

DECLINE OF A NATIONAL ICON: DEROGATORY REPRESENTATIONS OF THE ROMANIAN PEASANT IN RECENT TELEVISION PROGRAMS

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Abstract

*Intellectuals and artists have been crafting an image of the Romanian peasant as the building block of the nation since the second half of the 19th century. The process went hand in hand with the modernization of the elites, and the peasant was thus mainly ‘discovered’ within the cultural framework of Romanticism,—as the ‘eternal autochthon’ (Mihăilescu, 2017, p.173), creator of the specific Kultur of the Romanian people. However, dramatic social transformations such as the difficult transition period of the ‘90s have shifted the focus from a complimentary representation of the peasant as the national foundation – and all the positive characteristics of his/her habitus in terms of material, spiritual and aesthetic values– to a rather alienated and anachronistic figure coming across as a burden that has to be carried into modernity by the enlightened social strata. This paper uses visual analysis, grounded in Barthesian semiotics, to explore the changes in modes of representation of the peasant in popular media from the depository of national values to a marginal lower class, striving to keep up with the urban lifestyle. Various portrayals of peasants in TV series and sketches, movies and memes point to the degradation of the peasant figure in the public imagination. Images of poverty, bad taste and a lack of hygiene seem to pollute the bodies, garments and home environments of the rural characters, with a toxic effect on their language and behaviour as well. Although there have always been derogatory images of the peasants in the discourse of the elites (Mihăilescu also coined the term ‘domestic primitive’ for the representation associated with the historical tendency to portray the peasants as a backward population incapable of progress), in recent times this tendency has prevailed, especially with the rural-themed successful TV series *Las Fierbinți*, for mainly ideological reasons which will be discussed. Thus, apart from deconstructing a national myth, I argue that the representation of contemporary peasants and their degenerating habitus also contributes to the polarization in the Romanian society.*

Keywords: peasant; popular media; representations; stereotypes; polarization.

1. Introduction

A team of first responders has been called to the village of Fierbinți after a local man fell motionless in the dirt. One of the paramedics lifts an empty bottle from the ground and sighs: ‘Alcoholic coma, the local specialty...’¹. There is bitter resignation to the professional’s attitude in this scene from the TV series *Las Fierbinți*. The message is clear: expensive resources are spent each time a drunkard loses consciousness by the side of a village road. This is how intelligent, modern structures like the emergency services are wasted on the mess the rural world has become. The villagers are lazy and thus poor, they don’t contribute taxes to maintain the modern structures, and they are too uncivilized to

¹ Original text: “Comă alcoolică, specialitatea locală...”

refrain from drinking and too ignorant to vote the correct way – to vote for the complete Westernization of Romania. In a nutshell, this is the portrait of the villager put forward by the most viewed TV show in the recent history of Romania.

This essay analyzes elements of visual rhetoric (Barthes, 1964; Danesi, 2017) to argue that post-socialist media have contributed to the mainstreaming of a derogatory image of the Romanian peasant. This iconographic slide towards the pejorative has played a role in the advancement of a specific form of social polarization. Studies spanning the last decade have shown polarization to be a general social and political phenomenon with an acute manifestation in the United States, where it has been framed generally as a recent pathology of the democratic process (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Abramowitz, 2010). Europe has its own forms of political polarization, but what they have in common is a shift from ideological to affective messaging (Iyengar et al., 2012; Bettarelli et al., 2022). Recent scholarship has tended to investigate the polarizing effects of social media and internet culture (Lelkes et al., 2017, among many others), while others (Gill, 2022; Taibbi, 2019), have associated negative feelings towards social and political outgroups with exposure to televised media discourse. Social and political polarization in Romania has been the focus of several studies in recent years, either correlated with cultural patterns (Grecu, 2021), the urban-rural educational gap (Zamfir, 2017), or geographically distributed inequality of opportunity (Pop, 2023). This essay takes a different approach, inquiring how media representations build on historical negative perceptions of the rural population and on the complex cultural and economic consequences of the chaotic 1990s in order to present the Romanian public imagination with an image of the peasant heavy with ‘blemishes of character’ (Goffman, 1963, p.7), thus adding another representational layer to the already growing multiple forms of polarization. The examples used here will be mainly drawn from the series *Las Fierbinți*, but occasionally other media content will be used to illustrate important points. The portrayals in the show will be analyzed as visual texts, meaning ‘composite semiotic forms’ (Danesi, 2017) combining smaller signifiers into more complex constructions (Sebeok & Danesi, 2000) conveying an ideological message that can be decoded and interpreted.

2. Context

Ever since the creation of the modern Romanian state, the persistence of a ‘peasant issue’ (*chestiunea țărăneasă*) in the public consciousness has carried with it a perception of a fundamental gap between the modernizing urban classes and the rural masses. A paradox was haunting Romanian nation-building: the bulk of the population had to be moulded into a ‘foundation of the nation’ by urban intellectuals who felt they were already part of a different nation. Garabet Ibrăileanu makes this clear in 1909, noting that no other people has taken such a distance from itself (1979, p. 128). The nation-building project functioned as the rhetorical pretext for such distancing, as Verdery remarked:

The ideological process also constructed through discourse a relation to the lower classes, especially the peasants, that perpetuated their subjection, setting the masses squarely in another camp from those who spoke for them and precluding a new political relationship among groups. (Verdery, 1995, p.71)

