

It is particularly difficult to contain in the space of a limited analysis the entire complexity of Marin Marian-Bălașa's work, *Ochiul dracului și al lui Dumnezeu (mentalități economice tradiționale)* [*The Devil's and God's Eye (traditional economic mentalities)*]. It is a wide-ranging, somewhat disconcerting book that easily navigates from archaic cultural forms to ultra-contemporary socio-economic practices, from folklore understood in a traditional sense (carols, ballads, *doinas*, fairy tales, proverbs, mythological narratives and beliefs) to the multi-layered and no less folkloric universe of the Internet or contemporary big cities. However, Marin Marian-Bălașa never refuses his readers a "dip into the past" in his analysis of contemporary phenomena, as is shown by the analysis of the practices of the "minstrel-songteller" [*colindătorul-menestrel*] Vasile Ardelean (p. 393-399). In this presentation, I will try to start by outlining a few issues related to the author's methodologies and hermeneutical stance, then I will point out a series of contributions that I consider relevant, ending with a brief stylistic note.

To write today a synthesis book on the economy of Romanian rural and urban communities poses a methodological challenge, which Marin Marian-Bălașa meets with great subtlety. Let me explain: in such a book, it would have been easy, but also fashionable, for the author to adopt a neo-Marxist discourse. A few pre-fabricated categories that explain everything, a series of babble about class struggle, the use of a grid for presenting the facts that serves the conclusions on a platter, ready-to-use, ready-to-eat, and the recipe for success would have been perfect. Marian-Bălașa, on the contrary, takes a much harder, thornier, more methodologically and conceptually difficult path. Not even "economic servitude" is interpreted by the author from a Marxist perspective. This does not mean that his book does not tackle issues such as poverty, precariousness, prostitution, enrichment, racism and ethnocentrism, or socio-symbolic power relations. On the contrary, these sensitive issues are discussed from multiple points of view, except that Marian-Bălașa refuses rudimentary neo-Marxism in approaching them.

From the subtle, non-Marxist methodology, always appropriate to the intimate nature of the themes Marian-Bălașa tackles, derive many of the strengths of this book, but also its potential interest for a very wide audience. The book's most visible and enduring contribution is its emphasis on the sacred foundations of traditional economies. Namely, in Marian-Bălașa's perspective, no economic activity in traditional Romanian culture (but not exclusively) can exist without being inscribed in the horizon of the sacred, nor can it be understood separately from a whole complex of beliefs, rites and accompanying quasi-religious practices. For the traditional man and woman, work appears as a virtue, not as a generator of capital, and "in the framework of daily production (labor), human activity is irreducible to the aspect of generation and accumulation, consumption and material use" [în cadrul producției cotidiene (labor) activitatea omului este ireductibilă la aspectul generării și acumulării, al consumului și utilizării materiale] (p. 37-38).

In this logic, it is almost obvious that the traditional man and woman praise diligence, the supreme virtue, stubbornly rejecting certain forms of economic activity, as can be seen in folklore: "There are hardly any folkloric creations that glorify, say, trading. Or industry." [*Nu prea există creații folclorice care să proslăvească, să zicem, negoțul.*

*Sau industria.*] There is one exception, however: these are the “comical folk songs invented by post-1944 cultural activists” who praised socialist modernity, technology, industrialisation, and the collectivisation of agriculture (p. 128; see also pp. 494-508). In the mental world of the ordinary peasant, only agricultural labour is respected, the manual labour that toils to pluck the fruits of the earth, and it alone attains great symbolic dignity.

And yet, despite his careful attention to many forms of archaic culture (agricultural, pastoral, viticultural, mining mythologies; rites of passage; literary or musical productions), Marin Marian-Bălaşa is not a ruralist in the ideological sense of the term, i.e. he does not believe that only in the village survives the essence of the nation, that only in the rural world viable cultural forms worthy of arousing the interest of anthropology researchers are developed. On the contrary: the anthropologist is interested just as much as in the ancient village in the contemporary city, with its subway folklore, the “chains of fortune” or St. Anthony’s chains circulating on the Internet, the games of mutual support, financial swindles, shopping, and new social rituals.

Taking as starting point – in a few pages with a strong personal, almost programmatic imprint (p. 405-408) – a text by Petre Ispirescu, in which this 19<sup>th</sup> century author condemns the import of the Christmas tree and the abandonment of ancient traditions, Marian-Bălaşa moves on to similar ideas by Sabin Drăgoi and finally dissects the “attitudinal mistake” of these “conservatives, nostalgic, panicky and narrow-minded”, albeit illustrious, intellectuals, namely that of refusing to see “that identity is not only given by what the human being/culture has inherited, but represents a dynamic universe, often [...] a flexible, open, evolving or at least amplifiable universe” [*identitatea nu este dată doar de ceea ce omul/ cultura a moștenit, ci reprezintă un univers dinamic, adesea (...) un univers flexibil, deschis, evolutiv sau măcar amplificabil*] (p. 407).

