

# “The world of the hajduks”. Bandit subcultures in 19th century Romania and their balladry

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**Summary:** Banditry in 19<sup>th</sup> century Romania, as in all early modern societies, is quite a frequent phenomenon. Traditionally called *hajduks*, the men that resorted to robbery in the era, are the subject of various historical accounts but also of a rather rich popular culture, especially in the form of folk balladry that celebrates their exploits. Usually analyzed in 'class struggle' terms by most Romanian historians and folklorists, these popular ballads should rather be regarded as indicators of a delinquent subculture (or subcultures). The main assumption of this hypothesis, based on subcultural theories developed by criminologists in the past century, is that such subcultures elaborate distinct lifeways that celebrate, justify and encourage delinquent behavior. *Hajduk* balladry is thus a manifestation of such a subculture.

**Keywords:** social bandits, hajduks, subculture, popular culture, ballads, folksongs.

To say that all early modern societies are ridden with banditry is a truism today. There are indeed, prominent bandit figures all over the world in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, from Dick Turpin in early 1700's Britain, to Jesse James in reconstruction era United States or even Pancho Villa during the 1910 Mexican Revolution, extending banditry into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Romanian lands make no exception, the most famous of its outlaws being active during the same period. Most of the time, what we actually know about these bandits, comes almost entirely from popular culture since official documents usually lack.<sup>1</sup> Certainly, in the last half-century our documentary and theoretical knowledge concerning banditry has essentially improved thanks to the work devoted to it by such noted historians as Eric Hobsbawm and those who followed in his footsteps after his path-breaking study, *Bandits*, appeared in 1969.<sup>2</sup> As for popular culture, as source material for the lives of these outlaws, one can only say that it had a peculiar fate during the debate on the nature of banditry, a fate closely linked to the two main directions of study that the same debate sparked.

First there's Hobsbawm model of the *social bandit* popularized by the aforementioned book. What the British historian contended – in his work and in the following, otherwise frequently cited fragment – was that *social bandits* are “peasant outlaws whom the lord and state regard as criminals, but who remain within peasant society, and are considered by their people as heroes, as champions, avengers, fighters for justice, perhaps even leaders of liberation, and in any case as men to be admired, helped and supported.”<sup>3</sup> Further in his study, Eric Hobsbawm delineates the social protest that the bandit advocates, albeit in a poorly articulated manner, thus enclosing *social*

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1 Either because they were not published or simply because the archives were lost.

2 HOBBSAWM, Eric. *Bandits (4<sup>th</sup> edition)*. London: Abacus, 2001.

3 HOBBSAWM, ref. 2, p. 20.

*banditry* in a Marxist framework. In support of his theory, Hobsbawm appeals to the very strong bandit tradition that one finds in literally every culture. This attracted the critique of Dutch anthropologist Anton Blok, the first of the many to question the model of the *social bandit*, who in a seminal article from 1972, pointed towards the complex relationships that bandits everywhere entertained with other social categories, mainly with the elites. “Rather than actual champions of the poor and the weak – Blok remarked – bandits quite often terrorized those from whose very ranks they managed to rise, and thus helped to suppress them.”<sup>4</sup> As for the bandit tradition embodied in Hobsbawm's model, Anton Blok dismisses it as “a construct, stereotype, or figment of human imagination.”<sup>5</sup>

This two-sided debate attracted the dissatisfaction of recent scholarship.<sup>6</sup> Paul Sant Cassia, for instance, blames Hobsbawm for essentializing the concept of banditry in “too narrowly Marxist terms”, while “Blok and his followers do not take representations of banditry into account”<sup>7</sup>, and although he does not satisfactorily address the issue of popular culture<sup>8</sup>, Sant Cassia does make a good point about the limitations of the existing theories. In the present study, I wish to take Sant Cassia's reasoning further and argue, on the same note, that representations of bandits are essential in understanding banditry, especially when they come in the form of popular balladry produced in the same milieus that the bandits themselves populated, rather than in the form of popular novels or romantic literature (as Sant Cassia did in his contribution). For exemplification, I will use the large corpus of Romanian balladry since it is more familiar to me. I argue in favor of a more sociological approach, since the Marxist framework used by both Hobsbawm and Romanian folklorists and historians does not fully explain the particularities of the popular ballad. Of all the sociological theories that could account for the production of such forms of popular culture, *subcultural theories* seem to be the most appropriate. The general assumption of these theories is that delinquent behavior usually develops within a group setting. Such a group “devotes some or all of its time to

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4 BLOK, Anton. *The Peasant and the Brigand: Social Banditry Reconsidered*. In *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 1972, Vol. 14, No. 4, p. 496.

5 BLOK, ref. 4, p. 500.

6 For example, in CURTOT, Nicholas A. - FINK, Alexander. *Bandit Heroes: Social, Mythical, or Rational?*. In *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 2012, Vol. 72, No. 2, pp. 470-497. The article also offers a comprehensible, more expanded review of the existing theories.

7 SANT CASSIA, Paul. “*Better occasional murderers than frequent adulteries*”. *Banditry, violence and sacrifice in the Mediterranean*. In *History and Anthropology*, 2000, Vol. 12, No. 1, pp. 65-66.

8 Paul Sant Cassia tends to overlook folklore and peasant representations of the bandits in favor of the nation-state mythology, which indeed employed the bandit figure for its nationalistic purposes. When he finally addresses peasant representations, his reflections are brief and do not explain the social or political functions that these representations hold: “Peasant idealization of bandits is also variable and a function of their subsequent political evolution. In contrast to Hobsbawm, I argue that bandits do not necessarily «belong to the peasantry» (1986: 130), they often belong to those groups who sponsor or control the production of these symbols often in literary form. In certain cases bandits may belong to the peasantry only because those who peddled these images were themselves of recent humble origins eager to legitimate themselves. This occurred in Greece with klephts, such as Kolokotronis and Makriyiannis. In Brazil and elsewhere, through the *literatura de cordel*, bandits belong to the peasantry because they are incorporated in widely-circulated chap books (...). Bandits often belong solely to the peasantry because no other social group has a need for them and because they are often forgotten.” SANT CASSIA, ref. 7, pp. 93-94.

planing, committing, or celebrating delinquencies” and elaborates “a set of lifeways – a subculture – which encourages and justifies behavior defined as delinquent by the larger society.”<sup>9</sup> But before turning to the sociological explanations we should first make acquaintance with the Romanian bandits themselves and see why present theories about the songs dedicated to them are limited in giving a plausible account for their production and social function.