More recent work has argued in the same direction (see Borza, 2022 for the distance between the rural world and the elites as expressed in interwar novels). Efforts to close the gap were unsuccessful throughout the 20th century. In 2017 anthropologists would still

identify a “discourse of two Romanias”² (Mihăilescu, 2017, p. 172, our translation), often predicated upon the metaphor of the ant and the grasshopper: the backward Romania of the countryside is poorer than the dynamic urban Romania simply because it is lazier. Sometimes the other-mirroring narrative becomes almost farcical: “He wasn’t a shepherd because he didn’t smell of sheep”, denounced a senator during a sheepmen’s protest. ‘He smelled of perfume, like us. A shepherd smells like sheep and doesn’t wash.’³ (Mihăilescu, 2017, p. 172, our translation). This essay contends that current media portrayals of peasants contribute to the deepening of this social chasm, but this time by abandoning any luster of *Kultur* as described by Norbert Elias in *The Civilizing Process*. For Elias, “*Kultur* refers essentially to intellectual, artistic and religious facts” rather than economic and political or social realities; it is in *Kultur* that “the individuality of a people expresses itself” (Elias, 1939-2013, p. 6-7); *Zivilisation* on the other hand is in the German acceptance a much more dynamic process, by which modern European societies have pacified themselves through the refinement of mores. Romantic and post-Romantic intellectuals have tended to stress the *Kultur* of Romanian peasants as the legitimizing force in the process of nation-building. But throughout the 19th and early 20th century the cultural specificity of the peasants as “eternal autochthons”⁴ (Mihăilescu, 2017, p. 173, our translation) also functioned as a justifying shield for the preservation of material conditions perpetuating the gap between the peasants and the elites, keeping the rural masses in a subaltern position. Without its Romantic distinction in terms of *Kultur*, the rural population’s lack of *Zivilisation* lays bare. I follow this transformation in our social representation of the peasant as an alteration of the represented habitus mainly in TV productions. The argument cannot be fully sustained without a brief historical overview of the representation of the peasant in the Romanian political imagination.

3. The Birth of an Icon

The Herderian idealization of peasants was an ideological import by young Romanian intellectuals from German universities, applied to the rural population they were discovering, in some cases not unlike European travellers who would discover natives in the Americas. Alecu Russo’s Moldavian travel essays clearly illustrate the transfer of the Noble Savage trope from the Western cultural tradition to the local intellectual discourse about peasants. This discovery of the local population (also framed as efforts to “conquer the peasantness”, Cosma, 2022) provided the opportunity for developing the nationalist political project. The ‘eternal autochthon’ needed a face, and the icon of the peasant was born before the actual sociological knowledge of rural communities. As Sdrobiş puts it, “until the beginning of the 20th century, the Romanian peasant was rather portrayed than analyzed” (2021, p. 220). Two examples would suffice to show how the image of the peasant became an emblem of nationhood. An engraving from 1881 pictures the young prince Carol being crowned by two young girls clad in approximate peasant attire. There is visible artistic license to the depiction of the girls: they wear shoes and puffy skirts, European bourgeois style. At this point, *Kultur* informed a relatively simple political idea and was yet to be explored. On the other hand, liberal-minded elites had to negotiate a Western trajectory for the recently formed country⁵.

² “Discursul celor două Români”

³ “Nu era cioban pentru că nu mirosea a oi”, denunța o senatoare în timpul unui protest al păstorilor. ‘Mirosea a parfum, ca noi. Un cioban miroase a oi și nu se spală’.

⁴ “Autohtoni eterni”.

⁵ One disheartening experience for the young nation’s efforts to present its *Kultur* on the European stage was the rejection of Romanian peasant costumes by the director of the Paris Exhibition of 1867: the objects were considered “an almost savage display, rude furs, straw-packed specimens of the fauna of the forests and mountains, men’s clothes in embroidered leather, wool in various colours, a few women’s dresses in which already the Orient is manifest” (D. Kaempfen in Paris-Guide, 632, cited by A. Drace-Francis, 2013, p. 57).

The German-born Carol needed to be symbolically adopted into Romanianness, but at the same time Romanianness needed to be upgraded – for the moment only visually – to *Zivilisation*. The peasant girls in the engraving have a charmingly rustic appearance that places them in the vicinity of David Teniers the Younger's idyllic characters rather than in a Wallachian village.

The second example is the 500 lei banknote issued in 1924, where the reigning digit in its glorious rationality is flanked – again – by two young peasant women. Years of facing the harsh rural realities (meaning a more expert knowledge of the social, economic, and cultural realities in the villages) had tilted the iconographic representation of the peasant women toward realism. The women are barefoot, and there's ethnographic detail in their clothes and the distaff that one of them holds up. However, their physiognomies and posture (including the distaff) are firmly placed in the Western academic pictorial tradition: their features are Greco-Roman, hinting at the Romanians' Latin origin, a perceived historical fact vital for the elites' aspiration to being part of Europe. One of the women nurtures a baby, both a vision of the future and an iconographic reference to the Virgin Mary.

The role of the icon was to underline the narrative about the political, economic, and social possibilities of a nation founded upon the peasantry. As in other countries in the Balkans (see Daskalov & Mishkova, 2014), parts of the intellectual elite were proponents of the Third Way, agrarian ideologies centered on the potential of the peasant household as an economic unit to sustain a type of development carefully suited to the needs of the people. Both the needs and the people would be defined by the same elites; since, as Bourdieu noticed, the discourse on the identity of the peasants has always been the monopoly of other social classes (1977). Reality was visible through the cracks, however: in a parliamentary speech from 1907, historian Nicolae Iorga (himself an advocate of the Third Way) bitterly admitted the Romanian peasantry was the 'most backward' of all European peasantries (2016, p. 26).

