**Listening to Rural Voices: Why Bother?**

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**Abstract**

Scholars who have approached the concept of rurality and the notion of peasantry in the past have relied heavily on elite sources about the rural world, rarely including the voices of rural actors themselves. This special issue challenges the idea of a so-called “rural monolith,” which speaks with a single voice and reflects a single culture and attempts to draw attention to the fact that “the rural” is multifaceted, polyvocal and ambiguous. The articles presented in this issue identify and analyse the voices of rural actors, irrespective of their identities and missions, and highlight the fact that even though they are not always easy for researchers to access, these voices are far from worthless.

**Keywords**: Romania; rural; peasants; methodology; countryside

In a notebook that depicts the miracles of a well-known Romanian Old Calendarist monk, Glicherie Tănase, is a handwritten story entitled “The Experiences of a Schoolboy.” Gheorghe Olaru from Brusturi, a village situated in Neamț county, was in third grade when, on his way to school, he was stopped by a man who asked him if he kept the new or the old calendar. Proudly, the boy answered that he followed the old calendar; the man then grabbed his hand and took him to the mayor’s office. Confused, the boy started to scream, and his cries were recognized by his older sister who was working as a cook for the gendarmes in the village. She managed to hide him in the attic of the building for two days, and when things had settled down, she sent him home. Gheorghe, however, could recall the large number of familiar individuals who left the mayor’s office with their clothes torn apart and bloodied, as well as the women’s pleas of mercy when the gendarmes and the mayor forced them to eat meat. They promised that they would work as much as they had to, but begged to be exempted from eating meat as they were still fasting.[[1]](#footnote-1) This last piece of information, however, was not revealed to their persecutors. They were all Old Calendarist believers who worshipped the figure of their spiritual leader, Glicherie Tănase, and did not want to renounce their belief. This short story, seen through the eyes of a young boy, reveals much about the dynamics of a small rural community in the 1930s Romania. We learn who the rural actors were and the intricate relationships between them: a young naive boy, amazingly aware of his belief and tradition, is seen as a danger to the local community; the gendarmes and the mayor are involved in the spiritual lives of the citizens, as well as in their disciplining; women are victims and protectors, while still being charged with responsibilities that are portrayed as typically female; the spiritual leader is worshipped by the community, but he does not inhabit it. It is a story about different worldviews, about a rupture with tradition, about spirituality, violence, invasion of privacy and, in the end, about survival. What it is not, however, is a simple story about peasants in Brusturi, Neamț county. As the articles in this issue demonstrate, there is not, and never has been, one story that sums up everything one needs to know about being a peasant, or living in the countryside.

This special issue is concerned with “rural voices” as a category of analysis. According to one investigation into functionally rural areas in Romania in June 2022, the definition of rural space “focuses on the economic specialization of the local administrative unit” and “the rural areas are defined by their strong orientation towards agriculture and, in other cases, by their level of territorial endowment (inferior to the cities).”[[2]](#footnote-2) Especially earlier in the twentieth century, towns such as Mihăileni in Botoşani county or Medgidia in Dobruja faced similar levels of estrangement from the country’s centers of power as villages in Zlatna did, suggesting that similar interpretative frameworks might help us understand both. Defining the rural as an object of study is never simple. Recent scholarship on the United States has concluded that there are multiple types of rurality and rejects the notion of a “rural monolith” that reflects a single culture or speaks with a single voice.[[3]](#footnote-3) This special issue argues that there is no one representative of the rural, and insists that “rural voices” are not necessarily and exclusively the voices of peasants. They are the voices of all those rural actors – be they mayors, priests, teachers, gendarmes, landowners, monks, nuns, rangers, women, children, young people, and so on – who had something to say that was distinct from sociologists, folklorists, politicians, public officials, or poets and the various artists who have described rural Romania, usually from afar. We consider rural actors as all those individuals whose identities and missions emerged out of rural spaces. Landlords, village elites – usually consisting of the priest, the teacher, and the notary – along with gendarmes, forestry officials, and farmers all have their own rural voices which need to be heard if we wish to understand the worlds they inhabit.