Picture 1: "Portrait of hajduk Radu Anghel" (1864) by Mișu Popp - National Museum of Romanian History

**Hajduks and mere robbers. The paradigms of the Romanian scholarship on banditry.**

Romanian popular balladry, just like the ballads of most of the Balkan peoples, usually calls its bandits *hajduks*. From their discovery in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – along with other types of songs and forms of popular culture – these *hajduk* ballads were seen as evidence for the existence of the noble robber, an otherwise common conclusion all over the Europe of the same period, where similar popular figures popped out with the advent of Romanticism. The *hajduk* was the opposite of the mere robber (*tâlhar/hoțoman*) who, unlike its noble counterpart, did not rob the rich to give to the poor, was not driven by righteousness and did not fight the Turks, the Hungarians or any other

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9 BORDUA, David J. *Delinquent Subcultures: Sociological Interpretations of Gang Delinquency*. In *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 1961, Vol. 338, p. 120. Along with this review of the existing subcultural theories, a more recent one, also employed for the purpose of this article, is to be found in SHOEMAKER, Donald J. *Theories of Delinquency. An Examination of Explanations of Delinquent Behavior*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 141-179.

nation that subdued Romania in the era and in the previous centuries. This dichotomy became the basis for any future theories concerning the nature of banditry in the territories inhabited by Romanians. Thus, in order for a bandit to become a *hajduk* in the minds of the Romantics, he had to show his high moral standards, he had to prove he was not a common criminal. Of course, many of the biographies of these heroic figures were drawn out in the same era, based solely on the accounts that popular culture delivered to its enthusiastic elite admirers, in accordance with the general conviction of the time that popular ballads are historically accurate.<sup>10</sup> Today, in spite of general disagreement of past and contemporary folklorists concerning the historicity of the *hajduk* ballad, some Romanian historians still resort to folklore to fill the gaps where official documents are silent.<sup>11</sup>

The fact that the narratives of the popular ballads were historically misleading did not prompt folklorists and historians to doubt the validity of the *hajduk* - mere robber dichotomy. Ballads and folksongs were not 'true', of course, but they still articulated the attitudes and feelings of the people. Although the details of his exploits were not accurate, the *hajduk* had to exist historically, otherwise we wouldn't have had such a rich popular culture pertaining to him. Therefore, a framework for encompassing this character was developed. Relying on elite-collected folklore from the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and on the aforementioned Romantic biographies, the scholarship concerning banditry fitted the *hajduk* in a class struggle framework, perpetuating the same mythology. The analysis became fully fledged Marxist dogmatic during the first decades of communist rule in Romania when major, influential studies of *hajduk* folklore appeared.<sup>12</sup> It is also in the same period that the first thoroughly documented historical studies on banditry surfaced, but in accordance with the spirit of the age and the demands of the Party, these works also had the task to prove the class character of *hajduk* activity.<sup>13</sup> This not only reinforced the already old class perspective on outlawry, but also pulled the Romanian scholarship into a vicious circle, folklorists and historians relying on each others' finds to actually confirm their already validated hypotheses. Today, things aren't any better. Apart from a minority revisionist historiography that relies on

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10 The historicity of folklore is beyond the scope of this study. There is a great body of scholarship on the matter that actually disproves the connection between historical facts and poetical facts.

11 The more recent examples are BARBU, Paul-Emanoil. *Haiducul Iancu Jianu. Adevăr și legendă [The Hajduk Iancu Jianu. Fact and Legend]*. Craiova : Editura Alma, 2010; DIEACONU, Daniel et al. *Haiduci și tâlhari – Contribuții de mitologie și antropologie istorică [Hajduks and Robbers – Contributions on Mythology and Historical Anthropology]*. Cluj-Napoca : Editura Limes, 2013.

12 There were major works on folklore before the advent of communism, but only afterwards adequate instruments of analysis were developed (catalogs, motif-indexes etc.); see BÎRLEA, Ovidiu – ISPAS, Sabina. *Istoria folcloristicii românești [History of Romanian Folkloristics]*. Craiova : Aius PrintEd, 2010.

13 Some of the more informed studies of the era are IANCOVICI, Sava. *Materiale privitoare la haiducia lui Tunsu și Grozea [Materials on Tunsu and Grozea, the hajduks]*. In *Studii și Materiale de Istorie Modernă*, 1960, vol. II, București, pp. 105-154; IANCOVICI, Sava. *Iancu Jianu și Nikola Abras [Iancu Jianu și Nikola Abras]*. In *Studii. Revistă de istorie*, 1967, tom. 20, nr. 4, București, pp. 681-690; NEACȘU, Ioan I. *Haiducia în Țara Românească între 1822 și 1828 [The hajduks in Wallachia between 1822 and 1828]*. In *Studii și articole de istorie*, 1968, XI, București, pp. 221-231.

empirical evidence to disprove the myth of the *hajduk*<sup>14</sup>, there isn't hardly a change in what concerns bandit popular culture, its meaning and significance.<sup>15</sup>

But why is the class perspective so limited when it comes to discussing *hajduk* balladry? Certainly, 19<sup>th</sup> century Romania was a class-based society, as most of the world at that time. Folklore surely expresses class contradictions as is evident from this widely circulated Romanian ballad, tellingly entitled “The Rich Man and the Pauper”. The narrative presents the face-to-face meeting of the pauper with the rich man in a tavern. While the former has no money at all to carouse, the latter not only that has the necessary means to enjoy himself, but also brags to the less fortunate with his riches:

“Listen, ragged-trouser jack,  
Don't compete with me – you lack  
E'en a shirt unto your back!  
I have vineyards and estates,  
Money, gold and silver plates,  
Carts and carriages with wheels  
Hooped with the best irons and steels!”

