

Work, Relations and Forms of Cooperation in Transylvanian Rural Economy

Aims and the Delimitation of the Project

In my thesis I treat a topic which I have been interested in for a very long time: the functioning of self-organized associations and other forms of cooperation with a leading, an orienting role in rural economy, and the system of connections surrounding them. I am focusing on three areas: the Lower Nicău, the Middle Târnava Mică and Upper Trei Scaune region. The starting point of the study and of the whole research is represented by the autonomous popular institutions meant to fulfil communal functions and the deficits of official law making and economical organization, which – regardless of their state of institutionalization or their functions – are related to production and the distribution of goods, meaning no simple economic relations, but also personal and social ones. Basically I consider as such institutions the *kaláka* (traditional reciprocal work) and other reciprocal works, the organizations controlling animal husbandry and communal benefits along with the institutions appearing near specific agricultural sectors. Because of reciprocity I also add to these the communities organizing the rites of passage and the mutual help during crisis. And with another step, in the interest of analyzing other levels of associations and relations, I shall include in my research all forms of non-symmetric relations, inner or outer ones, therefore I touch upon the relations between farmer and day-labourer – considered by myself as a relation between owner and client –, but beyond these I also try to present the relations between the farms and the city.

Regarding economic, self-organizing communities I shall try to discuss the following questions: what makes people go and work for other people, sacrificing their own time without any institutional assurance that they will receive the invested work back. Why is that so, that when there is a truck full of bricks in front of a house, the neighbours, the closer acquaintances – but in many cases any people of the village – feel that it is their duty to go there and give a helping hand? Where do they know it from that they have to go? Or if someone deals with day-labourers, where does he know from which are the valid patterns of relationship, and on the other hand: what are the patterns the day-labourers are following? So the question is regarding the organization from below, the mechanisms of self-organization both when it is cooperation between equal parts and when the relation is in some meaning asymmetric. Thus I think that if I had to formulate the main question of this present thesis, it would underline the “why” of the sentenced above: why do the rural inhabitants form a working community of mutual help? Why do they associate, why do they associate in the way

they do, what kinds of inner or outer relations do they set up and why do they set up exactly those and exactly in that certain way?

Following an answer to my questions I analyzed different forms of cooperation tied together by reciprocity, by the existence of mutuality and trust, and by the fact that beyond organizing production and distribution, the relations between certain economic units are in every case codified, and finally by the fact that they are a part of an ecologic, social and economic regime characteristic to the Transylvanian village. The primordial points of reference formulating the differences between the systems and institutions included in this work are formal ones, but my aim is to enlighten the possible structural and content regards and to point out further possibilities of classification. The essential aim of this thesis is the following: to see what variants of these associations rooted in the traditional rural life, in the system of serfdom constraints and in the communal forms of production can be found, what kind of new forms of relationship did appear, what is their role in the maintenance of a certain village's economic life and system of relations, in the formulation of norms and moral attitudes, in fighting situations of crisis. Therefore I approach this topic from several points of view and I try to reveal the contexts which in my interpretation determine the forms of cooperation.

First of all I touch upon the image of the community and village – that was often identified with the community without any reflection – in order to name all the ideological contents, which I would try to overstep, and then I give an operational definition of the notions in use. The two following chapters can be regarded to some extent as a summary of research history, as in the first one I give a brief presentation of the historical aspects of the works related to the *kaláka*, in order to describe the apparition of this form of cooperation besides its evolution and transformation. With the set up of categories of classification, the aim of the other chapter is to elaborate – summing up the results that exist so far – a well adjustable system at least on the level of a hypothesis. Finally, I present my analysis along some thematic points of reference considered essential in the transmission and change of village organizations' traditional patterns (the situation of agriculture, informality, morality etc.) because in my opinion without this analysis a prosaic typology cannot state anything valid about the functioning of the economical leading institutions. So first of all I talk about the situation of agriculture in general, then about the existing sources, and I give a brief presentation of the target areas in the same chapter. As a next step of the analysis I touch upon the relation of cooperational forms with informality, and closely related to this I also discuss that of associations and interethnic relations. Because in my interpretation the occasions of work are playing a major role not only in the economic life but also in the sustenance and exposure of a

system of knowledge, I also analyze the dimensions of this knowledge related to work, namely morality and rationality. The fact that I do an analysis of a social and economical phenomenon, the cooperational forms, from several points of view, cannot be overemphasized. In my view, without understanding the points of view exposed in this thesis we cannot draw an enough detailed picture about the attitudes shown in rural cooperation and outer relations, therefore in every chapter I explain the different phenomena by involving newer and newer related factors.

