

# CHARACTERISTICS OF ECONOMIC LIFE IN THE OLT COUNTRY FROM MIDDLE AGES TO EARLY XX<sup>th</sup> CENTURY. ELEMENTS OF ECONOMIC SOCIOLOGY

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**Abstract:** *The Olt Country is a Romanian area of noble origins, a blessed preserver of some rich and ancient cultural traditions, but also of a particular economic development. The dominant characteristic of the economic life, from the Middle Ages to the early decades of the XX<sup>th</sup> century is the autarchical peasant household, based on family production.*

**Key words:** *The Olt Country, peasant households, compossessorate, emigration.*

## 1. Introduction

The Olt country is an area whose noble origins trace back to the old times, recognized as the preserver of the "oldest and most persistent Romanian settlements" (1, p 14). Settled between the Olt and the Făgăraş Mountains and harmoniously divided into "sunny and round estates" (6, I, p 189), this Country of the founders of Wallachia has fully remained related to the typical Romanian traditions, specific to the well done work meant to of the pre-established work built to last.

This ancient Romanian area has developed for centuries due to the fruitful labour done by each generation of people and it stands out by the presence of "the most durable and innocent Romanian element of Transylvania" (3, p III) and by its sacrifices during insecure times against the "enemy foreignism".

The Olt country also "provided" the Romanian life a specific economic development, in accordance with the simple living "patterns", tailored naturally according to the needs of the people and the rational use of the local resources.

2. Marked by reversals of political status, disburdening (the attachment to Wallachia) or burdening (the Hungarian and Austrian rule), throughout its troubled history - from time of principalities to building the Greater Romania - the Olt Country oriented or it was "pushed" to those forms of economic life considered appropriate by the temporal political powers.

During the "ruling intervention" or the tutelary care of to Wallachia, in the Olt Country there was founded a class of Romanian boyards whose investiture was purposeful as it regarded the destiny of this country. This "system of working boyardness" invested by the Wallachian

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rulers owning estates formed in the spirit of Romanian medievalism, of the "full ownership" with the right of hereditary transmission, shaped by its particular spirit - if only for a time – the character and "sense of the structural development of the social and economic life" in Terra Blachorum (1, pp. 22-23).

The Hungarian rule over the Olt country first meant setting up a feudal exploitation regime "of cities and life concentrated around them" (1, p 21), a regime which subsequently became deeply burdening, with "difficult toil and taxes" imposed to the serfs of the country and with more or less refined mechanisms and enslaving, meant to prevent the "rigorous development trends of the economic life of the country" (1, p 34). The place and role which have been appointed to the Olt Country within the Hungarian economic system, the Austrian one and later on within the Austro-Hungarian, meant, in fact, an "exclusive guidance "towards agriculture, deviation from stable settlement in its "old and natural relations with Wallachia" (1, p 94). In this way, the state authorities ruling over Transylvania pushed the Olt Country (and the whole Transylvania) outside their traditional economic development, defined by the complementary nature of the economic orientation of the Romanian provinces from within to the outside of the Carpathian arc.

The dominant characteristic of the economic life in the extended Middle Ages in the Olt Country, as well as along the entire Romanian area, is the existence of those small social units with predominant agricultural, pastoral and forestry character, sometimes dispersed, different in terms of technical equipment and closed in the narrow patterns of "family production" – the peasant and boyard households. Each of these units were set in accordance with the people's "social state" and the needs of consumption, small and

hardly individualized and covered by production accordingly. The economic life, tailored as stated above, became of "second importance of existence" regarded and designed only as "part of a wider community of life, needs, aspirations, feelings and ancestral, ancient, traditional knowledge, which perpetuates in the people's facts, from generation to generation..." (7, pp. 58-59). This character of totality given to the rural life, also specific to the communities of the Olt Country, empowered the autarchic households and the Romanians of Făgăraş to live and survive in the middle of feudalism until the dawn of the modern age, even in conditions of instability and scarce resources so that time passed fruitfully and purposefully. In this way, all over the Olt Country there was developed a life model of an innocent world which used to obey the moral order, reluctant to the acquisition of tyrannical amount of money and untempted by the temptation of economization of all the values that give life to this world.