This obviously enrages the poor man who lashes back at the rich man, but also paints the picture of what seems to be, a step by step description of how a man is pushed into a *hajduk* career:

“Look, sir, though you wealthy be,  
Make no fun like this of me;  
If you anger me, mind you,  
I shall beat you black and blue!  
...  
Noblemen and lords and counts,  
With you I will square accounts!  
At the plough you have me rode,  
Pushed and drove me with the goad,  
I have toiled for you, have run,  
Hungry, thirsty, woe-begone  
...  
Seeing this, in the long run,  
To the forest I was gone.  
I took aim, loud cracked the gun,  
The lord writhed and lost his breath -  
Let him die of a dog's death”<sup>16</sup>

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14 LEU, Valeriu, *Lotrii Banatului [Robbers in Banat]*. In LEU, Valeriu, *Studii istorice bănăţene*. Reşiţa : Editura Banatica, 1997, pp. 7-60. See also the studies gathered in NICOARĂ, Toader (ed.), *Haiducie, brigandaj şi disciplinare socială [Hajduks, brigandage and social discipline]*. Cluj Napoca : Editura Accent, 2010.

15 Possibly with the exception of Mihaela Grancea's essay on popular and elite perceptions of Romanian banditry, where she points to the “sweetening” of the popular culture performed by the Romantic elite, but fails to account for the social function that it had in traditional peasant communities. GRANCEA, Mihaela, *Haiducul şi tâlharul – o dilemă culturală? Schiţă de imagologie istorică şi literatură comparată [The hajduk and the robber – a cultural dilemma? An outline of historical imagology and comparative literature]*. In GRANCEA, Mihaela. *Trecutul de astăzi. Tradiţie şi inovaţie în cultura română*. Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărţii de Ştiinţă, 2009, pp. 118-159.

16 LEVIŢCHI, Leon D. et al. *Romanian popular ballads*. Bucharest: Minerva Publishing House, 1980, pp. 306-309 (translated by Leon D. Leviţchi).

It is this sort of balladry that prompted Romantics and Marxist historians and folklorists alike (Hobsbawm and his followers included) to see bandit activity from a class struggle perspective. And they are partially right, since it is also my contention that banditry is produced by structural social inequities and blocked economic aspirations<sup>17</sup>, but it is far from protest as many of these scholars claim. While such a class consciousness, as the one displayed by the unfortunate character in the folksong reproduced here, is not that uniform as it may seem.<sup>18</sup> There are multiple examples within the *hajduk* ballad genre to disprove such well defined portraits as historians and folklorists might like.

For instance, *hajduks* frequently show no discrimination between their victims on a social basis. Iancu Jianu, one of the most famous bandit figures in Romania, is usually presented as drinking wine without paying it, stealing lambs from shepherds or bread from bakers since, as he himself argues in the words of the ballad dedicated to him: “If I had to pay/ Why would I be a hajduk, anyway?”<sup>19</sup> And he is not the only folksong character to display such behavior, many other folklorists noticing the same in other *haiduks'* cases, especially when it comes to their relationship with the shepherds.<sup>20</sup> This does not prompt them to doubt their model. Nor does the fact that bandits, when in conflict with the supreme authority (i.e. the ruler of the country, the voivode), sometimes end up being in cahoots with their ultimate class enemy who gives his blessing to the outlaws: “For as long as I rule/Be a hajduk if you will”<sup>21</sup> And if you add the countless episodes of unnecessary violence on the part of the bandits<sup>22</sup>, the class consciousness approach becomes quite shaky.

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17 Although not Marxist, since it does not see delinquency as protest, Robert K. Merton's *strain theory*, acknowledges that delinquent behavior is produced by the limited or blocked opportunities to reach culturally defined goals by legitimate means. MERTON, Robert K. *Social Structure and Anomie*. In *Social Theory and Social Structure. Toward the Codification of Theory and Research*. Chicago : The Free Press of Glencoe, 1949, pp. 125-149.

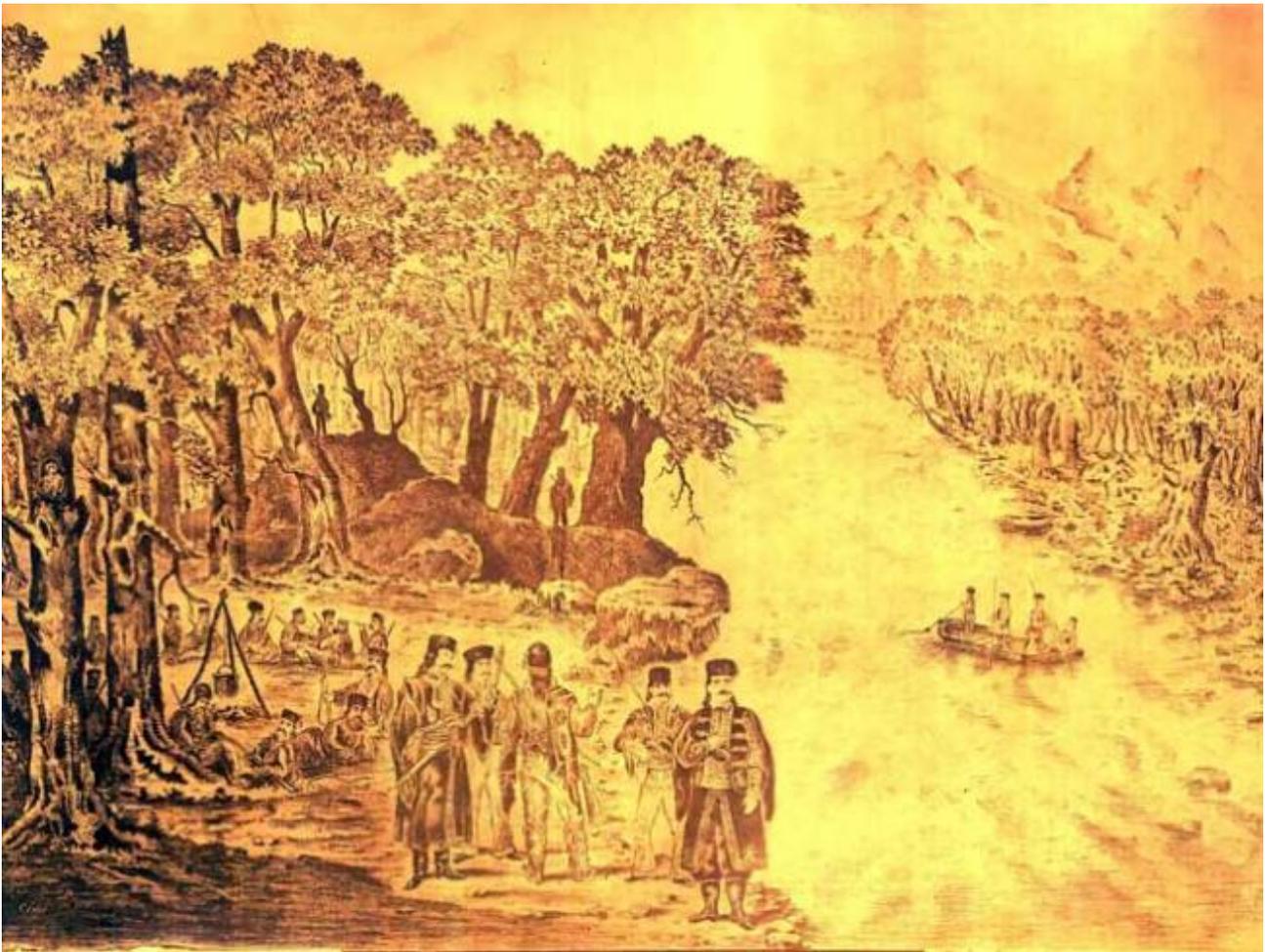
18 In fact, class consciousness is not uniform at all with all the members of a specific class. French peasants, Karl Marx argued, had a consistent lack of it. See on these matters ELSTER, Jon. *An introduction to Karl Marx*. Cambridge, 1986 pp. 129-134. “Class consciousness or 'horizontal solidarity' was largely lacking.” says Peter Burke, when examining popular responses to general wrongs in European popular culture, BURKE, Peter. *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*. London : Harper Torchbooks, 1978, p. 176.

