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**Cuvinte cheie:** cotidian, etnologia urbanului, deconstrucție națională, deconstructivism antropologic

### Repere de etnologie a urbanului

#### Rezumat

În cadrul mai larg al antropologiei culturale resuscitarea interesului pentru cotidian a provocat o serie de dezbateri (și chiar controverse) extrem de interesante. O consecință directă a disputelor pe această temă a fost faptul că s-a conturat din ce în ce mai clar dorința cercetătorilor de a aduce în prim plan și de a pune sub lumina reflectoarelor tot ceea ce a fost lăsat deoparte, neglijat sau considerat fără importanță de către știința oficială. Această schimbare de paradigmă sugerează în același timp dezinteresul manifest față de naționalul omogen, peren și reprezentativ care a fost foarte mult timp domeniul de analiză, aproape exclusiv, al etnologiei naționale. Poziționarea în timpul cotidianului se opune în mod expres privirii fixate (aproape întotdeauna) pe timpul sărbătorii, caracteristică esențială a etnologiei naționale.

Din această perspectivă, o etnologie a urbanului care, în mod programatic, are în centrul atenției cotidianul se înscrie pe trendul general al “deconstrucției naționale” tocmai prin această orientare sistematică a privirii cercetătorilor într-o direcție total opusă.

În România, această “înregimentare” în slujba deconstructivismului antropologic nu permite doar alte perspective epistemologice și metodologice, ci aduce în câmpul analizei teme și subiecte noi, neobservate sau pur și simplu privite cu dispreț și expediate în derizoriu.

În lucrarea de față încercăm o foarte succintă prezentare a câtorva repere importante care trebuie luate în dezbateri de către cei interesați de domeniul etnologiei urbanului.

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## Landmarks of Urban Ethnology

### Summary

Within the larger framework of cultural anthropology, a renewal of interest for the quotidian has provoked an extremely substantial series of discussions (even controversies). The direct consequence of disputes around this issue was that researchers started to express with more and more clarity their intention to foreground and bring to the light of intense interest everything that used to be set aside, neglected, or considered of no importance by official scientific research. This paradigmatic change also suggests a manifest lack of interest for studies related to homogeneous national issues, which are perennial and representative, which almost exclusively constituted the domain of analysis of our national ethnology. A positioning within the quotidian is expressly opposed to an almost exclusive observation of behaviours during celebrations and feasts, which are the essential moments of interest for national ethnology.

The general trend of a “national deconstruction” is at the basis for this new general trend to programmatically concentrate on urban ethnology, that has the quotidian as its centre of attention; researchers, though, come from a totally opposing direction of research.

Such regimentation of Romanian researchers under the flag of anthropological deconstructivism does not only allow new epistemological and methodological perspectives, but it also brings new themes and subjects in the field of discussion; such themes have been simply neglected until now, or, they have been looked down upon and considered as derisory.

This paper tries a very succinct presentation of a few important landmarks that have to be debated upon by those interested in the domain of urban ethnology.

## Landmarks of Urban Ethnology

Urban ethnology has as main objective a delimitation and a clear-cut separation from those other approaches that have in view the identification and the analysis of the reminiscences of the traditional universe, which are (still) surviving within the urban area. Such reminiscences have many times been transformed in choice themes of research, directed towards finding the individuals that are uprooted from their villages, and who have become inhabitants of the towns and cities (sometimes even against their will). Consequently, we are referring to a programmatically set delimitation and a focussing of research that forces urban ethnology to discover the city in its unity, its uniqueness, and its specificity, reconsidering it as an ethnological object of research<sup>2</sup>. Such analysis will move away from the sphere of the rural, so that it may approach, analyse, and comment the novel world of the town. Let us also add to these comments the fact that urban ethnology does not intend to take the place of urban sociology in any way. In this respect, ethnology will go forward according to an ordering vector which is opposed to the universalist homogeneity that is accredited by the sociological syntagm "the urban way of life"; on the contrary, ethnology will reject the idea of a universalisation of society by urbanisation. Thus, ethnology of the urban will aim at identifying and analysing differences that can be signalled in a medium that sociology shows as being extremely amorphous. Such approach places urban ethnology within an epistemic endeavour, which supports a separation from the project and the methods of sociology, in their (successful, we may say) attempt to constitute itself as an independent scientific activity.