4. An Ambiguous Icon

Iorga's remark points to the awareness within intellectual circles of the gap between the idealized image of the peasant and the reality of downtrodden rural masses. Based on the ideological option, many intellectuals chose to blame this silent majority for the country's inability to keep up with advanced Western societies. Disputes such as this were common throughout the end of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century.

Mr. Pogor, returning to his favourite theme, began to shout: (...) 'A people with no literature, no art, no past civilization, is not worth the time of historians. (...) While France had produced Molière and Racine, the Romanians were in complete barbarity'(...). Then Eminescu, sitting in a corner, rose and said uncharacteristically violently: 'What you call barbarity, I call the wisdom of a people developing according to its own genius, sheltered from the influence of foreigners' (Panu, 1942, p. 99-100, our translation)⁶

Bărbulescu (2015) has shown the contradiction at work in the reports of country doctors responsible for the praxis of 'civilizing' the rural masses. Believers in the cultural and even racial uniqueness of the Romanian people, they had to account for the harrowing state of its health and hygiene and for widespread alcohol addiction. Medical reports present "a social

⁶ Original text: "Dl Pogor, revenind la tema sa favorită, a început să strige : (...) Un popor care nu are o literatură, artă, o civilizație trecută, acela nu merită că istoricii să se ocupe de el. (...) Pe când Franța produsese pe Molière și pe Racine, Românii erau într-o barbarie completă. (...) Atunci Eminescu, care ședea într-un colț, se ridică și, cu un ton violent, neobișnuit lui, zise : 'Ceea ce numești d-ta barbarie, eu numesc așezarea și cuminența unui popor, care se dezvoltă conform propriului sau geniu, ferindu-se de amestecul străinului'"

hell” – physical wretchedness transformed inevitably into moral wretchedness, disease, and suffering on a large scale. These reports became an important vehicle for propagating negative stereotypes about the peasants. The doctors had to resort to the motif of the ‘degenerated race’, already used by other observers of the countryside in the 19th century (M.Eminescu, A.D. Xenopol) to make sense of the daunting gap between the idealized representation of the village and what they perceived as its reality. Bărbulescu himself confesses he had perceived the countryside as an idyllic world with peasants dressed in clean and beautifully adorned clothes, whom he interpreted as the “quintessence” of Romanianness (Bărbulescu 2015, p.77).

The real peasant should be somewhere halfway between the despondent ‘domestic primitive’ and the Romanticized autochthon. However, these two antagonistic but often coexistent conceptions clearly account for the culturally imported imagological dichotomy of noble savage/barbarian. The interplay of these two angles in the conception of the peasant has underlined the othering process of the rural population throughout Romanian modern history.

Overcoming prejudice in both directions was at the heart of Dimitrie Gusti’s sociological inquiries into rural life. However, his students, with various ideological backgrounds, had trouble situating the urban subjectivity in relation to peasantness, conceived as sameness but felt as otherness, and the village as ‘terra incognita’ (Stahl, 1946). Many of them, such as Ernest Bernea, Traian Herseni, H.H. Stahl or Mircea Vulcănescu, explored this unknown terrain clearly rooting for the noble savage, or rather the eternal autochthon.

Sociology was thus put to work for the ‘regeneration’ of the nation (Golopenția, 2021). The monographers tended to see their work as a bulwark against social processes they believed were destroying the Romanian social fiber. Degeneration was conceived as an alteration of habitus. In the 1930s, Anton Golopenția complained about the slow degradation of traditional clothing in the villages of Runcu and Goicea Mare, as women were gradually giving up weaving and tended to dress more and more in brightly colored urban knitwear. (Golopenția, 2021, p.16).

This attitude is relevant to what was to happen once popular media took over the representation of peasantness, particularly in light of another of Golopenția’s remarks concerning generational transformations in the rural space. He saw a ‘cultural interregnum’ in the discarding of patriarchal values by younger generations. Golopenția identified a ‘danger of nihilism’ in rural communities where ‘elements of the modern civilization concerning the economy, health, the understanding of the world’ (quoted in Butoi, 2015, p.193) would still be missing. Thus, the ‘greening of the iron cage’ (Costinescu, 2018) of modernity, which was the programmatic basis for Gusti and his teams’ efforts, would turn out to be illusory, as many of the sociologists attached to the project, such as H.H Stahl and Mihai Pop, seemed to be convinced that pristine traditional culture was on its way to extinction. Gustian scholars were joined by proponents of the Third Way in distrusting the civilizational potential of the peasantry. Ionuț Butoi thus wonders what could be expected from the detractors of the peasantry if its ideological supporters

conceived of it in such condescending ways (2015, p.191). The liberal Ștefan Zeletin would dismiss the peasantry as ‘an inferior people’ dominated by fear, a young Emil Cioran would complain about the rural masses’ lack of vitality and sense of historical defeat and so on. These intellectual discussions were interwoven into the complexities of the nation building process.