Methodology/Applied Methods

My interest in the relations of economic life, in the popular institutions, communal occasions of work and forms of economic association was determined – besides a scientific one – also by personal causes, therefore the personal aspect had a direct impact on the methods of research as well. Already before 1989 and especially afterwards my life had such a turn that in my native village I took part in many *kaláka*, being able to observe their ways of functioning. Although I was not born in a peasant family – both of my parents were teachers – I had to be acquainted with rural life and agricultural work, because the collective farms enabled non-members too to receive a parcel of land as share-croppers. At the change of regime I was exactly 14 years old, and on the returned land of my grandfather my father was able to set off his own farm, but we still helped out my grandfather, too. My neighbours and acquaintances also got back their lands, so there were a lot of people starting their feverish activity; therefore the number of work occasions and cooperation was constantly growing. My spring and summer holidays were filled with work, and it was cruel to learn how to keep up with two mower adults, to keep close to the first one, as the scythe of the second one kept moving behind my legs – ethnography, from the outside, calls this instil into work. I was already a student in the first year, we can say that almost an ethnographer, when – being only 20 – the responsibility of working and leading a farm was placed onto my shoulders. Since then I have been intensely observe and reflect on myself as a member of rural cooperation, as I have had many opportunities, because our damaged farm – especially at the beginning – received the help of numerous neighbours and friends, giving us credit that we had to return in time. Credit and return – regardless if they did it or I did – was in fact work or other form of help that was logical, offering itself quite in a usual manner in the case of farms in lack of resources during the 1990s. As the leader and major workforce of a farm, as a giving or receiving part in a *kaláka* I was forced to learn and adapt to the local knowledge as good as I could. I had to know whom to turn to in case of emergencies, who is more helpful and who is less, which day-labourer is a good worker and which one is not, how much drink some of

them acquire – and lots of things like that. I became more profound with this knowledge after graduating – leaving behind a major fieldwork in Luna with very important experiences on cooperation – and working as a teacher next to my native village. Within a series of situations like these or similar to these I came closer to what I call in this thesis economic attitude. I cannot say that during this period I was doing fieldwork as we know it, and I won't even call myself a participant ethnographer, unless someone with active participation or complete participation. But I don't want to delude myself or the reader that I have been doing fieldwork in my native village for years. I don't want to do this first of all because I didn't step out of my role, I didn't expose the ethnographic work: I was working together with the others and I tried to observe as much as I can. But the hidden ethnographic work also has its own disadvantages: the ethnographer is not able to do any recordings or to take notes in these situations, unless after he arrived home, he would recall events and sentences from his memory – if he has the mood or the energy to do so after a hard day's work. I verified the knowledge collected this way within different conversations held after I came back from Cluj-Napoca, but I neither on these occasions did I force the underlining of my ethnographer's identity. I was talking about the life of the village with those that I knew, and if I had the chance – more and more rarely – I was still working together with them. I think that my position came closest to that of the native ethnographer.

The same personal aspect turned out to be present during my fieldwork in Upper Trei Scaune and along the Târnava Mică, because it came to light quite early that I came from a rural area myself and I have some knowledge about the discussed topic, therefore people used to explain things to me like to a person who came from another region, being familiar with a different or a similar economic system. In these areas data collecting through working process was not possible, so I could gather mainly verbal information from farmers more or less wealthy, more or less young and more or less willing to cooperate, although I could still observe working processes, *kaláka* or day-labour. Altogether I consider my methods close to that of participating observation, because first: most of my data comes from my active participation or my observations, and second: I was interested primarily in attitudes and relations. Because of this I was engaged in several informal conversations that I recorded or wrote down, depending on the situation. The advantage of these soft methods is that the questions raised in this research could be constantly transformed and they provided a more profound insight into the life of the people, and in the same time newer and newer questions could be formulated, so – although my work reflects only to a small part of society, and these affirmations are valid only for the very areas it is dealing with – with the setup of the theoretical model these questions can ease the understanding of other regions' economic system.