19 TOCILESCU, Grigore G. - ȚĂPU, Christe N. *Materialuri folcloristice [Folkloristic materials]*, vol. 1. București : Editura Minerva, 1980, p. 242 (my translation).

20 The most detailed account of *hajduk* – shepherd conflict is to be found in DENSUȘIANU, Ovid. *Vieața păstorească în poezia noastră populară [Shepherd life in our popular poetry]*, vol. 2. București : Editura “Casa Școalelor”, 1923, pp. 26-32, but it is an acknowledged fact by most researchers POPESCU, Aurelian I. *Ideea de dreptate și libertate în cîntecul popular [The idea of justice and freedom in the folksong]*. Craiova : Scrisul Românesc, 1988, p. 173; VRABIE, Gheorghe. *Balada populară română [The Romanian popular ballad]*. București : Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, 1966, p. 395.

21 The formula is quite wide-spread, as is attested by FOCHI, Adrian. *Cîntecul epic tradițional al românilor [The epic traditional song of the Romanians]*. București : Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1985, p. 64 (my translation).

22 On these episodes see GRANCEA, ref. 15, pp. 136-137, note 54.



Picture 2: "Iancu Jianu and his gang" - The Romanian Academy Library (The Engravings Department)

Researchers on the matter of bandit tradition have diverse reactions to such recurrences. Some bring to their favor the already mentioned *hajduk* – mere robber dichotomy, pointing that certain figures could be included in a ballad category of their own, which some chose to name “horse-thief balladry”, others “common robber balladry” (*balade hoțomănești*). But the distinction is quite arbitrary, since many of these bandits appear under the *hajduk* category in some collections and studies and under 'the mere robber' category in others. Furthermore, classifying these figures on this basis becomes quite difficult when a bandit is portrayed, in the different variants of a ballad, as *hajduk*, common robber, horse-thief or even pretender to the throne.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, such elite and popular 'darlings' as the aforementioned Iancu Jianu or Ioniță Tunsu, though very often presented as a 'mere robbers' in the folksongs dedicated to them, are always included among *hajduks* on account of their good names among the Romantics. At the same time, those same folklorists that make such distinctions are careful to point out that the difference between *hajduk* and mere robber balladry is

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23 AMZULESCU, *Balade populare românești [Romanian Popular Ballads]*, vol. I, București : Editura pentru literatură, 1964, p. 22.

not at all easily discernible in popular culture<sup>24</sup>, making their previous statements quite confusing. Others chose to see these incongruities as anomalies, as exceptions to the rule<sup>25</sup>, but this conflicts with the general idea that folklore is dynamic and that there is no fixed form ballad, thus no rules to obey. That such instances were recorded on so many occasions accounts for the fact that these, not-so-socially conscious bandits, were sung and appreciated by certain audiences.

In fact, we rarely find in Romanian balladry such well-elaborated narratives as that reported by Eric Hobsbawm about Jesse James lending money to a poor widow “to meet her debt to a banker, then to have held up the banker and taken the money back”<sup>26</sup> Most commonly, one finds the *hajduks* banqueting in the woods or in taverns and inns, courting girls and barmaids, fighting the posse sent by the authorities, robbing noblemen and merchants and usually sporting a defiant and valiant attitude, as exemplified by this folksong about the famous outlaw Bujor:

“Green leaf of the maple-tree,  
At Focșani near the wide lea  
Stands a hut, a bit aslant  
In a ring of elm-trees pent.  
There with widow Ann at hand  
Frolics Bujor cheerfully  
And she serves him wine and glee:

...

«But stop drinking, I'm afraid  
Lest the catchpoles lie in wait!»  
«Never mind them, mind my word:  
Sweetest love and trusty sword  
Are my shelter and my guard!»<sup>27</sup>

All the narratives are simple, rarely pointing to class conflicts other than the bandit's own with his master or the authorities<sup>28</sup>, as in “The Rich Man and the Pauper” ballad. Of course, the transfer of wealth, the mark of noble banditry, is recurrent in Romanian folksongs but never in such well-developed plots like the already mentioned Jesse James episode. Just as there is a “For as long as I rule/Be a hajduk if you will” formula, there is one (even more frequent) usually stated by the captured bandit when the judge asks him of the whereabouts of the riches he stole:

“Under trees I hid them low,

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24 AMZULESCU, *Balade populare*, ref. 23, pp. 96-97; FOCHI, ref. 21, p. 68.

