the minimum due to private courier services, the libraries—covered by dust and with no readers, traditional crafts—endangered, the rites or customs over the year and of family life stripped of sense and meaning, village quilting bees, *corvées* and circle folk dances—devoid of the purpose of their existence. All these are accompanied by the contemporary villagers’ civic and moral degradation, aging and the migration of the village population abroad, as well as the deterioration of the vital occupations, agriculture and animal husbandry. This is the overall picture of the rural Criș County at present.

In the world of the traditional village, the community members knew and respected each other, greeted each other on the street, and when strangers passed by they were respectfully greeted, as if belonging to the community. Relationships among people were so close that all seemed akin, relatives, part of an extended family. The schools and the churches, vital institutions for the Romanian villages, played an essential role in the formation and consolidation of these states.

It was in the teachers and the priests that the tillers, the makers of the daily bread placed their hopes and trust over time. Teachers and priests were the ones who educated them, taught them to read and write, to learn and master the moral norms of coexistence in society and, when necessary, took part in the great events of their human lives (birth, marriage and death). The priests united them through the Sacrament of Marriage, forming that gem of permanence, the family, baptized their infants in the holy church and in full harmony with God. The church and the school helped to guide their young to become “great people” representing with dignity, probity and honor the communities they came from. A village with no church and school risks to end with devastated souls, to decline morally and spiritually, implicitly leading to the material impoverishment of the community.

Our analysis will focus, in the following, on several mutations that have occurred during the latest decades in the centuries-old structures of Criș County villages, includ-

ing those that have taken place within churches and schools, with serious consequences for the civic and moral degradation of contemporary villagers.

One can say that in the contemporary village, the relationship between the church and its parishioners has weakened a lot, compared to the one existing in the world of the traditional village. Parishioners participate in large numbers only in the religious services held by the church at the great feasts of the year, Christmas, Easter, Pentecost and Saint Mary. During the rest of the year, the churches are almost empty. Only the village elders attend the Holy Mass on Sundays or religious holidays. This is the situation, in spite of the fact that in the last decades more than 70 new houses of worship (Orthodox churches) have been built, and over 30 have been restored in the Diocese of Oradea. Therefore, all the conditions are met for the optimal carrying out of worship activities. The fact that the number of parishioners is decreasing day by day is due, on the one hand, to the migration from the village to other countries, and on the other, to the aging of the rural population.

Another cause would be the attitude of the young people, the few remaining ones, towards that traditional rural world. Unfortunately, for the young inhabitants of the contemporary village, the traditional village remains only a memory, and not an “existential center, prolonged in mythology and metaphysics,” as philosopher Lucian Blaga masterfully defined it. How many of those populating this world still perceive childhood “as a single gateway open to metaphysics,” or still live in the “cosmic horizon and the consciousness of a destiny emanating from eternity”? Obviously, they are very few, if any. On Sundays and religious holidays, the young people still left in the villages head for other places of entertainment, not for the churches, they go to the mountains, on picnics or to swimming pools.

If we were to talk about the causes, we might also point to the fact that it's been a long time since the village priests stopped living in the parish houses, having moved to the city, after acquiring their own apartments, and also carry out other profitable activities, as ministry wages no longer provide them and their families with a decent living in the village. Therefore, they no longer take direct part in the daily life of the community, unlike the traditional village priests who, in addition to their daily pieces of advice to the villagers, used to work the church garden and land with their help. Nowadays, the priests are notified by phone when an event occurs in the community they are supposed to be pastoring. With the construction of new houses of worship, more than 60 monuments of popular architecture have fallen into disrepair (wooden and brick churches), all over two hundred years old (in Ogești, Topa de Jos, Topa de Sus, Copăceni, Sâmbăta, Săucani, Vărășeni, Câmp-Moți etc.), places of worship which no longer hold any canonical activity: liturgy, the Holy Unction for the community, baptisms, marriages etc. Thus, with such behavior, contemporary Romanian villages become more and more eroded and vulnerable.