The villages of the Olt Country, with their totalitarian lifestyle ruled the land on the basis of rooted (customary) practices or local customs, according to a formula established since the Middle Ages and kept up late until modern times: on the one hand, the family ownership - for arable land and house, on the other hand, the condominium property – for the forests stock and grasslands. The condominium ownership plays a special part due to its developing role in the destiny of the communities. The first condominiums set up in the Olt Country, similar to the neighbouring condominiums beyond the mountains belonged to "the manorial system of peasant character" at the foundation of villages during the times when Almaş and Făgăraş were ruled by Wallachian rulers. Later on they turned into compossessorates, from a juridical

point of view, as the result of some regulations and special juridical principles (2, pp 7-9). The second part of this study will focus on the role and importance of these social units.

The protecting principles of the autarchic economy tightly and naturally connected to the "persistent agriculture" promoted by the local households of this area allow the Romanian economic Medievalism in the Olt Country open the way to the nourishing and lasting development of a domestic industries autarchic economy meant to cover sufficiently the range of the most varied needs; then, the trades provided consistency to the whole economic Făgărășean life especially until the settlement of the Austro-Hungarian customs union due to the unceasing and worthy toil of the craftsmen living and working in the Olt Country. The craft activities were fully performed as long as the rooted economic complementarities with Wallachia were preserved intact, as well as due to the strong and longstanding organization of craftsmen of Făgăraș into strong guilds (they were abolished in 1872), with rigorously defined and applied hierarchies, privileges and occupational and community responsibilities. The Census of 1721-1722 synthesizes and presents the number of crafts specializations in Făgăraș and the villages of the district (Annex 1).

Some of the endless political and social turmoils which had an impact on the economic feudalism in the Transylvanian area were to find their freedom for the serfdom in the middle of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century and late Middle Ages, which was not only the deserved, justified and long awaited act of justice for the Romanians of Transylvania, but also a preparatory step towards a lasting and sustainable administrative questioning and reconfiguration of property. The Imperial Patent of June 21st, 1854 was to regulate,

with full legal force, ownership in line with the spirit of the time opening through its constitutive dispositions, the way to allotting the former serfs (and the legal rights reserved) the serfs' lands, pastures and forests previously in use of these very hard tried.

Under the legal act of 1854, boosted by the cadastral organization and the design of the land books that followed, "shared or private communal pastures and forests set up in urbarial or boyernal compossessorate and common property as shown by the previous possession case" (1, p 66). This new order enshrined in legal rules imposed by the political, social and economic post serf regime was more a matter of depriving the Romanian peasants from the enslaving obligations from the Middle Ages to the dawn of the modern era and also a natural and beneficial liberation of the Romanian element to the desired setting in its old customs and ancestral rights.

3. At the turn of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century and XX<sup>th</sup> century and even in the first few decades of the twentieth century, the Olt Country preserves, besides the capitalist spirit of the time, an "economic morphology" similar to the medieval economy. First, the character of "totality" of economic life is preserved. Then, the well-established, closed, autarchic peasant households remains "the economic and social cell of the Olt County" (1, p 224), a factor of balanced ordering of village life "working unit" whose "indicative criteria" are "power of production and power of consumption" (7, p 148) and whose balance is the foundation of village life. Therefore, abundant provision of land and agricultural inventory is a constant concern of any peasant household, as the villages of the Olt Country balanced the efforts to purchase land with real working power and diversification of consumption needs of the constitutive families.