25 BARBU, ref. 11, p. 151

26 HOBSBAWM, ref. 2, pp. 48-49. “The identical story - Hobsbawm asserts in a footnote to the quoted fragment - is told of Maté Cosido, the leading social bandit of Argentine Chaco in the 1930s.” I suspect that such well-elaborated class conscious characters appear in a popular culture quite different from that of the illiterate peasantry of 19<sup>th</sup> century Eastern Europe. Jesse James's myth is probably the product of a more 'refined' society, that of the literate and politically conscious farmers from Reconstruction era Missouri; see STILES, T. J. *Jesse James. Last Rebel of the Civil War*. New York : Vintage Books, 2003.

27 LEVIȚCHI et al., ref. 16, p. 313 (translated by Alfred Margul-Sperber).

28 One such exception is *Buruleanu*, a ballad about an exploitative noble who, unsatisfied by the mowing work done by the peasants, curses them enraging the *hajduk* who punishes him. See TEODORESCU, G. Dem. *Poezii populare române [Romanian folk poetry]*. București : Minerva, 1982, pp. 654-656. All the subjects and variants of *hajduk* and 'mere robber' balladry are inventoried in AMZULESCU, *Cîntecul epic eroic. Tipologie și corpus de texte. [The Epic Heroic Song]*, București : Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, 1981, pp. 110-152.

On the poor help to bestow,  
Bought them many an ox and cow.”<sup>29</sup>

So, there are no elaborate narratives to prove the distinctive class consciousness of any of these bandits, but there are formulas that briefly express it, just like there are formulas that express no class solidarity at all, as we have seen the above examples (e.g. “If I had to pay/ Why would I be a hajduk, anyway?”). These formulas are very important. Along with themes (i.e. groups of ideas employed in telling tales in the formulaic manner of the folksong), they are the fabric of the ballad. But it is the performer's choice if they are employed or not during the performance of the song.<sup>30</sup> Certainly, the fact that they are so wide-spread, accounts for their appreciation by the audience. It also accounts for what Alexandru Amzulescu calls “the sometimes confuse attitude of the ballad hero”<sup>31</sup> who displays such a diverse behavior, often in the same folksong. And, although Amzulescu tries to explain it in Gramscian terms, stating that the “confusion” was worked into popular culture by the ruling class, he is probably wrong since Antonio Gramsci himself stated that in preindustrial societies (such as 19<sup>th</sup> century Romania) the elites had few contacts with subordinate groups, therefore few intentions of imposing their cultural hegemony.<sup>32</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, with his theory of the *social bandit*, which is in fact far removed from the Marxist-dogmatic brand of Romanian scholarship, is probably more to the point. He admits that: “A man may be a social bandit on his native mountains, a mere robber on the plains.”<sup>33</sup>, so he acknowledges the possibility of different perspectives on banditry within the same peasant class, at least on a regional basis.

This brings us before the major error in Romanian folkloristics and historiography, more precisely the idea that balladry voices the attitudes, concerns and feelings of the *whole* lower class (i.e. the peasantry). In fact, what western historians and folklorists contend, is that popular culture is in no way monolithic, and that one should consider the existence of “many popular cultures or many varieties of popular culture”, to borrow Peter Burke's words.<sup>34</sup> These “varieties” appear because the peasantry is also, in no way, uniform as class. There are differences in status (landed peasants and serfs), region (from the plains, from the highlands, from the riverbanks, etc.), profession (woodcutters, miners, blacksmiths, cattle herders, shepherds, ploughmen, etc.) or religious confession. All these come with distinct lifeways that impinge on one's culture. Thus, the idea of the existence of several, more or less distinctive, folk groups<sup>35</sup> is more adequate when

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29 LEVIȚCHI et al., ref. 16, p. 315 (translated by Alfred Margul-Sperber).

30 See on the process of composing/performing of balladry by the use of themes and formulas in BEATON, Roderick. *Folk Poetry of Modern Greece*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1980, pp. 35-73.

31 AMZULESCU, *Balade populare*, I, ref. 23, p. 21.

32 FEMIA, Joseph. *Gramsci's Political Thought*. Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1981, p. 49. Anyway, the elites of the era had almost no interest in the criminality of the lower classes, therefore no intention to denigrate such popular characters, see GODFREY, Barry et al. *History & Crime*. London : Sage Publications, 2008, p. 81.

33 HOBBSAWM, ref. 2, pp. 20-21.

34 BURKE, ref. 18, p. 29.

35 Peter Burke states that shepherds, for instance, do have a very distinct culture among the peasantry, BURKE, ref.

analyzing folklore. Balladry, as a specific form of popular culture, makes no exception. Barre Toelken, an expert on the matter, notes that what actually qualifies a song to become a ballad is its “absorption into a group's expressive performances, by shaping of presentation and meaning brought about by the group's values”.<sup>36</sup> The only exception that I know of in Romanian scholarship, that shares the same views, is sociologist Henri H. Stahl. “Any folkloric typical example, of whatever nature, – Stahl remarks – is only representative for the social group where it is regularly employed, and not for the whole ethnic community.”<sup>37</sup>

What I am hinting at, hopefully clearly by now, is that we should look at bandit balladry as a form of folklore obviously enjoyed by a certain audience and performed in a specific context and not as Marxist scholarship maintains, as the expression of popular protest (be it well-articulated or not) of the *entire* peasant class. Briefly stated, we should see this form of popular culture in subcultural terms, as the cited theorists advocated in their studies.<sup>38</sup> The easy assumption, following their observations, would be that such folksongs are created by the bandits themselves for their own amusement and glorification. The answer is more complex than this, and has been sketched in the above considerations. For now, we can surely doubt the ballad performing abilities of the *hajduks*, and we also might not know whether certain details in these ballads are “the fruit of the fertile imagination of the criminal, or of the man who wrote about him” as Peter Burke puts it (although he actually refers to early modern crime-fiction writers); “but if specific details can be doubted – Burke continues – the existence of the criminal sub-culture can not.”<sup>39</sup> It is with this claim that we should start looking for the answer. It's actually this statement that should first be put to test before finding out who popularized such songs and who constituted their audience.

### **A hajduk subculture?**

Peter Burke's subcultural views on popular culture are sociologically influenced, as his references attest. This sort of approach is quite absent from bandit studies altogether. Hobsbawm, relying heavily on his Marxist framework, draws most of his concepts from there. But, by refusing to see banditry as crime, the vast sociological explanations are outside his interest (though he might have found an ally in Marxist criminology and labeling theories). As for Anton Blok and the revisionists, they also eschew sociological approaches, in their case, mostly out of shortsightedness (although they do not refrain from seeing bandits as self-interested, common robbers). Therefore,

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18, pp. 32-33.