Having clarified these aspects, let us focus our attention upon this new "ethnological object": the town/city. Since urban communities of our present day consumerist society evolve according to a different structure, and, obviously, a different social dynamic, a new relation will be reported between the individual and the cultural objects. Such new relation will lead to a certain coagulation of the image that man receives as to the space and the objects in his proximity, as well as the manner in which he will relate to these, through a sort of mechanism of symbolic communication. Firstly, we will mention a strong impulse towards abstractisation, which leads to an intense use of signs; such a process is accompanied by a diminution of the importance of real objects. The dissolution of the borders between the sign and its signification, between connotation and denotation, impose another system of codes, whose main function is not that of representing, or reflecting reality, but, especially, that of modifying the image of that reality. Thus, each member of society is subject to a new challenge: that of forming the necessary abilities in order that they might "resist" instability of delimitations, by assimilating and utilising signs in an adequate manner, constructing and deconstructing images, and experimenting by a permanent relation with the social space.

Starting from the premises that a society is a result of the addition of all relationships between people, we have already sketched a conception as to the reticular essence of the social space. This means that the reticular analysis would be the most indicated methodological approach

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<sup>2</sup> This approach has to be seen as "To distinguish and discern what we see", as François Laplantine expressed it (*Descrierea etnografică / Ethnographical Description*, Iași: Polirom, 2000, p. 44) thus getting to "a process of social and cultural organisation of the look, of the visible, of the expressible and the readable" (Laplantine, 80)

in order to describe and understand this complicated phenomenon of producing the urban. We will stop briefly at a few details regarding this method of reticular analysis.

In urban areas, the social space has been powerfully influenced by the new dynamics of the consumerist society. The modern, industrial city has been designed in such a way as to satisfy all entertainment and consumption necessities. The profound spatial metamorphoses have imposed new frameworks of the regionalisation of the social space: urban architecture is standardised, it blurs differences, it pushes towards anonymity, it consolidates loneliness, and, in most cases, it provokes an alienation of the individual.

Due to this instability of delimitations, the urban social space becomes inhomogeneous, marked by obvious discontinuity, by the difficult identification and coherent ranking of institutions; this is the exact opposite of the positioning of the individual experience in the rural space. In other words, the general symbolic order in which the individual order is placed entails another kind of



Aspecte urbane; foto: Felician Săteanu

rigor. This different type of rigor is imposed by the particularity of the complementarity between the psychic and the social, starting from the axiomatic truth according to which the proof of social existence is of a mental nature. Then, in such a context, everything is reduced to a projection of various sequences of the real that the psychic is ordering starting to give a meaning to the flux of symbols. These differentiate the urban from the rural. In the sphere of the urban, this being under “siege” of the mental by a multitude of aspects of the real, and, especially, the symbolism that implies and includes it, impose a specific configuration of the relations between people, and,

ultimately, it provides a distinctive mark to the urban. Another aspect refers to the assault of the real upon the psychic, which causes a certain flexibility of the influence of social institutions upon the individuals; the meaning of these institutions is perceived in a diffuse manner, and their functionality is dissipated at the level of types of inter-human relationships<sup>3</sup>. In the rural universe, the extremely rigid incidence of institutions can be easily signalled, by a solidarity of the members of the community around the norms, and the observing of codes, which leads to a maximum behavioural stereotyping. On the contrary, in the urban world, this incidence is perceived as being extremely elastic, which implies a (much) diminished behavioural stereotyping, and a ceaseless undermining of codes, especially through a minimising of adhering to one or another social institution.

The relations or the interaction between individuals give structure to a series of egocentric networking, which verify the functioning of the official social code. When such networks come together, they form reticular fields. A network can be created by the members of a family, by neighbouring families, between co-workers, or friends. Subsequent to various types of connexions, they are at the origin of some partially natural networks. A particular constellation can be formed by bringing together several natural particular networks, or, sometimes, only segments of these. Thus, secondary partial networks can result. They may be induced or stimulated by a series of factors that belong to economical interests, to religious ones, to political, elective, unionist, scientific ones, etc. As a direct effect, type-associations will be established in all segments of urban social life: in communication, in production, in consumption, in education, in the recreational, the associative, etc.