The story of Gheorghe Olaru from Brusturi is just one example of a rural voice that expressed the hardships endured by members of a marginalized religious community, independently of what was written in the official reports produced by the representatives of the local authorities. Voices like Olaru’s have been silenced, interpreted and reinterpreted, analysed, politicised, reported, rephrased, or completely ignored, but rarely listened to carefully. From the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries the notion of rurality in Romania was equated with the peasantry, which is itself a problematic social category.[[4]](#footnote-4) The peasantry was either idealized or presented as degraded, and contrasted with modern, urban citizens.[[5]](#footnote-5)

For some, rural voices refer to the voices of Others, of threatening and marginalised subjects who are constantly defined in relation to the centre, who lead alternative lifestyles; the poor, backward thinkers, and the uneducated.[[6]](#footnote-6) It is precisely this notion of Otherness that makes their voices important. Unlike elites and public figures, whose stories had a wide audience, rural voices need to be, most of the time, sought after, dug for and brought to light. They can be contained in a short phrase expressed at the end of a postcard, or in long and thoughtful letters and testimonies.

The present issue emerges out of an international workshop on “Rural Voices” sponsored by the Lapedatu Foundation and hosted by New Europe College in Bucharest in November 2022. The workshop brought together scholars from Romania and abroad from disciplines as diverse as architecture, anthropology, ethnology, history, and the study of religions. The main purpose of the workshop was to interrogate “rural voices” as a category of analysis, as well as to generate new definitions and research questions in connection with rural actors and the countryside. The event explored themes such as the histories and struggles of various rural communities and ways of reading written and oral sources in which the worldviews of rural inhabitants are reflected. The articles included in this special issue illustrate a variety of ways of (re)discovering the voices of rural actors. From the ignored voices of peasants (Bărbulescu), to the importance of oral history and collective memory (Cupcea), and the presence of rural actors in state archives (Blasen, Andrei and Davis), this issue examines a variety of different themes and research methods that can be used to interrogate rural voices.

In his contribution, **Constantin** **Bărbulescu** argues that despite talking about peasants *ad nauseum* throughout the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries, folklorists, ethnologists, and ethnographers consistently ignored what peasants were trying to say. Instead, they idealized them as representatives of Romanian national identity, preventing them from speaking by telling them what it was that was valuable about their culture. Bărbulescu’s account is not entirely pessimistic, as he argues that despite their faults, researchers like Ovid Densusianu and Henri H. Stahl did manage to break the silence that surrounded the voices of the peasants by recording and interpreting their personal stories. A careful reading of their work thus allows us access to the words of peasants talking to researchers from the city about issues that the peasants themselves cared about.

**George Andrei** focuses on the southern and eastern Transylvanian highlands during the interwar period, delving into debates amongst state forestry officials, communal administrators, and villagers over how forests should best be exploited, who had the right to use the forests, what responsibilities the state and local communities had towards the natural environment and each other, and how money, the law, and the forests shaped power relations in the countryside. Whereas Bărbulescu contrasts peasants with elites, Andrei emphasizes that there were conflicts between rural actors, who leveraged state power to settle disputes amongst themselves.

**Philippe Henri Blasen’s** research discusses Mihăileni, a small town located in Northern Moldavia. He is interested in police interviews with local inhabitants in 1938, asking about their opinions on life under King Carol II’s royal dictatorship. Summaries of “public opinion” appeared frequently in police reports from the interwar period, but what makes the reports from Mihăileni special is that unlike the schematic reports found elsewhere, these were structured in the form of regular interviews conducted by the Mihăileni police department with various individuals. The interviews provide unique insights into the daily lives of the residents, as well as their personal opinions about the new regime, the new constitution, antisemitic policies, or high prices. Though silenced by the official press of the time and shaped by the power relations involved in their collection, the voices of these individuals can still be heard within archival documents such as these.

**Adriana Cupcea** turns to the Turkish Muslim Roma community in Medgidia, Dobruja. Based on fieldwork through semi-structured interviews and participant observation, she explores notions of religiosity and how the community understands, negotiates and practices Islam. Despite the absence of reliable archival documents, Cupcea gives us access to the voices of this community by appealing to their collective memories and everyday practices. Exploring themes such as migration, religiosity, gender, and the challenges faced by double minorities, Cupcea highlights the ways in which this rural community managed to ensure its survival by constantly negotiating, adapting and reinventing its identity, including its religious one.

Finally, the letters translated by **R. Chris Davis as part of the Sources section** fit well into the topic of “rural voices.” In these letters members of Roman-Catholic Csango communities in rural Moldavia during 1940-1945 were appealing to the Romanian authorities to recognize their status as ethnic Romanians and asking for access to the rights and privileges that accompanied that status. The letters described hostility and discrimination from army officers and railway staff and problems obtaining important documents from state officials. As well as trying to arouse pity for themselves, they used ethnographic and historical arguments to convince the state of the rightness of their cause.