36 TOELKEN, Barre. *Ballads and Folksongs*. In ORING, Elliott (ed.). *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres : An Introduction*. Logan : Utah State University Press, 1986, p. 148.

37 STAHL, Henri H. *Eseuri critice. Despre cultura populară românească [Critical Essays. On Romanian Popular Culture]*. București : Editura Minerva, 1983, p. 235.

38 Although only Peter Burke actually uses the term 'sub-culture', the concept is clearly implied in the other studies cited here.

39 BURKE, ref. 18, p. 47.

Paul Sant Cassia rightfully calls them “hard-nosed empiricists.”<sup>40</sup> I think that sociology could give us a better understanding of the meaning of banditry in general, but as far as the scope of this study goes, it will suffice to prove its usefulness in explaining what social functions popular culture, namely Romanian *hajduk* balladry, has in traditional peasant society.

As I mentioned in the beginning of this article, there is a considerable range of subcultural theories in contemporary criminology, all stressing that, by organizing themselves in groups, delinquents usually develop distinct lifeways which encourage and justify their behavior, more exactly, they form delinquent subcultures. In discussing the validity of these theories, sociologists usually place emphasis on the causes that drive an individual to deviate, and to form or join criminal gangs. This is less important here (but no less important in the general discussion about banditry!), since my aim is limited to showing that *hajduks*, independently of the real reasons behind their actions, elaborate their own, distinctive lifeways that are motivated in the very ballads that sing their exploits or those of their peers. In other words, they form subcultures. It is actually this assumption made by subcultural theorists, rather than those regarding the causes of delinquency, that receives strong empirical support in the documentation of today's gangs.<sup>41</sup>

So, what evidence is there in favor of the existence of a *hajduk* subculture? And what better way to prove this, than by providing examples of conflicting subcultures? This is by no means hard and has been attempted by one of the leading Romanian folklorists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ovid Densușianu<sup>42</sup>, although the concept of 'subculture' was unknown to him at the time. Concentrating on shepherd folklore, Densușianu came across the relationship between shepherds and *hajduks*, as it was reflected in Romanian balladry. After noticing the similarities between the lifestyles of the two (which also include shepherds turning to petty thefts, every once in a while), the noted folklorist devotes his attention to the conflict that often sparks, between shepherd and *hajduk*, in many of the ballads that have them as protagonists. Usually, this translates into the bandit trying to rob the shepherd of his sheep. The robbery is invariably performed, but what follows next is more interesting. Most of the time, the *hajduk* prides himself with stealing the lambs, as we have seen in Iancu Jianu's case, and he is put in a good light by the performer. But there are occasions, like in Costea's ballad, when the bandit is severely punished by the shepherd and his dogs. In other folksongs, though the *hajduks* do not get their deserved punishment, the tone is that of compassion for the despoiled shepherds. But when revenge is served, the shepherd is clear in defending his lifeways in contrast to those of the *hajduk*:

“You stole from me like hajduk

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40 SANT CASSIA, ref. 7, p. 65.

41 The evidence supporting or infirming the existing subcultural theories is amassed in SHOEMAKER, ref. 9, pp. 141-179.

42 DENSUȘIANU, ref. 20, pp. 9-36.

I'll strike you like a shepherd”<sup>43</sup>

In fact the distinctive subcultures of the two conflicting characters are clearly stated previously in the same ballad, before the robbery occurs, when the two are on good terms and try to convince the other to join his trade:

“Leave your hajduk ways  
Join me in my trade  
It's going to be great!

...

Leave your shepherd ways  
Join me in my trade  
It's going to be great!”<sup>44</sup>

Densușianu, noticing these different perspectives on both the shepherds and the *hajduks*, makes an insightful remark, considering the time when he was writing this: “With all the identity of the motif rendered in one way or another, these ballads are different in the sense that some show pastoral provenance, while for the others it is clear that they took shape in the world of the *hajduks*.” While in some cases, “of the shepherds, one hears good things and they are portrayed as being oppressed by the *hajduks*”, in other instances “the tone changes in the *hajduks*' favor: what they achieve in the detriment of the shepherds is described so that their superiority results, and in the entire narrative one sees the self-confidence, the pride of the *hajduks* that nobody is able to oppose them.”<sup>45</sup> A subcultural explanation *avant la lettre*, that puts things into perspective in a way that traditional Marxist interpretations of bandit folklore as class struggle, were unable to.

The same proud display of the *hajduk*'s status in contrast that of other social categories is stated in the ballad of “Miu Cobiul”, where the protagonist is challenged by a rival *hajduk*, named Ianoș the Hungarian. After the two engage in physical confrontation, with the final victory of Miu, the winning *hajduk* tests the qualities of Ianoș's gang to see if any of the members are worthy of joining his. He challenges them to lift his saddle off the ground and put it on his horse, but all forty-five *hajduks* are unable to even budge it, with a single exception. To all the others, Miu prophesies a more mundane fate than that of *hajduk*, of which they are obviously unworthy:

“You are weak  
And you are hopeless,  
At once, you shall leave the forest,  
Grapevines you shall weed,  
Corn you shall grow,  
Hay you shall mow,  
And in wintertime  
You'll cough!  
Come summer

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43 TOCILESCU, ref. 19, p. 282 (my translation).