The Romantic iconography of the peasant however never ran out of vitality, surviving successive political regimes despite the gloomy perspective of intellectual elites. The othering of the peasant and distancing from the rural space were conveniently obscured by the

idealizing discourse about the peasant. The peasantry was not framed in popular discourse as a lower class, but, at most, as a waning aristocracy of sorts, in need of technical help in order to play its part in the economic and social advancement of the nation. The peasant was usually, and more so in popular culture, imagined as the inexhaustible fountain of the national spirit. Rural habitus and material culture, more or less faithful to locality, were increasingly commodified for cultural consumption throughout the interwar period and then again from the 1960s on, with what is usually considered Ceaușescu's return to a form of nationalism. The only hiatus in this continuity was the 1950s, when the regime change had important effects on the image of the rural population in popular media, at the time mainly propaganda posters, magazines and films. The representation of the peasants became de-folklorized, as they were expected to leave their old ways behind and join the international proletariat. Portrayals of peasant men and women in the 1950s, increasingly influenced by socialist realism and Soviet esthetics, leave aside visual elements of cultural specificity to the point where it becomes impossible to distinguish between posters from Romania and Hungary or any other socialist country. This period of valued indistinctiveness, premised on the "unique Soviet impulse to transform society" (Haber, 2014), was, however, brief and left a bitter taste, particularly to the intellectuals of Gusti's school, many of whom had been politically persecuted.

5. The Role of Television

The national television was instrumental to the regime's recycling of the peasant icon under the socialist regime (Urdea, 2018; Matei, 2013). Under strict ideological control until 1989, television programs would broadcast the official edulcorated image of the rural world, mainly in a celebratory vein. As Rădulescu (2020) points out, as a fresh locum of cultural activism, from 1956 on television took over from the radio the mission of shaping the 'old man' into the 'new man' of the communist regime, reframing tradition with input from academic folklorists, government officials, local activists and, not least, TV editors. As both the Army and the Securitate were endowed by the end of the 50s with musical-choreographic folklore ensembles, the stereotypical image of the peasant was suddenly becoming more rigid and predictable than ever. A campaign to 'depollute' popular party music of Gypsy and other Balkan influences in the 1980s also contributed to a sense of malaise experienced by segments of the audiences towards officially approved folklore and the aseptic portrait of the peasant that came along with it. After 1989, these feelings of saturation were already fully expressed:

In January 1990, when the national television channel dared to resume its folklore shows, some viewers were outraged. They perceived folklore as a fake in the service of communist propaganda and took advantage of the momentary confusion of the national television (the only one existing then) to publicly express their indignation: that was not what freedom looked and sounded like! (Rădulescu, 2020, p. 253)

No one was sure what freedom looked and sounded like. In terms of representations, the 1990s were times of 'chaos' (Catherine Durandin, quoted in Bănică, 2014). And it is in the 1990s that the most disturbing representations of the peasant found their way onto TV screens and comedy stages. Throughout the consumerist boom that followed, as multiple television channels were recovering, this time for profit, the still festive, but less politicized folkloric peasant, deprecatory comedic images of the rural poor were gradually being mainstreamed into the Romanian public consciousness.

6. A Shift in Subjectivity: the 1990s, Leana and Costel

The first to popularize derogatory images of visibly rural characters was the comedy group named *Vacața Mare*. In the 1990s, they created the stage (soon turned into a TV) duo Leana and Costel, a married couple from the village of Sadova, Dolj district, home to one of the group members. This aspect needs to be stressed: this isn't the kind of distancing performed by the intellectual elite, who switches easily from showing interest and benevolence to surgical lucidity as to what the peasant has become. It's 'waterfall contempt' (Todd, 2020) from cultural creators recently separated from the peasant way of life and eager to signal this newly created gap as a form of socio-cultural evolution. Leana and Costel, both played by men, are poor and unemployed. They are situated in the space of transition from subsistence agriculture to employment in capitalist agricultural enterprises, following the collapse of the perceived inefficient collectivized farming system. This space of transition seems to be empty⁷.

The couple is poor, but poverty is a consequence of their laziness rather than of structural inequalities and bad public policy. They're both heavy drunkards, quasi-illiterate and domestic violence is a daily occurrence. They're particularly ignorant and gullible, victims – especially Leana – to various quackeries. Behavioural flaws like alcohol consumption, a lack of hygiene, ignorance and violence have led to their child growing up with very visible physical and cognitive impairments (which might also be genetic, a trace of the race degeneration motif). This sordid rural fresco employs all the blemishes of character that country doctors would identify in the peasantry in the 19th century: idleness, an unsanitary lifestyle, alcohol addiction and so on. This time, however, it is descendants of the actual peasants who take over the denigrating discourse, while at the same time hinting ironically at the eternal autochthon iconic image: Leana and Costel's everyday surroundings contain visual cues referring the viewer to the Romanticized peasantry and its material culture. However, the pure aesthetic forms claimed by promoters of the eternal autochthon have vanished. Their surroundings are a hybrid of low-quality peasant objects and post-communist kitsch, unsavoury to the taste of Westernized audiences.

With Leana and Costel, the 1990s had become a slippery slope in terms of the representation of the peasant. Modernization was happening fast, and the rural population seemed to be left behind. In the official nationalist vein, the comedy TV representation of the peasant had been an instrument of measuring what was deemed fit for Romanian society from everything that was going on outside the cultural and political borders of Romania. The classic character was Nea Mărin, created and played in the 1970s and '80s by actor Amza Pellea. Originating from the same geographic and cultural area of Romania as Leana and Costel, Nea Mărin was neither dirty, nor stupid, although he was obviously not a product of formal schooling. His peasantness was in many ways harlequinesque (see Bottini, 2015), serving as a device to showcase other characters' obtuseness; his peasantness was thus equated with a specific type of common sense, predicated on local patterns of speech.