Consequently I did not follow a simple description of facts, but to create a proper theoretic background for the analysis of the collected data. Regarding the methods of work up I tried to get answers for my questions in a way that allowed me to see the phenomena related to one another, because I thought, and I still think, that the popular institutions in question have a major role not only in the orientation of farming, thus their analysis asks for a much wider context. In this work the main endeavour is to set the experienced phenomena by the answers given into a frame and to examine to what extent these frames contribute – if they contribute at all – to the sustenance of long lasting systems, if we can talk about such long lasting systems at all. Thus I can rephrase: I see mutual connections among the examined phenomena, so I analyze these through their connections. I try to say something more about rural lifeworlds, about the relations between economy, society, culture and nature through the functioning of self-organizing communities, and also to get closer to these institutions through the understanding of the characteristics of rural economic systems. I consider these communities such integrative institutions which include not only the economic activities, but they also transmit the social values, norms and rules of conduct. I state that rural economies become only partially integrated into the capitalist economy, the communal point of view survived in their leading orientation, and that determines their everyday strategies as well. To demonstrate all this, I do not follow one certain theory in my work, although the notions proposed by Károly Polányi and Pierre Bourdieu (namely the theory of economy as an embedded phenomenon) determined in many ways the question rising of this thesis. Thus socially embedded economic activities and the economic calculation hidden behind non calculative approach are important starting points of my thesis, I come back to them from time to time, I argue with them (and with myself), I apply them to my own material and I tinge their statements.

The Enumeration of the Results

I. In the first part of my thesis I make an overview of some of the specificities of the power, scientific and everyday discourses regarding the community, pointing on the ideologic sources of social sciences and on the formulations regarding *organic community*. In this part – considered by myself worth to be written because even nowadays many people identify the village with the world of purity – I point on the fact that for the scientific attention the village and the community – identified with the old days – is not simply a social, economic or settlement condition, but an outstanding place, a place of values. According to the endeavours of modernization the village is a condition to be stepped beyond, while to the minorities' way of thinking it is a value to be kept. So from an outer point of view the power of the

community is sometimes a power of withdrawal, sometimes a power of maintenance, a fact that could be exposed also on the axes of criticism and conservatism, and as a conclusion we can say that our minority way of thinking is conservative, therefore it constructs the village along a notion of community interpreted as a value, and without any reflection. The *kaláka* has become a kind of emblematic representation of all this – and in my study I prove exactly the fact that the *kaláka* is not the historical survival of unselfishness and noble gestures, but a response to given social and economic situations.

II. To make this background more easy to understand, in the next part I make an overview of the data provided by history, historical ethnography, history of society and history of economy. Taking a look to the history of peasantry and the village, behind the fact that the participants of rural economy adjust to each other, we can discover old – possibly several centuries old – forms of cooperation helping out the individual or communal cultivation of common lands or leading the affairs of common animal keeping. Although it would be quite hard based on the actual literature and data to reveal any genetic connection between common use of land and associations in behalf of a certain person, the *kaláka*, but it is without doubt that common use of land forced the inhabitants of a village to adjust to each other in doing different agricultural works. Besides common land we have to deal with such specific forms of cooperation as the ones related to certain sectors of agriculture, determining the access to certain resources, controlling profits and profit-margins, possibly the order of cultivation: we can think here about the *hegyközség* (community of vine-growers) and the commonage, which also represent such a cooperative frames within individual owners have to adjust their interests to the interests of the other members of the community. All these assure a fertile ground for the tendency of cooperation shown during different forms of agricultural work and which – because economy was entirely embedded and organically tied to socio-cultural phenomena – was a part of the everyday meeting practices of the members of the community. Finally I also refer in this part to the connections between work and entertainment, exposing the possibility that the ritual over-consumption at the time of harvest served as the apportioning of the further consumption.