But these farms are part of a collective work system in which a vital role is played by neighborhoods, nations, groups, village communities, forms of property and traditions inherited. Collective exploitation, especially in the form of compossessorates is interesting, of community interest and widely spread in the Olt Country. Compossessorates are structured social units based on customary practices specific to the place in view of forest stock exploitation in indivision which, by their force and economic importance, generate stability and social solidarity at community level. There are two prevalent types of compossessorate in the Olt Country: those of former serfs (grouping compossessorate owners according to nongenealogic criteria, but to the quality of descendant of former serfs, to a social relationship) and the compossessorates of former boyards (which group compossessorate owners genealogically, chaining them biologically in the organization of the compossessorate) (2, pp. 4-5).

After completion of national unity (1918), the status of these social units (compossessorates) was reconfigured, both legally and from the forest point of view, as they could no longer preserve the forms and methods of operation after the orders of the Hungarian forestry stocks. Naturally, they were integrated into the new legal architecture of Greater Romania, to which were applied, later on, the provisions of the Forest Code of 1910, provisions which also capitalize the local customary practices. From an economic perspective, there remained solid sort-outs giving considerable financial resources which used to feed constantly the communal budgets of Făgăraş.

A demographic phenomenon, with causes and consequences mainly economic and social, and also with legal and political resonance, which marked the Olt Country

at the beginning of XX<sup>th</sup> century was the emigration of inhabitants of Făgăraş to the United States of America. The reasons for this are, firstly, economic: the low fertility of the soil on large areas, the fragmentation of family property by destroying through succession, the working of land by predetermined areas allotted by rotation and leaving a large part of land to be ploughed, etc. To all these, a relevant demographic growth is added at the beginning of the twentieth century. The interweaving of these factors, expressed in "the need for better" caused a segment of the population of the Olt Country "swarm" to "the land of all opportunities" (Annex 2). As regards the economic consequences, most of the revenues obtained from the United States of America were intended for the development of family households: the acquisition of land and raising its price, the renewal of the agricultural inventory or setting up deposits to increase in the banks of the times. As regards the social order, these large amounts of money led to an increased quality of life in all the villages of the Olt Country, as the church and the school have also benefited from gifts and donations, which "betrays distinguished qualities and well defined and preserved characters" (4, p.113).

A preserver of orders and organizational forms specific to the economic medievalism, the Olt Country created in the early XX<sup>th</sup> century and especially between the two world wars, a well-structured banking system. Besides the capitalist banks, supplementing them and probably to a greater extent larger than these, the economic environment of Făgăraş took advantage of the exemplary, protective support of the popular banks, developing and rewarding the "credit unions" that had opened paths since the end of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century to most diverse initiatives for economic development.

Confidence in these banks manifested by the population of the Olt Country is illustrated by the increased value of loans provided by popular banks compared to the capitalist ones (8% higher than the capitalist banks, net income at joint stock) and the deposits increased spectacularly. But what is very important for the development of the popular banks is the fact that "out of the total number of heads of families, we can find 20% members of the credit unions" (1, p. 206) in the Olt Country. Moreover, financial losses of the capitalist banks' during the general crisis between 1929-1933 created in the villages the Olt Country, a sense of confidence and a "positive trend" for the cooperative forms. (Annex 3)

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Olt Country preserved its regional unity both from a cultural, historical traditions and economic point of view. The strong characteristic of the family economy has been fiercely preserved, with each generation of people, over times. Even nowadays, the peasant farm represents the main hub of the village life in Făgăraș along with the inherent elements of modernization.

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**Annex 1**

*Types of crafts and number of craftsmen in Făgăraş and the villages around Făgăraş, according to the Census from 1721-1722*

No.	Types of craftsmen	No. of craftsmen		
		Făgăraş	The villages around Făgăraş	Total
1.	Tanners	27	14	41
2.	Tatters	8	7	15
3.	Belt makers	42	-	42
4.	Shoemakers	17	9	26
5.	Skinners	11	3	14
6.	Butchers	2	16	18
7.	Potters	17	11	28
8.	Tailors	10	-	10
9.	Tubbers	-	15	15
10.	Wainwrights	-	8	8
11.	Button makers	4	-	4
12.	Tapestry makers	2	-	2
13.	Rope makers	2	-	2
14.	Comb makers	2	-	2
15.	Others	35	34	69
	TOTAL	179	117	296