⁷An article on a news website from 26 February 2016 correlated two pieces of information under the headline *Backward Romania*: two thirds of the village houses have toilets outside the house (the famous 'backyard toilet') and 80 per cent of the people on social welfare live in rural areas (Zamfir, 2016). Another piece of news, also from 2016, provides welfare statistics for Southern Romania; Sadova, Leana's village, has the highest number of welfare recipients, but the mayor's explanation was ignored by *Vacața Mare*: 'There are no employers, the Administration of State Property has leased 2500 hectares on which they grow nothing now. This used to be the main employer in the region. There were peach and plum orchards, there were vineyards where my fellow citizens would work and earn a salary' (Original text: "Obiective economice unde să muncească oamenii nu sunt. În plus, Administrația Domeniilor Statului a arendat o suprafață de 2.500 de hectare pe care nu se lucrează nimic. Înainte, acolo era principala unitate care absorbea forța de muncă. Erau plantații de piersici, de pruni, podgorie, unde oamenii desfășurau activitate și câștigau un ban, Dănescu", 2016).

Leana and Costel appealed to a different audience with a different message. It's the peasants who are obtuse and rather inarticulate; they no longer possess a valid worldview like Nea Mărin. The audience doesn't laugh with Leana and Costel (Nea Mărin's sketches were collectively titled *Let's laugh with Nea Mărin*), they laugh *at* them. These transformations obviously didn't happen all of a sudden, and certainly not without criticism. Vacanța Mare's portrayal of the peasant was bitterly contested, but it didn't die. Instead, it spilt over in mainstream media, especially starting in 2012, when the first *Las Fierbinți* episodes aired.

It is also important to remember that the various TV channels specialized in consumer folkloric music have also proposed their own representations of the peasant, recycling the simplified and idealized image of the generic regional peasant (Moldavian, Dobrudjan, Transylvanian, from Maramureș, Oltenia etc.) together with their respective musical styles. Cosma and Constantiniu (2022) have delved into the origins and appeal of *muzică populară*, a form of entertainment consumed by the masses, but frowned upon by educated strata. The same folklorized material, be it music or visual imagery related to the rural world, shifted from cultural state propaganda to capitalist consumption in the post socialist decades, losing some of the concern for authenticity, but maintaining the sense of pride and national identity. Thus, characters such as Etno TV's Văru' Săndel, played by Sandu Pop, would extend some of Nea Mărin's features for consumption by nostalgic, mostly elderly audiences. Carefully avoiding the blemishes of character associated with the anti-Romantic view of the peasant, Sandu Pop's character strived to be witty and endearing, inviting the audience to identify rather than distance itself from him. However, as ratings have repeatedly shown over the years, the rural figures in *Las Fierbinți*, akin in many ways to Leana and Costel, seem to have won the battle for cultural significance.

7. Characters in *Las Fierbinți* as Representations of Altered Peasant Habitus

The show premiered on March 1st 2012 on the private television channel ProTV and has constantly enjoyed the most extensive national viewership, with only slight variations, throughout its 22 seasons. Episodes are watched on average by 1.2, sometimes reaching 2 million viewers (Răducanu, 2023). A comedy of manners set in a rural community about 45 km from Bucharest, *Las Fierbinți* satirizes the behavior of contemporary villagers as they try to keep up with the modernizing processes sweeping through the almost adjacent urban environment. As a postmodernist cultural product, the series attempts to deconstruct the idealized representation of the countryside and presents a 'postrural' space (Murdoch, 1993) where various trends and ideas compete for the villagers' (and consequently the viewers') attention. However, as the next pages will show, this view of the village entails a different set of stereotypes under the guise of a 'realist' or rather a 'disenchanted' gaze. Far from being an attempt to represent the peasants as they work through processes of redefining themselves (Kearney, 1996), it's an exercise in othering the rural population by depicting it once again as backward and barbaric.

Laziness

According to classic anthropological definitions, and to the typical imagined peasant, we might add, peasantries everywhere are characterized by attachment to the soil, the local community, and to tradition (see Redfield, 1955) –and it's precisely these important elements of habitus that break apart in post socialist media images. Peasants work the land for subsistence. This is why, in the idealized representation, they would be hard-working and in tune with natural cycles. This characteristic of the peasantry was historically considered at odds with the macroeconomic development of the Romanian principalities, which saw specific forms of agro-capitalism destroy the pre-existing communitarian peasant structures

(Stahl, 1946, Chirot, 1976). Well-known characters in Romanian novels would embody these economic shifts by emphasizing the almost pathological desire to own land. Rural literary characters such as Ion (from Liviu Rebreanu's homonymous novel of 1920) or Petre Petre (from the same author's *The Revolt*) are dominated by a longing for land (which in Petre Petre's case turns into lust and the rape of a woman from the oppressing boyar class). These novels are part of the Romanian literary canon, and the two characters are widely known. They are represented with strictly peasant dispositions, "perhaps coarse, but dignified and sure" (Banton, 1964, quoted in Halpern and Brode 1967, p. 50). It's thus telling that Firicel, one of the characters in *Las Fierbinți*, has been visually constructed to resemble the film versions of Ion and Petre Petre. Played by actor Cuzin Toma, Firicel is one of the most rural-looking figures in the series: tall, muscled, wearing a moustache and always a little straw hat, the epitome of imagined Romanian peasantry in its healthy and rough masculine form. His dark hair, black eyes and prominent cheekbones concur with this idealized, but rather ambivalent image: both Ion and Petre Petre are dangerous young alpha males and the cultural iconographic tradition in which they have been created arguably goes back to Ovid's Scythian barbarians looming at city gates. It's a significant aspect, because Firicel is only visually related to Ion and Petre Petre. Their most important moral feature, the desire to possess and work the land, and their active disposition, are completely absent in Firicel. He is irredeemably lazy.