44 TOCILESCU, ref. 19, p. 280 (my translation).

45 DENSUȘIANU, ref. 20, p. 32.

You will gasp!”<sup>46</sup>

It is pretty hard, considering the above examples, to doubt the existence of a *hajduk* subculture. Moreover, such subcultures clash not only when they are of different types, like in the folksongs of the shepherd-bandit conflict. From what we can discern in Miu's ballad, *hajduk* gangs are sometimes portrayed as being in rivalry. And it is by no means an exception. “Baba Sîrba” presents the conflict between two outlaw gangs. One of them, led by captain Surdan, robs the hidden treasure in Sîrba's house, who's boys are actually *hajduks*. When they come home encumbered by loot and find their tortured mother crying, they go in Surdan's pursuit, but fail to recuperate their treasure or take revenge.<sup>47</sup> This is a bleak and violent ballad, where Sîrba's sons, though portrayed more favorably than the men of their rival gang, die at the end, shot down by captain Surdan, without even being able to give him a good blow. It's quite hard to see in this case, how such a folksong voiced the needs of the less fortunate for social justice. Subcultural explanations are definitely more appropriate, should we consider the ballad as a depiction of 'gang warfare' and nothing more. Similarly, in Ghiță Cătănuță's ballad, the protagonist is attacked by *hajduks* while on the road with his wife. Though not a bandit, Ghiță, who goes victorious in the ensuing fight, becomes a *hajduk* in the end. And, after severely punishing his treacherous wife by beheading her and putting her head at the top of a haystack (another sample of gruesome violence on the part of the bandit), he disappears into the woods, where, the ballad goes: “Hajduks, if he met/To all, he'd cut their heads”.<sup>48</sup> This folksong is also difficult to explain with what instruments the present theories offer. Besides the fact that he punishes treason, certainly a virtue by traditional standards, Ghiță shows none of the marks of the honorable bandit: he is not abused and exploited by his master, he does not rob the rich, he does not share the loot to the poor and he does not fight the posse sent after him by the authorities. He is, simply put, a *hajduk* on a crusade against *hajduks*! And he is favorably depicted doing so.

Clashes between bandits, or between well differentiated subgroups, are not the only elements that point to the existence of a *hajduk* subculture. Its elements are also inner referenced. The more visible of these features is, of course, the organizational aspect of the *hajduk* gang with its leader (*arâmbașă*) and the rest of the members (typically called *voinici* or *hajduks*). It is a hierarchical structure with a distinct set of values, of which 'worthiness' (*vrednicie*) is the most prominent, as we have seen from Miu's challenge. But there's also a bandit universe, “a world of the *hajduks*” in Densușianu's words, quite distinct in its imagery.<sup>49</sup> The greenwood, a typical element of

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46 TEODORESCU, ref. 28, p. 555 (my translation). In a variant published by Al. Amzulescu, the same *hajduk* addresses Ianoș's gang: “Forget your *hajduk* ways/And take a ploughman's place”, AMZULESCU, *Cîntecul epic*, ref. 1, p. 506. (my translation).

47 AMZULESCU, *Cîntecul epic*, ref. 28, pp. 518-521.

48 TEODORESCU, ref. 28, p. 683 (my translation).

49 On this, more extensively in MAZILU, Dan Horia. *Lege și fărădelege în lumea românească veche [Law and felony*

bandit literature all over the world, is priced for its leafage that conceals the outlaws from the sight of the authorities. This also particularizes their activity as seasonal, since on Holy Cross Day (September, 14) the *hajduks* leave the forest that does not offer cover anymore, to settle in the houses of their hosts:

“The Day of the Rood is near,  
The leaves of the trees are sere,  
Look, the wood is almost bare,  
Life will be too hard to bear,  
You'll get caught and thralled, beware!”<sup>50</sup>

There are plenty more features that individualize the *hajduk* lifestyle in the balladry dedicated to them, from owing a good horse (that many times proves to be a lifesaver)<sup>51</sup> to the already mentioned feasts in the woods or banquets in inns and taverns, but there isn't enough space here to detail them. What should be more revealing is how the bandit sees his own trade, how he justifies his decision to go robbing people. Though most of the time they put the blame on exploitation and high taxation, *hajduks* also find other explanations for their behavior. One of these involves prejudice against the average individual:

“A hajduk they all say I am,  
There's no place for me in this land,  
I don't know were else to go,

...

Out of anger and of fury  
I'll resort to banditry.”<sup>52</sup>

Others stress fate as the cause: “Ever since I was a toddler/I bore the mark of the *hajduk*”<sup>53</sup>, while others still, put the blame on bad upbringing. This is the case with Niculiță who, his ballad goes, is sought by his mother who tries to convince him to leave his *hajduk* ways and return home, to his estate (!). He reproaches her that, when he was a child, she looked away when he was stealing or even that she gave him a thievish education:

“When I was two years old,  
I stole horses, I stole oxen,  
You'd receive them in our stable.  
And when I reached the age of ten,  
To steal steeds, you taught me then.”<sup>54</sup>

By picking these examples it might seem that I downplay the social and economic reasons

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*in old Romanian society*]. Iași : Polirom, 2006, pp. 323-334.

50 LEVIȚCHI et al., ref. 16, pp. 323-325 (translated by Leon D. Levițchi).

51 See about the *hajduk's* horse at VRABIE, ref. 20, pp. 404-407.

52 Quoted in POPESCU, ref. 20, p. 112 (my translation).

53 Quoted in POPESCU, ref. 20, p. 113 (my translation).

54 AMZULESCU, *Cîntecul epic*, ref. 28, p. 617 (my translation). This is in agreement with what certain sociologists found in studying crime in the neighborhoods of 20<sup>th</sup> century United States, more precisely with the permissive social structure of the community, which often turns a blind eye to criminal activity; see BORDUA, ref. 9, pp. 122-123.

behind the decision to turn to banditry and that I refashion the portrait of the bandit as being quite detached from the norms and values of peasant society. This was by no means my intention. Romanian folk balladry abounds in instances of abuse and unjustness on the part of the lords or the state, and “The Rich Man and the Poor Man” folksong is not the sole example. Many *hajduks* start out as simple peasants, only to become victims of exploitation or overcome by needs, as the ballad progresses. What I intended in fact, was to enlarge the basis of analysis to encapsulate these, so-called ‘exceptions’. This is where Peter Burke’s explanation of subculture comes in handy, because it shows that outlaws, though distinct in their manifestations, are not that far outside peasant society and its problems. Burke argues that: “«sub-culture» may be a more useful term than «culture», because it suggests that songs, rituals and beliefs were partly autonomous rather than wholly autonomous, distinct yet not completely severed from the rest of popular culture. The sub-culture is a system of shared meanings, but the people who participate in it also share the meanings of the culture at large.”<sup>55</sup> Therefore, *hajduk* subcultures do not in fact reject peasant values, but find alternative ways to enforce them. So, when the peasant tries to make a living under the existing unfair conditions and finds no understanding from the tax-collector, just as it happens to the character of a ballad called “The Peasant and the Tax-collector”, he tries to address the ruler of the country, the voivode. But since he is unable to pay the bribe, he’s not even permitted to cross the main gate of the palace.<sup>56</sup> The folksong ends with the disappointed peasant going back home, but it might as well end with him becoming a *hajduk*<sup>57</sup>, exacting revenge on the tax-collector, but also making a living. And if this involves stealing lambs from shepherds and bread from bakers, or drinking wine without paying, it is justified (or justifiable) under those conditions, though it does not conform to the class struggle model advocated by Marxist scholarship. It does however conform to some existing subcultural theories which state that, when the legitimate opportunities to make ends meet are not evenly distributed throughout society, an individual may choose illegitimate opportunities to satisfy his needs. He may be able to determine that his failures are “the fault of the larger social order” (like the peasant in the aforementioned ballad), or at least, he may justify his behavior by adopting such reasoning.<sup>58</sup> He may even think that it is fate’s hand, the malice of the community or his bad upbringing, as in the above examples, since there is no single justification for crime in any society, but multiple ones.