As to the conflicts between various denominations, they have been largely overcome, each practicing their rites in separate churches or houses of worship. We are talking here about the disagreements between the Orthodox and the Greek Catholic Church. The return of the places of worship by the Orthodox Church to the Greek Catholic one often

led to the construction of new Orthodox churches, which explains in many cases the construction of so many new churches in the Diocese of Oradea. This is generally the situation of the church in the contemporary rural community.

In the following we will try to make an analysis of the rural education, of the place and role of the school today. Since 2009, the rural educational institutions have restricted their activities by merging. Thus, by 2018, 79 educational establishments have merged in the current 91 communes of Bihor County. This was due, on the one hand, to the decrease in the number of school children, and on the other, to the so-called desire for efficiency of the educational process, for the reduction of administrative-financial expenses. Let us remember that in the last 20 years there have been reforms after reforms, experiments, pilot studies, each worse than the previous one for the Romanian education in general, for the rural one in particular. These have led to educational commuting, both of the school children and of teachers, and the result is a high percentage of functional analphabetism, with primary and secondary school students who cannot read and write, or who can read without understanding what they have read.

Also, the percentage of students passing their baccalaureate exam at high schools in rural areas is catastrophic. These results are due both to the students' deviant behaviors and complete disinterest, as well as to the teachers' indifference.

It is impossible to have high-performance or any education whatsoever with untenured teachers, changing each year, and whose teaching activity is related only to classroom time and who, in the village, are familiar only with the school entrance and the cars and buses they commute by. The teaching staff should become a permanence of the school, the soul of the Romanian village, being involved in its spiritual and material life.

Such an ostracizing social environment increasingly promotes and maintains a culture of violence, based on aggressiveness and intolerance, culminating in all sorts of delinquent phenomena (rapes, robberies, homicides, suicides etc.) which draw attention to the unthinkable level of immorality that has now been reached in this social space. Some of the causes of these issues are the following:

- young people left, from an early age, in the care of grandparents or close relatives, by parents who went abroad and no longer have control over their societal manifestations;
- the lack of civic, moral, religious education and, last but not least, of education in general, corroborated with the precarious level of culture and civilization in most Romanian villages;
- the lack of jobs, which limits the aspirations of these socially excluded villagers;
- the dependence of most young people on those who provide them with a minimum of support, living on the edge of subsistence, some as day laborers, becoming dependent on any existential resource given to them by the rich of the village and society;
- the vulnerability of the democratic institutions staffed by ignorant people, graduates of worthless "higher education" institutions, with nothing to show for in terms of personal professional achievements.

The abovementioned issues amplify social inequality and inequity, frustrations and dissatisfactions, which become real causes of such deviant and delinquent manifestations, the actions carried out being a response to the general disinterest of decision-makers to-

wards these rural communities. For such frustrated individuals, the villages have become a hostile and averse environment, revealing a series of inner conflicting states, against the background of aggressive selves altered by the environment in which they survive.

This state of affairs has diverted the Romanian villages from the path of traditional values, of psychosocial balance and of stability, leading to instability and psycho-moral and psycho-behavioral degradation. Against this background of socio-affective and economic insecurity, corroborated with the state of chronic poverty, relatively many members of the rural communities (pensioners, women, unemployed, people excluded from the occupational sphere and activity, specific to the rural environment or not), have other preoccupations which lead to delinquent phenomena such as the consumption of alcoholic beverages (the phenomenon becoming a much more visible reality in this environment), as well as other habits borrowed from the urban world (coffee mornings, daily or weekend mundane outings etc.), which have replaced the rural, traditional ones, converting the village in every way into a social environment living on the edge of survival.

Such a situation highlights the precarious state of the Romanian rural communities, especially where the scourge of poverty, in the context of generalized crisis, reaches the limit, warning of the need for economic and social strategies and policies able to get the Romanian villages out of the slump in which they have fallen, and in which coexist most inhabitants of this social environment, which is increasingly degrading, morally, culturally and spiritually.

**E**NSURING THE stability, durability of the Romanian rural world in general, and of that of Criș County in particular, requires the cooperation of institutional mechanisms likely to end this state of crisis. As we have shown above, the mutations the Romanian villages are going through are not only of a socio-economic nature, but also of an anthropological and spiritual one, which further increases the radius of the vicious circle of waste, fear, consumerism, selfishness and hedonism taken to extremes.