What Firicel still has from these peasant figures is the frustration of living in poverty. However, this poverty isn't presented to the viewer as deeply unjust – or perceived by the character as deeply unjust, as in the case of Ion and Petre Petre or Stan Țugurlan from Marin Preda's novel *Moromeții*, who have a sense of the historical injustice done to poor peasants. Firicel wakes up at after 10 a.m., whenever he works, he does a sloppy job, but instead of work he prefers to drink, straight from the bottle, sitting against fences like a vagabond and letting his large family struggle with daily insecurities. This message attached to his attitude, in conjunction with his wasted physical robustness, carefully constructed to look as pleasant as possible, is thoroughly ideological in substance.

Recent social and economic developments have tended to create the perception that the rural masses are free-riding on the capitalist industriousness of the urban educated class, the real producers of wealth in post-communist Romanian society. They have to pay taxes for the state to provide welfare to all the unemployed ex-peasants like Firicel. To the current economic ethos, 'poverty is not a misfortune to be pitied and relieved, but a moral failing to be condemned' (Tawney 1937, p.116), so economic success is due to individual character rather than social circumstances. If the urban classes used to have at least some dim awareness of living off the hard agricultural work of the peasant (see the dialogue about the 'peasant question' at the beginning of Rebreanu's *The Revolt*)– in post-communism it's the rural poor that are framed as parasites. This change in perception is traceable in current media visual rhetoric. Former Labour Minister Raluca Turcan 'sent to work' almost 10.000 welfare recipients, according to an article from January 2021 (*Adevărul*). The Minister wrote on Facebook: "I've assured the Romanians that those who don't want to work will no longer take advantage of hardworking people⁸". The text is visually supported by a photograph showing a group of villagers, men and women, sitting at an improvised table by the side of the road. The urban-rural divide has never before been so clearly associated with the moral divide as conceived by the Protestant thinking underlying the current economic ideology, as Max Weber described it.

⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/RalucaTurcan/posts/3773618189369173>

Drinking Too Much

Alcohol addiction is an extremely widespread stereotype associated with peasants. Although it's been proven to be unfair (see Bărbulescu, 2015, also INSSE statistics for 2022), in recent years, it has become one of the main meme subjects in Romanian internet culture and in *Las Fierbinți* it's constitutive to the villagers' everyday life. The two taverns in the village are presented as the only spaces for socialization, but people drink everywhere: at home, when they go fishing or just simply by the side of the road. Celentano (Adrian Văncică), the village drunkard in the series, personifies the whole community. Alcohol seems to open the way to liminality, making Celentano the poet, the philosopher and the prophet of the community, albeit in the most defective ways; a possible indication that such a wretched community only has access to the workings of the spirit through intoxication.

As is the case for Native Americans or the Irish following the English conquest, as well as many other autochthons faced with a technologically superior dominant group, the stereotype of alcohol addiction fits into an ancient cultural trope that can be traced back to Tacitus. The Germans, the archetypal barbarians, were drinking copiously and knew no measure. In this perspective, the problem isn't alcohol *per se*, but the lack of self-restraint, attributed to the primitive mind, which hasn't risen to maturity (associated with *Zivilisation*). It's worth remembering that many promoters of the positive eternal autochthon would attach to the peasant the adjective *cuminte*, meaning wise in the sense of obedient and quiet, but also in the sense of master of one's own affect, of one's urges, akin to stoicism. In the domestic primitive guise, the peasant is plagued by addiction, meaning he's unable to control himself (or herself, as women in *Las Fierbinți* drink almost as much as men). The drunken stereotype thus works as one of the mechanisms in intergroup relations, as a means to define the peasant as a 'repugnant other', to employ Harding's (1991) concept, used in a rather different context (Harding was referring to the framing of Christian fundamentalists by anthropologists). It can be argued that characters in *Las Fierbinți* are simply comedic figures, in the tradition of the carnival or *commedia dell'arte*, but it wouldn't, I argue, reveal the whole meaning and function of these particular representations of (post)peasants. Besides, Bakhtin (1965) emphasized that today's satirists have little in common with the traditional carnival, as they position themselves above or in opposition to the object of their satire, rather than on the same level or in the same community.