On the other hand, precisely by virtue of this broad interest in cultural phenomena, Marian-Bălaşa adopts, as I have suggested on other occasions, a liberal perspective (in the philosophical sense of the term) on the matter he approaches and on the facts he analyses. He is neither a conservative nor a Marxist and knows how powerful the ideological mediations of Romanian folkloristics are, especially those of the inter-war period, but also those of national-communism, perhaps even contemporary ones, trying consequently to avoid them and to interpret the facts of culture in their specific social dynamics. Marian-Bălaşa knows how to distinguish with acumen what is an authentic contribution in a collection of folklore or in an interpretative text from what is blind obedience to the ideological imperatives of a particular era. A close reading of a text by Ilarion Cocişiu is exemplary of Marian-Bălaşa’s approach (p. 508-513): an unpublished manuscript in two versions, built around the observation that only the poor sing, that only they are the generators of folklore and that – the richer man or woman become – the further they move away from song, dance, and poetry. Although Marian-Bălaşa basically agrees almost entirely with Cocişiu’s claims, two variants, two successive drafts of this January 1950 text are presented as an expression of the folklorist’s ideological reorientation, of the deadly gymnastics he was forced to perform between his personal convictions and the proletkultist imperatives of the historical moment.

Marin Marian-Bălașa's analytical approach can be compared – *mutatis mutandis* – in its best, deepest, most specific achievements, to the effort of correlating cultural facts and understanding them in their specific context, which was undertaken by members of the inter-war Gusti sociological school. Marian-Bălașa is well acquainted with the research of the D. Gusti's disciples, whom he quotes repeatedly, even though he does not do so apologetically, but always in a nuanced and critical way, which is the highest praise that could be given to them. In Marian-Bălașa's opinion, the sociology of the Gustian school would have achieved remarkable results if its natural development had not been interrupted after the Second World War. However, today, the Gustians have many emulators who continue their nuanced and complex analytical approach, with updated and perfected methodologies, among them Marin Marian-Bălașa himself.

*Ochiul dracului și al lui Dumnezeu (mentalități economice tradiționale)* [The Devil's and God's Eye (traditional economic mentalities)] is a work full of relevant scientific contributions. Almost every chapter and sub-chapter could turn into a stand-alone work, but this does not detract from the unity of the whole, in which the sections and information correspond and link together in a remarkable synthesis. I would point out that the author's training as an ethno-musicologist and his specific skills are clearly visible here, as many pages of the work deal with the economic life, the social status of the Roma/Gypsy violin players [*lăutari*] and the economic practices underlying their art. In addition to the remarkable pages on violin-playing, one of the most important contributions of Marin Marian-Bălașa's book is an investigation – the first of this broadness and nature in Romanian anthropology – of what the author calls “the folklore of maximal precariousness” (p. 331-399). It concerns folkloric productions linked to extreme poverty and performed mainly by beggars, namely “begging song”, “begging Christmas carols [*colindas*]”, “subway songs”.

Another relevant contribution of *The Devil's and God's Eye* relates to the economy of the sacred. If, as we saw at the beginning of this presentation, the economy of traditional communities is based on sacral foundations, it is no less true that religions have always had an economic dimension, often ignored by anthropologists, especially in Romania. Our researchers have preferred to study the “cosmic Christianity” of the Romanian peasant and have never placed the Orthodox Church (and other denominations) in the complex web of economic and social life, whether rural or urban. Marian-Bălașa fills an exegetical gap here too, studying with scientific probity but also with humour the “acquisition of posthumousness”, the “barter of salvation”, “tithes” or numerous forms of “devotional-confessional prosperity”. It must be said that, in these chapters, the examples given by the author are not only Romanian, but rather take readers to many meridians, from the United States to India, in a remarkable attempt to open up analytical perspectives and terms of comparison.

Style, together with some very solid points of reference (“the sacred foundations of traditional economics”) and a number of methodological principles, is one of the basic binding agents in this huge amount of diverse information, heterogeneous texts and ideas of the most varied kind that is *The Devil's and God's Eye (traditional economic mentalities)*. Indeed, any informed reader can easily recognise here Marin Marian-Bălașa, the astute researcher from previous scientific works, or the publicist who is increasingly

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asserting himself in the online environment with remarkable public positions. In his book, Marian-Bălașa resorts to his usual arborescent phrasing, with numerous digressions, but which is never hard to follow or convoluted. There are flashes of irony on almost every page, but these are often offset by glimmers of tenderness or compassion for all the poor and disinherited. A touch of preciousness from place to place, visible in some of the French words that Marian-Bălașa writes almost by pronouncing them *à la française*, brings nothing but a necessary touch of colour to a work that is basically ultra-soothing and “heavy/difficult” in many ways.

This book is an important work that should not be missing from the library of any cultural anthropology enthusiast. I have not attempted to summarise it, but to list a few reasons why it is a remarkable achievement and I would conclude by urging potential readers to enjoy this book straight away, tasting it at length, for it should be read and re-read both as a whole and in fragments, in a thorough and always open reading.

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