In our view, the main agents of the rural world which need to collaborate in order to revitalize this material and spiritual environment in all aspects and at all levels are as follows.

The church, with an important role in reviving the spiritual life of contemporary villages. It should be the one in charge of the villagers' moral education, healing and formation, in order for them to live in society as good Christians and good citizens, to take a stand against modern individualism, against contemporary totalitarianism, authoritarian and tyrannical, to defend and support human dignity. It should be an everyday church—not just one for Sundays or holidays for people and society. This must lead to the priests' involvement in the life of the community, so that they become once more what they used to be for the villages, and for each of their parishioners. In other words, the priests should return to the villages, settle in the midst of their flocks to shepherd them according to the laws of Christian morality.

The school is another institution which must be co-opted in this process of village regeneration, of restoring it to what it used to be morally and spiritually. Together with the church, it must be the main driving force in educating the village youth in terms of morals, preserving traditions, openness to trades lacking in the village but vital to it (agricultural



or horticultural engineers, agricultural mechanics, beekeepers, teachers etc.). Updating the educational space with the introduction of habitational elements in schools and outside them requires providing access to running water in schools, upgrading school sanitation facilities and sports grounds, bringing school medical offices to modern day standards, equipping classrooms and labs with adequate teaching materials and technology, providing school libraries with the latest digital publications, computers, printers etc. All these facilities are needed in order to connect rural pupils to novelty, lest they should be deprived of the opportunities of the modern world. To all that we would add a priority element pertaining to infrastructure: the modernization of roads connecting the villages to the commune center, as well as equipping schools with means of transport for students.

As the oldest and most important institution in the history of humankind, the optimal environment for human formation and becoming, the family is the emotional, social and cultural framework for the training and education of young people. Through its functions, the family must help the Romanian village change for the better. The family environment constitutes the socio-economic and emotional framework of the child's development, it is the true school of feelings, given the abundance and variety of relationships it provides, hence the deeply socializing function of the family.

The social changes also affected village family functions as follows: the status and role of the women has changed significantly, leading to their economic independence, and their opportunities on the labor market are revolutionary elements for the evolution of the families. Rural women are forced to migrate and work abroad, often independently of their husbands, as caregivers for elderly people and children, housekeepers for families, restaurant employees etc.

It should be noted that the contemporary village world has seen a change in the way families relate to children, which depends on the parents' economic and occupational status. For certain children, their parents' status may be a source of satisfaction or one of conflict, thus families with a high socio-economic status will develop in children a sense of independence by giving them a lot of facilities (computers, state-of-the-art mobile phones, designer clothes and even cars).

Without diminishing its importance as a social institution, the family is no longer a conservative institution, but one increasingly adapted to changes in a democratic and open society. The family is more and more integrated in the dynamics of society, increasingly conditioned by the economic and social changes, influencing, in its turn, the overall evolution.



## Notes

1. Constantin Noica, *Șase maladii ale spiritului contemporan* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2012), 2.
2. *Ibid.*, 3.
3. Rollo May, *The Discovery of Being: Writings in Existential Psychology* (New York–London: Norton, 2015).

4. The Speech of His Beatitude Daniel, patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, delivered at the opening of the Conference “The Rural Socio-Economic Space: National Identity and Unity,” organized by Gheorghe Ionescu-Șișești Academy of Agricultural and Forestry Sciences of Bucharest and the Romanian Patriarchate, at the Patriarchal Palace, on Monday, 12 November 2018.

### **Abstract**

#### The Romanian Villages in Criș County between Survival and Hope

This study is the result of investigations undertaken in the contemporary world of Romanian villages in Criș County, a place subjected, during the last decades, to changes at all societal levels. Our research has shown that contemporary villages have undergone a series of mutations caused by external causes, that is, something completely foreign to the nature and practices of the Romanian peasant of yore. Through our investigations, we have tried to shed light on some of the main changes in the rural world, changes which have caused a “sickly” state, with great social convulsions. This is due to the major alterations in other socio-economic sectors outside the rural area, but which also affected it, generating phenomena it has never been confronted with throughout its history.

### **Keywords**

village, mutations, survival, negative changes