III. At the classification of reciprocal works – based mostly on the results of ethnographic literature – I offer a new point of view according to which I distinguish the forms of organization from the forms of activity, thus some problems that are not really clarified in the ethnographic literature become more easy to analyze. In this matter I delimited the following categories:

Organizational forms and institutions

1. Communities leading a common economical system and animal keeping

2. Communities organizing the exchange of work
3. Organizational forms regarding ritual occasions and dealing with crisis
4. Civilian and professional organizations, singlestranded coalitions

Forms of activity

1. Activities closely related to farming
 - 1.a. Work for the community
 - 1.b. Work for one member of the community
 - 1.c. Work for someone from outside of the community
2. Forms of activity related to the experiencing of rituals
 - 2.a. Preparing for the rituals
 - 2.b. Organizing and arranging the rites of passage
 - 2.c. Ritual averting of danger
3. Forms of help activated in situations of crisis

IV. My aim with the analysis of resources is to present the economic resources of the Transylvanian village included in a system, because I believe that this way we can get closer to the understanding of the functioning of deficiency as an economic practice. In fact I am interested in the aspects regarding the resources of the rural, familial farms' functioning; therefore I analyze the resources in three different groups, a delimitation inspired by classic economics, but created as a work hypothesis: the first group includes the material resources, the second one the natural-environmental resources, while the third one the human resources. The main conclusions of this chapter are the following:

- (1) One of the bases of the Transylvanian rural economy is the profound and detailed knowledge on resources, and the optimal exploitation of these based on this knowledge. This includes the exploitation of the natural environment, the use of the machines, implements, animals and human resources.
- (2) The way of use is generally delimited by certain patterns, therefore the livestock receives extra feed only in situations of need, or they do not built fences from stakes or twigs – although it would be more economical than the plank – because it is a sign of poverty. The variety and ingenuity experienced during the use of resources is limited, it is determined by the given patterns, and we can rarely see examples for innovation.
- (3) In the rural economy the environment is seen as the entirety of limited resources. Because of this limited character, in this approach getting rich happens inevitably at the expense of the others. The patterns regulating the use of resources are rooted in this communal existence as well.

(4) Besides the internally produced resources, which in many cases prove to be insufficient, external forms of income are very important. As a consequence of resource diversification the systems based on traditional approach become restructured, and the norms are reconsidered.

V. It is well known that due to the restricted character of material possibilities and monetary incomes the households are looking to cut back the outer expenses as much as possible. Filling the gaps of the officially controlled market, of the official economy and solving the supplying deficiencies the familial farms are using specific techniques in every situation, techniques that are tied to the official sphere with several lines. For the rural economies one way is to establish and sustain some forms of cooperation described in this thesis, which do not acquire a monetary presence, or relations of exchange with other families or individuals, so they can get to some goods – at least manpower and the experience of others – without any special material expenditure. But the forms and activities of association have changed in many aspects in the era of rural community disintegration, during the socialist economic system and during the return to free market economy, therefore I present the techniques of socialism and of the transition period taking into consideration the changing conditions and arguing for the fact that informal relations – regardless if rural–rural or rural–urban ones – had a considerable contribution to the sustenance of the families' welfare. Maybe it is not exaggerated to state regarding resources that because they have diversified considerably in the last years, the techniques to reach these resources have diversified as well and as a consequence there were new contents appearing in the traditional cooperation forms and the accent was relocated onto relations of other kind. In my thesis I bring arguments and examples to show that on the rural level we are facing such a complex system of achieving and sustaining welfare, which combines patterns including official work, informal activities and the passage between these two spheres.

VI. Although I am usually talking about cooperation between families of equal economic level, I shall refer to the economic and activity relations between families of different economic level, because these relations are socially and culturally embedded in the same way as the other institutions of reciprocity. I analyze the vertical relations established during work between the land owner and the day-labourer, because day-labour stands closer in many aspects to cooperation work than to contractual work. According to my observations work is the central element in these relations, but it is not the exclusive one – especially if the day-labourer family is from the same village as the owner or from a village nearby –, it is about much more, about a long term relationship, where the owner is the patron of the working family. In the same time – because quite often these relations are tied between a non Gypsy employer and a Gypsy employee – I also state in this part of my work that nevertheless these

relations are established, the borders between the two ethnic groups are drawn on the economic level as well.