But who justifies his actions, since imagining that the *hajduks* themselves popularized such songs is a too facile explanation? The answer lies with the ballad performer who, by all accounts, is not a bandit. These individuals, known as *lăutari* or *cobzari*, clearly had a rural background, but

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55 BURKE, ref. 18, p. 42.

56 TOCILESCU, ref. 19, pp. 237-238.

57 In fact, the ballad is included by Al. Amzulescu among *hajduk* ballads, in his catalog; AMZULESCU, *Cîntecul epic*, ref. 28, p. 125.

58 See the entire discussion in BORDUA, ref. 9, pp. 131-135.

were rather professionals than peasants with a side-job. Their repertoire counted between 30 and 40 ballads<sup>59</sup> and, most likely, they performed in front of the most diverse audiences. One day, they could be entertaining noblemen in their mansions, the other, they could be amusing crowds in the local fairs organized in many of the villages of 19<sup>th</sup> century Romania. Like their audiences, their repertoire not only had to be rich, but also diverse, in order to satisfy the various tastes of those employing these performers. And, most importantly, the repertoire had to be carefully selected when reproduced, so as not to offend the audience. Therefore, one can doubt that ballads such as “The Rich Man and the Poor Man” were ever sung in the houses of the gentry.<sup>60</sup> The cultural background of the audience (i.e. the subculture) was consequently very important in establishing the 'playlist'.



Picture 3: "Cobzar - folksong performer"(1844) by Charles Doussault - The Romanian Academy Library (The Engravings Department)

But where does that leave the *hajduk* ballads? Who was their audience, since we should imagine that the outlaws themselves could not constitute a regular public for these performances? They were not regulars indeed, but they surely were not unfamiliar with these folksongs, nor were they their only audience. They certainly enjoyed these songs about them in the inns and taverns

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59 As evidenced by investigations made in the 1950's, when folklorists finally became interested in the singers themselves, and not only in the folksongs, AMZULESCU, *Balade populare*, ref. 23, p. 25.

60 AMZULESCU, *Balade populare*, ref. 23, p. 47.

where they were often located by the authorities<sup>61</sup> and where one typically finds folksong performers. And it's probably in the very same inns and taverns, where their numerous hosts and fences (also historically documented) also listened and appreciated *hajduk* balladry. This consistently enlarges the audience of these performances but also shows the extent of the *hajduk* subculture. Though not actively participating in robberies and thefts, the hosts and fences are actually supporting the outlaws, thus clearly belonging to the same subculture. They may even come to admire them sincerely, as it happens in today's crime ridden neighborhoods.<sup>62</sup> And if for the *hajduks* themselves, the folksongs might have served as justification and/or glorification of their behavior, for the others it might have had different functions. Sociologist Henri Stahl notes that “even inside a modest social group, enjoying not only the general folklore, common to the entire group, but also the folklore specific to the subgroup, one asks himself to what degree is folklore representative, which, staying the same inside the group, is employed in manifold ways by its members.”<sup>63</sup> This leads Stahl to conclude that folklore is like “public opinion”, namely that there is no uniform, unique reading of it, not even inside the group wherefrom it emerges. Therefore, one can suspect that the non-bandit audiences of *hajduk* balladry might have appreciated such folksongs because they depicted abusive authorities and noblemen being punished. In any case, their reading of it is certainly filtered through whatever group values they share. Hence, we should not be surprised if, on many occasions, the bandit is portrayed unfavorably since he might have disrespected such a group's values and beliefs (as we have seen with shepherds, for instance). This, of course, is the case with performances that are addressed to different audiences than those associated with banditry. After all, it's the audience that pays for the performance; the performers only comply with its tastes.<sup>64</sup>

To sum up, the noble bandit – mere robber dichotomy is definitely limited in explaining banditry in 19<sup>th</sup> century Romania (and I suspect, all over the world at that time), and so is the Marxist framework that sees banditry as social protest. Outlaws rather form subcultures than class struggle guerrillas, subcultures that sometimes clash with other, different subcultures or with those of similar nature, independently of the class they belong to. The tradition around these subcultures justifies robbery, whether directed against the rich and powerful or the weak, in a number of ways

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61 SĂVOIU, Emanoil Em. *Haiducia în Oltenia [Hajduks from Oltenia]*. Craiova : Editura Sitech, 2010, pp. 67-68. The historically documented Ștefan Bujor, also had innkeepers among his acquaintances; see BARBU, Paul-Emanoil, *Ștefan Bujor între legendă și adevăr [Ștefan Bujor in Legend and Fact]*. Craiova : Editura Alma, 2011.

62 SHOEMAKER, ref. 9, pp. 153-154 and p. 160.

63 STAHL, ref. 37, p. 235.

64 Alexandru Amzulescu notes that folksong performances are usually very interactive. The ballad is demanded from someone in the audience, there is intense emotional participation involved, with people cheering, laughing or being moved by the different episodes related by the performer. Listeners know the repertoire and demand good renditions of it, intervening when the performer shortens the ballad. “Sometimes, the listeners react lively, proving a strong interest in precisely the passages that relate to their situation and their own concerns, with their *way of life*” (my emphasis), AMZULESCU, *Balade populare*, ref. 23, pp. 75-77.

that ranges from responses to exploitation and abuse, to fate and bad upbringing. This tradition is fashioned and transmitted in the form of folk balladry by professional performers mainly in the inns and taverns where the bandits and their hosts and fences are often located by the authorities.