8. Decline of the Little Community: Promiscuous Women

In Redfield's description, peasants are also highly attached to the community - the 'little community'. The village has survived by clinging to conservative social structures, and its idealized representation has always put forward motherly or virginal feminine images, conveying purity of all sorts: blood, custom, language etc. The feminine icon had legitimizing power in this ideological perspective (as illustrated by the two emblematic peasant feminine figures crowning Prince Carol) as the collective urban imagination would juxtapose the body politic with the feminine birthing body. Rather unsurprisingly, the opposite image of the woman prevails in the domestic primitive ideological stance: one that becomes distorted towards promiscuity. *Vacanța Mare*'s Leana was particularly lustful, in ways that would surpass whatever remnants of carnivalesque rituals still surviving in the Romanian countryside could account for (see Hedeșan 2005 and Știucă 2015). In *Las Fierbinți*, all women are promiscuous, no matter the age, with the single exception of the young ex-mayor's daughter Gianina (Anca Dumitra), who's visually derived from contemporary pornographic images (hence the teasing aspect of her sexuality) and has no elements of peasant habitus. The actual peasant women in the show either sell themselves for very little, sometimes just for alcohol, or fall prey to uncontrolled lust. In one episode, the character

Rapidoaica (Maia Morgenstern) sleeps with a whole group of bikers passing through the village. In another, a villager tells another that it's best to visit her in the evening, when she's already drunk, so that he wouldn't have to go through the trouble of making her drunk before having sex. This rather sleazy representation of rural women may be rooted in the postmodernist intent to demystify the positive virginal image, with the awareness that the iconic message (Barthes, 1964) has reached a point of saturation. But the derogatory representation might also assume a descriptive role: traditional social structures have been destroyed- the *Kultur* that kept things together, the cultural content that informed all the dispositions in the traditional peasant habitus has disappeared.

Another argument for the latter point comes from a series of visual cues in the production design of the show. In Firicel's front yard, for example, the most archaic-looking and the poorest of homes on the set, multiple saucepans and cooking pots are hanging on pillars and outer walls (the family's everyday living space is outdoors or in the liminal places between inside and outside, as peasants usually live when the weather allows it). The Romanian viewer has been well trained by the national visual discourse (and commercial representation of folklore in recent decades) to expect any type of dishes hanging on rural walls to be richly decorated and colorful, another iconic image messaging the plenty of Romanian culture. But Firicel's dishes are all bare and old, at times rusty, communicating nothing except poverty and maybe a archaic instinct to display the objects of private life to the outer world. In the background of other scenes, plain white plates are hanging on walls, and the message there is clear: there might still be a reflex of traditional patterns of behavior, but it's devoid of content and meaning. The village has no more *Kultur*, but it has never had *Zivilisation*. Its barbarity is now plain to see.

9. From Tradition to Bad Taste

The esthetic dimension is particularly relevant to the *Las Fierbinți* pop deconstruction project. Romanticizing intellectuals used to admire the esthetic of the autochthon's material culture and celebrated the peasant as a poet and an artist, while the peasant woman was an exquisite designer (Xenopol, 1967). As mentioned above, the Romantic representational convention was resurrected as a political and then a commercial tool. The *muzică populară* was the main vehicle for the reproduction of the stereotypical esthetic forms associated with tradition. Cosma and Constantiniu show that this particular genre is consumed mainly by the rural and urban lower class, and that Romanian ethnomusicologists have generally dismissed it as "a falsification of the genuine peasant music that has no worth" (2022, p.58). For decades, the refined urban subjectivity has been associating rural preferences in terms of entertainment with both political ignorance and poor taste.

As a consequence, perceived bad taste has become pervasive in media representations of village life. In *Las Fierbinți*, the village is drowning in kitsch, which isn't framed as the glorious burst of human creativity in dire socio-economic conditions as is the case of Emir Kusturica's films (Gocic, 2001). Although Kusturica's influence is easily recognizable at least in the first episodes of *Las Fierbinți*, the dominant attitude in the Romanian show seems to be pedagogic mockery rather than playful nostalgia. A plaster putto painted dark bronze in the otherwise austere village setting, dreams of gates guarded by lions 'as large as Brânzoi's horse' would have the potential to convey a celebratory third-worldist view. However, associated with the didactic tendencies in many episodes, where the peasants are literally scolded or shamed by urban intellectual figures for being lazy, ignorant and dirty, the kitsch elements take up a role in what the media perceives as its 'civilizing' role. One of the main

writers of the show said it plainly: ‘In my opinion, *Las Fierbinți* should work as an example of Don’t do this’⁹.

10. Represented Ignorance as Othering

Don’t indulge in kitsch, but also don’t be so ignorant, one might add. *Las Fierbinți* makes a spectacle of the characters’ grammar mistakes, lexical confusion and general ignorance. In this respect, its precursors weren’t only the fictional duo Leana and Costel, but also a popular TV show segment called *Vax populi*. As part of the satirical show *Starea nației* [*State of the Nation*], *Vax populi* consists of a simple edited series of voces which in television jargon are short street interviews of passers-by, usually the answer to one or two questions. Here, the voces are shot almost exclusively on village streets, and only the most ignorant or conspicuous answers survive the editing process. Questions range from “How often do you brush your teeth?” (“now and then” or “never”) to “What planet are we on?” (“I don’t know, I’m not from around here”) and the respondents are usually extremely poor, drunk, toothless. As an inevitable effect of selecting and then isolating these characteristics by means of a complete lack of context, the viewer finds the rural population in a state of utter abasement, almost dehumanized. *Vax Populi* is a classic illustration of the process described by Champagne (1993/1999):

When marginal or disadvantaged groups attract journalistic attention, the effects of mediatization are far from being what these social groups could expect since the journalists in this case have a particularly significant power of construction so that the production of the event is almost totally out of the control of the people concerned (Champagne, p. 49).

It’s the logic of media representation in general, but in the Romanian case, Champagne’s insight points to a development that may have dire social consequences, as groups with no autonomous voice – such as peasants – “are spoken of more than they speak, and when they speak to the dominant group, they tend to use a borrowed discourse, the very one the dominant offer about them” (1993/1999, p. 51). This might be one explanation for the denigrating image of rural folk put forward by *Vacanța Mare*.