When they wrote to the authorities, the Csangos displayed the same level of sophistication found in the words of early twentieth century peasants speaking to ethnologists: Transylvanian villagers complaining about abuses by forestry rangers, Moldavians telling policemen about their attitudes towards the new regime, or Turkish Muslim Roma negotiating their status within Medgidia’s social hierarchy. As James C. Scott has persuasively argued, rather than “speaking truth to power,” when poor people find themselves face-to-face with powerful people, they often prefer dissimulation, polite courtesy, and speaking in riddles and half-truths. “The greater the disparity in power between dominant and subordinate and the more arbitrarily it is exercised,” he writes, “the more the public transcript of subordinates will take on a stereotyped, ritualistic cast. In other words, the more menacing the power, the thicker the mask.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Most of the rural actors discussed in this issue were not facing the same sorts of oppressive relationships experienced by the Vietnamese peasants Scott was referring to, but neither were they ignorant about the social and economic disparities that separated them from their interlocutors. Whereas anthropologists like Cupcea have spent a long time building up relationships of trust with their informers, the peasants who spoke to Ovid Densusianu and Henri H. Stahl were well aware that the “gentlemen researchers” from the city were not their equals. Similarly, civilians being interviewed by the police in Mihăileni under the royal dictatorship, Transylvanian peasants asking that state officials be punished, or Csango villagers trying to obtain official documents knew that they needed to speak the language of those in power if they wanted to get what they needed and avoid retribution. In the words of a Moţi proverb, “To get along with the fool, speak like him and act as you wish.”

Of course, the Romanian peasant *can* speak, but it is important that rural voices are not necessarily taken at face value, and that we do not assume that the speaking peasant is a unitary subject, independent of the productive signifiers and social discourses upon which their speech is predicated.[[8]](#footnote-8) Given scholars’ longstanding interest in rural Romania, it is remarkable how rarely rural voices are brought into the conversation. When Constantin Bărbulescu and Călin Cotoi write about the history of public health in rural areas, for example, their primary sources come from urban doctors.[[9]](#footnote-9) When historians such as Traian Sandu and Oliver Jens Schmitt write about the role of peasants in Romanian fascist movements, they have rarely included the voices of rural actors themselves.[[10]](#footnote-10) Similarly, the excellent collection of essays in *Politics and Peasants in Interwar Romania* (2017) relies heavily on elite sources *about* the rural world rather than source *from* that world.[[11]](#footnote-11) For a number of reasons, elite sources are more accessible, lengthier and contain more detailed descriptions than rural sources on similar topics. On some topics regarding rural life, no rural sources exist at all.

Rural actors nonetheless have had a lot to say, both in the past and in the present. The challenge is finding their voices and learning how to listen to them. War widows and veterans, for example, can be found petitioning the National Office of Veterans, Widows and Orphans (IOVR), and the reports of Communist cadres about collectivization often contained the voices of rural complaint.[[12]](#footnote-12) As Gail Kligman and Katherine Verdery argue, the cadres were themselves rural actors who “engaged in multiple forms of … avoidance, noncompliance, and bending higher directives to their own purposes.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Speaking directly to rural actors often reveals that their concerns are not those which urban researchers and policy-makers originally thought.[[14]](#footnote-14) Rural voices frequently express themselves in the language of religion, and we need to take their belief systems seriously if we expect to enter into their worlds.[[15]](#footnote-15) Even the classic materials of folklore studies, such as wedding rituals or popular music, can express rural concerns if researchers are careful to listen to how such texts are used to engage with power relations rather than as expressions of national identity.[[16]](#footnote-16)

One of the challenges associated with hearing rural voices is that even when we do uncover them, as many of the authors cited above have done admirably, we are hearing rural actors speaking to centres of power. By emphasizing these voices, we unintentionally silence the voices of rural people speaking to each other. What do peasants say to each other when no one is listening? If a tree has fallen in the woods but there were no sociologists present to record it, did it make a sound? George Andrei’s article in this issue is valuable for the fact that he reveals a conflict *within* a rural community, even if the voices we hear are mostly those of the different participants explaining the conflict to outsiders. The person recording an interaction, whether they are a well-meaning anthropologist, a policeman, or a forestry official, always shapes and changes the content and medium of what is being recorded. As Lynn Abrams points out, “the interviewer by word, deed and gesture in the interview solicits a narrative from the narrator; a different interviewer would solicit different words, perhaps even a very different story or version of it.”[[17]](#footnote-17) The subjectivity of the researcher is the perennial issue for the social scientist, but knowing that the voices we have access to are limited and relative does not make them worthless. On the contrary, it allows us as researchers and readers to encounter rural actors as people very different from ourselves and to allow that difference to penetrate and shape our own subjectivities through their experiences.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Finally, the articles contained in this issue constantly remind us that rurality intersects with wealth, gender, ethnicity, and religion to structure power relations, as Adriana Cupcea demonstrates with her argument that performing Muslimness and practicing Islam is important for situating Turkish Roma Muslims within Medgidia’s social hierarchy.