VII. In the last large chapter of my work – after discussing upon the notion of moral economy – I analyze the forms of contact and activity which in my interpretation are carrying also the ideas of the locals on a right way of life and a reasonable rural–urban relation of power. In the sustenance of moral traditions I see constraint as an important factor, because it can be discovered all the time in the search for the right way of the rural farmers at a change of regime with so many contradictions. The moral related to rural economy can be seen within the village-praising ideological constructions as a part of a conscious choice against the processes of modernization, which are devastating archaic culture and organic communities. But this moral system can also be regarded as one that is regulating the connection between farming man and resources and society, a mental tool for creating situations of balance. Moral economy is revealed during the verbal formation of one village’s internal or external relations and in the same time – in relation with the changing of rural society, with the diversification of resources and income strategies – there are dissensions in its organization and its reception as a norm. At the end of this part I finally point to the fact that rural economy is working with a specific rationality which takes into consideration the existing conditions, and which we are disposed to consider irrational in comparison with the capitalist industrial organization, although in the given situation it is one possible method of adaptation.

List of publications

- *Az erővonalak eltolódása – magyar–cigány gazdasági kapcsolatok egy székelyföldi faluban.* In: Szabó Á. Töhötöm (szerk.): Lenyomatok. Fiatal kutatók a népi kultúráról. Kriza Könyvek 12. Kriza János Néprajzi Társaság, Kolozsvár, 2002. 205–217.
- *Informális technikák a hagyományos gazdálkodásban.* In: Szabó Á. Töhötöm (szerk.): Lenyomatok. Fiatal kutatók a népi kultúráról. 2. Kriza Könyvek 19. Kriza János Néprajzi Társaság, Kolozsvár, 2003. 105–125.
- *Bizalom és elfojtott bizalmatlanság. A társasmunka és a kölcsönösség néhány jellemzője.* In: Szabó Levente – Virginás Andrea (szerk.): RODOSZ tanulmányok. Bölcsész tudományok. Kriterion, Kolozsvár, 2004. 22–41.
- *Kizárás vagy befogadás? Magyarok és cigányok az informális gazdaságban.* Székelyföld. 2004. (VIII.) szeptember, 122–144.
- *Stratégiakeresés és alkalmazkodás.* Korunk, 2004/12. 99–103.

- *Patroni vechi, patroni noi: maghiari și țigani din perspectiva economiei informale.* In: Chelcea Liviu (ed.): *Economia informală în România. Piețe, practici, sociale și transformări ale statului după 1989.* Paideia, Bukarest, 2005. 315–341
- *Van-e a gazdaságnak identitása? Az identitás megjelenítése és a második gazdaság.* In: Bakó Boglárka – Szoták Szilvia (szerk.): *Magyarlakta kistérségek és kisebbségi identitások a Kárpát medencében.* Gondolat – MTA ENKI, Budapest, 2005. 66–77.
- *Megismerés és tapasztalat: az erdélyi falu problematikája.* Magyar Kisebbség, X. évfolyam, 2005. 3–4. (37–38. szám), 117
- *Falusi modernizáció: változás vagy válság? Korunk, 2006. június, 60–66.*
- *Robogóból kisszekér. Három erdélyi kistáj gazdálkodásának erőforrása.* In: Jakab Albert Zsolt – Szabó Á. Töhötöm (szerk.): *Lenyomatok 5. Fiatal kutatók a népi kultúráról.* Kriza Könyvek 27. Kriza János Néprajzi Társaság, Kolozsvár, 2006. 179–200.
- *A kooperáció mint agrárstratégia. A gazdasági környezet és a fejlődés kérdései.* In: Peti Lehel – Szabó Á. Töhötöm (szerk.): *Agrárörökség és specializáció a Kis-Küküllő mentén.* Nis Kiadó, Kolozsvár, 2006. 101–151.
- *Morális elvek az erdélyi falusi gazdálkodásban.* Tabula, 2006. 9. évf. 2. szám, 187–212.
- *A falu és a közösség ereje: mit gondolunk a faluról, és miért gondoljuk azt? Várad, 2007. 4–5. VI. évf. 32–33. szám, 104–109.*