**Annex 2***Emigrations from Făgăraș County to The Unites States of America 1899-1913*

*Source: Adrian Negrea – Procesul de emigrare a drăgușenilor în America (The Process of Emigration of the People in Drăguș to America), Arhiva pentru știință și reformă socială (The Archives for science and social reform), Bucharest, 1933, pp. 107-108*

No.	Period	Number of emigrants			
		Men	Women	Total	Repatriates
1.	1899	232	193	425	17
2.	1900	173	92	265	17
3.	1901	339	99	438	34
4.	1902	273	56	329	65
5.	1903	677	33	710	79
6.	1904	507	190	697	107
7.	1905	1,577	359	1,936	130
8.	1906	1,327	255	1,582	179
9.	1907	1,522	354	1,876	657
10.	1908	442	275	717	448
11.	1909	1,150	360	1,510	183
12.	1910	1,141	350	1,491	102
13.	1911	385	280	665	364
14.	1912	714	368	1,082	221
15.	1913	562	603	1,165	120
	TOTAL	11,021	3,867	14,888	2,723

**Annex 3***Report on the popular banks of the Olt Country on 31st December 1927**Source: Alexandru Bărbat – Desvoltarea și structura economică a Țării Oltului (The Development and Economic Background of The Olt Country), Cluj, 1938, p. 202*

No. crt.	BANCA POPULARĂ	Commune	Joint stock	Reserve fund	Deposits	Effects of payments	Net profit	Total activ
1.	Corbul.....	Corbi	14,300	1,921	90,550	60,000	7,375	183.977
2.	Cruțarea.....	Comana-de-Sus	192,576	43,653	264,134	180,000	44,304	769.893
3.	Drăgușana...	Drăguș	53,101	19,725	773,928	145,000	25,447	1,052.695
4.	Economia.....	Vad	249,648	68,173	4.513,903	700,000	94,003	5,944.302
5.	Hârseana.....	Hârseni	107,955	31,534	1.573,467	1,140,000	96,147	3,102.836
6.	Liseana.....	Lisa	103,102	10,025	466,286	785,000	41,693	1,471.257
7.	Luțana.....	Luța	23,224	4,839	40,126	169,000	9,946	258.367
8.	Mândra.....	Mândra	110,827	2,684	241,705	–	42,444	401.715
9.	Pojorțana..	Pojorta	56,590	275	78,468	370,000	17,881	538.747
10.	Plugarul.....	Sâmbăta-de-Jos	27,066	1,023	164,630	80,000	9,382	293.262
11.	Sâmbeteana..	Sâmbăta-de-Sus	35,420	11,185	359,779	252,000	13,616	702.481
12.	Sărățeană...	Sărata	74,118	4,398	187,868	30,000	10,918	374.559
13.	Sebeșana.....	Sebeșul-de-Jos	33,200	–	42,444	150,000	2,709	240.570
14.	Sebeșana.....	Sebeș	17,690	–	42,444	35,000	1,534	146.925
15.	Săceleana.....	Arpașul-de-Sus	53,900	51,242	862,447	200,000	32,142	1,411.087
16.	Turnu-Roșu	Porcești	147,901	10,812	1,378,131	230,000	51,500	1,910.736
17.	Viitorul.....	Șinca-Veche	162,293	26,246	446.150	1.070.000	26,249	1,981.642
18.	Viștea.....	Viștea-de-Jos	249,739	16.471	453.568	1.615.000	61,605	2,597.643
19.	Vișteana.....	Viștea-de-Sus	26,750	16.747	316.249	554.360	15,065	941.050
20.	Voivodeana	Voivodenii-Mari	27,910	693	156.193	38.000	8,912	239.538
21.	Unirea.....	Olteț	80,100	832	121.731	125.000	18,346	362.343
Total lei			1,847,710	322,478	12,617,899	7,928,360	618,023	24,925.619