Rural voices are diverse: they can speak loud and clear, or more subtly; they reflect belief systems, fears and doubts, prejudgments; they have to be sought after, brought to light, and sometimes read between the lines. The young Gheorghe Olaru from Brusturi told his story to a villager who, later on, wrote it down in a notebook, making his voice heard. The man who asked him what calendar he followed might have gone on and told the others that he had met a naïve and indoctrinated young boy whose beliefs were dangerous for the safety of the community; the gendarmes might have written down reports in which they detailed the alarming large number of Old Calendarist believers in Brusturi; the women might have warned their families about the brutality of the gendarmes. Even though they reflect different – and sometimes contradictory − aspects of the same small village and its inhabitants, all of these voices are crucial for understanding the complexity of the rural world. Be they hitherto ignored peasants who suddenly became the main interest of the folklorists and ethnologists, residents of Mihăileni giving their opinion on King Carol II’s reign, villagers debating over how forests should be exploited, Turkish Roma from Medgidia reinventing their Muslimness, or Csango villagers defending their Romanianess, all of these voices are diverse and complex, representing different aspects of Romania’s rich social tapestry.

1. “Sfântul Glicherie Mărturisitorul,” unpublished manuscript, author’s collection. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Alexandru Rusu, Lilian Niacşu, Andrei Enea, and Octavian Goga, *Functional Rural Areas in Romania:*

   *A Methodological Investigation* (Luxembourg: ESPON, 2022), 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Nora Shalaway Carpenter ed., *Rural Voices: 15 Authors Challenge Assumptions about Small-Town America* (Somerville: Candlewick Press, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Alex Drace-Francis, *The Traditions of Invention: Romanian Ethnic and Social Stereotypes in Historical Context* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 11–59. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Sorin Radu and Oliver Jens Schmitt, ‘Introduction’, in Sorin Radu and Oliver Jens Schmitt eds., *Politics and Peasants in Interwar Romania: Perceptions, Mentalities, Propaganda* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 2–3. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Sarah Neal, *Rural Identities: Ethnicity and Community in the Contemporary English Countryside* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in Rosalind C. Morris ed., *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Constantin Bărbulescu, *Physicians, Peasants and Modern Medicine: Imagining Rurality in Romania, 1860-1910*, trans. Angela Jianu (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2019); Călin Cotoi, *Inventing the Social in Romania, 1848-1914: Networks and Laboratories of* Knowledge (Leiden: Brill, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Traian Sandu, *Un fascisme roumain: Histoire de la Garde de fer* (Paris: Perrin, 2014); Oliver Jens Schmitt, *Corneliu Zelea Codreanu: ascensiunea și căderea “Căpitanului”* (București: Humanitas, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Sorin Radu and Oliver Jens Schmitt eds., *Politics and Peasants in Interwar Romania: Perceptions, Mentalities, Propaganda* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Maria Bucur, *The Nation’s Gratitude: World War I and Citizenship Rights in Interwar Romania, Routledge Histories of Central and Eastern Europe* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022); Gail Kligman and Katherine Verdery, *Peasants Under Siege: The Collectivization of Romanian Agriculture, 1949-1962* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Kligman and Verdery, *Peasants Under Siege*, 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Maria Bucur and Mihaela Miroiu, *Birth of Democratic Citizenship: Women and Power in Modern Romania* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. James Alexander Kapaló, *Text, Context and Performance: Gagauz Folk Religion in Discourse and Practice* (Leiden: Brill, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Gail Kligman, *The Wedding of the Dead: Ritual, Poetics, and Popular Culture in Transylvania* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Margaret H. Beissinger, Speranţa Rădulescu and Anca Giurchescu (eds), *Manele in Romania: Cultural Expression and Social Meaning in Balkan Popular Music* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London: Routledge, 2016), 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)