11. A Danger to Democracy

Ignorance favours a tendency to support conspiracy theories and suspicious political figures. This is the most problematic aspect of this essay, because it touches the core of current Romanian social discontent. Social polarization is most visible in political choice, and the blame that the urban educated class lays on the rural, uneducated class is widely visible in the representation of peasants on TV. According to theories put forward by agrarian idealists such as Nicolae Iorga, proto-democratic institutions were embedded in the egalitarian structures of the peasant community (Iorga, 1985). Reality would put this conception to the test, as in 1907, a bloody peasant revolt swept through the country and faced the apologists of the eternal autochthon with the fury and violence of masses fed up with poverty and exploitation (more so than in neighbouring states, see Marin, 2018). The spectre of angry peasant mobs has been haunting the Romanian public imagination ever since. In the very first episode of *Las Fierbinți*, an irate mob of villagers threatens to disrupt the local elections. They’re brandishing pitchforks and scythes – classic signs of rural barbarity, as well as a direct reference to the memory of the 1907 events - and are easily manipulated by one party

⁹ <https://cristinastanciulescu.ro/interviuri/mimi-branescu-dupa-parerea-mea-serialul-las-fierbinti-ar-trebui-sa-functioneze-ca-un-exemplu-de-asa-nu/>

who offers them free alcohol and pushes them to frighten the incumbent mayor. Manipulation has often been associated with angry half-illiterate mobs in post-socialist media representations, particularly after the traumatic events of 1990 and 1991 known as the ‘mineriads’, when large numbers of miners from the Jiu Valley poured into Bucharest and entered into violent altercations with demonstrators. The societal conflicts of the 1990s have ramified into the present and are represented in recent media, reflecting the urban-rural divide in the perception of polarization. There are echoes of the same peasant revolts (particularly the 1907 revolt, seen as ‘the last major peasant revolt of Europe’, as one article put it) in a journalistic film from 2017, when social tensions reached particular intensity again. Subtitled ‘Hatred divides Romania’, the film portrays the contemporary Romanian ‘repugnant other’: elderly, poor, uneducated and visibly rural or small-town folk, presented as ‘hateful’ precisely because they are ignorant and thus easily manipulable.

12. Conclusion

I have given an array of examples for how current media representations tend to use increasingly negative stereotypes in their portrayal of peasants, long considered the foundation of the Romanian nation. One explanation for this slip towards a derogatory type of humor directed at peasants may be akin to what Rădulescu has identified as the ‘dynamisation, desacralization and fragilisation’ of traditional musical repertoires, leading to their eventual decline. In the case of Leana and Costel, the process of dissolution of traditional structures, already somewhat advanced by the 1990s and early 2000s, becomes embedded in the subjectivity of the rural population itself, especially as it transitions to urban lifestyles. Although this still awaits research, it is generally known that *Vacanța Mare* audiences mainly consisted of male less educated youth. This peripheral masculinity fell victim to the ‘chaos of representations’ of the 90s, as it happily discarded what they perceived as invalid forms of material culture and habitus by making fun of them. However, this does not account for the vehemence of the depreciatory portrayals of peasants in these stage and TV sketches. The lack of nostalgia for modes of living associated with an oppressing regime seemed justified in an ideological context in which freedom was equated with consumption and accumulation of wealth. However, the stigmatization of the peasant seemed excessive for this type of ‘goodbye to the past’ comedy. There might be other systemic explanations that account for it. The first would be the very logic of media discourse. Champagne shows how the media contributes to the downgrading of certain social elements, not necessarily because of any political project, but because of distortions that are intrinsic to media functioning. Stigmatization happens partly because of the journalists’ or content creators’ bias, partly because stimulating and agitating, thus keeping the audience hooked on the channel, works with emotionalized polarities. Media “creates content that reinforces your pre-existing opinions, and, after analysis of your consumer habits, sends it to you”. (Taibbi, 2019, p. 25). The pre-existing is however important. It isn’t television *per se* that engenders such attitudes, it has just been shown to exacerbate current attitudes (Taibbi, 2019; Richards, 2007), not necessarily towards polarization, but also towards creating a sense of shared identity (see Abu Lughod, 2005 for the role of TV dramas in creating a sense of national identity in Egypt).

But the logic of comedy and mass communication doesn’t fully account for the vicious reflections of the peasantry in popular media. Recent ideological transformations and class dynamics might also be responsible, as has already been suggested. Reifova (2021) has shown how Czech TV productions have been creating neoliberal sensitivities via shaming the working class, in a process of ‘doing class’ (Scharff, 2008) that sustains the emergence of a new class structure. TV productions such as *Las Fierbinți* might be doing or rather downgrading class by downgrading within the structures of social imaginaries the main elements that used to define the

eternal autochthon. These programs perform iconographic shifts in a pop-deconstructive vein, demolishing a Romanticized conception of the peasant-based on *Kultur*. By eliminating the ideological representation of peasants, these images of rural characters contribute to making them second-class citizens. The village, as depicted in *Las Fierbinți*, is no longer a cultural unit living according to its legitimate values in its own space and time, as per the official discourse. The destruction of this Romantic vision, however, didn't make way for genuine concern and proper contextualization of the rural world, but rather for a set of negative stereotypes concurring to the general perception that Romanian urban modernity is surrounded and trapped by Third World wretchedness.

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