A double tendency appears in each group that belongs to a reticular networking: to bring the risk to a minimum, and to get involved at a minimum level (both affectively, and in relation to the resources the individual allots to that association). Consequently, a tension appears, an internal conflict that derives from this true principle of group self-preservation. If we decompose this type of conflict into its basic elements, we will be able to identify a few valid constants for any network. Such constants can be grouped into three categories: a) the content of the relations; b) the iteration of the contents; c) the direction of fluxes. They have a certain number of inter-relational variables that come to the aid of the dual strategy of a minimum of investments and a minimum of risk.

a) the contents of the relations can be quantified according to the group members' degree of involvement, which evolve from simple conversations (the lowest degree of involvement) to personal favours (the maximum degree of involvement).

b) iteration of contents comprises the number of relations realised by individuals within the framework of a network, that is, their frequency.

c) the direction of fluxes (unidirectional or bidirectional) establishes the preponderance in the orientation of exchanges and connections within a relationship.

We may easily conclude from the above that an ethnologic approach of the urban is anything but facile, it is a risky endeavour, but a challenging one, as well.

The first studies of urban ethnology were conducted in Romania at the beginning of the 90s, and were focused on three main themes: 1) Urban habitation; 2) Neighbourhoods,

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<sup>3</sup> See Nicolae Panea, *Zei de asfalt. Antropologie a urbanului / Asphalt Gods. An Urban Anthropology*, București: Cartea Românească, 2001, Chap. 11.3

<sup>4</sup> The study was first published in 1994, in a number of the "Revista de cercetări sociale" /The Journal of Social Research/ and revised by Mihăilescu and included in *Etnografii urbane/ Urban Ethnographies/* (coordinated by him), Iași: Polirom, 2009, p. 31

and 3) The Industrial.

Urban habitation is approached by V. Mihăilescu in his study “Blocul între loc și locuire. Teme și probleme de etnologie urbană”<sup>4</sup>/ The block of flats between habitat and habitation. Themes and issues of urban ethnology/. This study unexpectedly places the emphasis on *habitation*, rather than the *habitat*. The suggestion is that a house is important to be perceived not as a definitively delimited institution, but rather as a process. What is similar to considering that the house, the dwelling should not be seen as a space “loaded” with human actions, but as a social space of interactions that are in continuous change, of a defining reciprocal dialogue with the object and the environment. Domestic unity of habitation was approached within the theme of neighbourhoods (the study of the neighbouring communities and neighbourhood life) in the volume *Relații de vecinătate în localități urbane din sudul țării*<sup>5</sup>/ *Neighbourhood Relations in Urban Localities in the South of the Country*/ and in the micro-monography “O stradă oarecare din București”<sup>6</sup> / *An Average Street in Bucharest*/ . The authors of such research emphasize the deterioration of the criteria that are at the basis of the functioning of sociability and helping networks, especially highlighting parallel sociability: of women, on one hand, and of men, on the other.

The industrial is also considered to be interesting from an ethnological (and anthropological) point of view, on the background of the urban setting<sup>7</sup>. The authors of all the



Aspecte urbane; foto: Felician Săteanu

<sup>5</sup> Paula Popoiu, Sanda Larionescu (coord), București: Paideia, 2006

<sup>6</sup> Irina Nicolau și Ioana Popescu, București: Nemira, 1999

<sup>7</sup> Let us just refer to Liviu Chelcea's study *Bucureștiul postindustrial. Memorie, dezindustrializare și regenerare urbană / Postindustrial Bucharest. Memory, De-industrialisation and Urban Regeneration*/ Iași: Polirom, 2008

above paths of research are focused on individual subjectivity and interrelationships, that is, on the actual changes and dynamic. All these directions of research also refer to social phenomena within the urban space, which are manifestations of obvious discontinuity from any kind of reflex or reminiscence of the traditional universe.

As the main characteristic of the city is given from an interconnection and interpenetration of reticular fields, we think that a continuation and a development of research in the domain of urban ethnology should take into account this characteristic with necessity. The method of reticular analysis can constitute the adequate framework for the study of surface social aspects, by a spectrographic scanning of anything that is particular.

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