

REVIEW: FRANÇOIS RÜEGG, LA MAISON PAYSANNE: HISTOIRE D'UN MYTHE

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Throughout six chapters, the book approaches the construction of the “peasant house” notion since the 18th century until present-day. By means of an ethno-historical vision, the book reveals the extent to which the “peasant house” as an emblem of national culture is an intellectual or ideological contemporary construction. Through the representations and imaginary inspired by the rural house, the author thoroughly configures the history of ideas linked to diverse conceptions of living or of the habitat. The anthropology of heritage, of globalization, or rural anthropology could richly benefit from the typologies, cross-disciplinary references or visual material offered by this book.

Keywords: house, imaginary, rurality, environment, symbolism.



La maison paysanne: histoire d'un mythe is a chronological account on the emergence of the “peasant house” in Central and Oriental Europe as an object of study. Throughout six chapters, the author richly reveals the study traditions and disciplines which articulated specific ways of looking at the house, habitat or living practices. Without seeking to contribute to the encyclopedic knowledge related to *vernacular architecture*, the book aims, from a social or cultural anthropology perspective, to put the house and related objects in their ideological context in order to reveal how and when the concepts of peasant, or popular architecture, as referred to sometimes, were born and to what these categories correspond. The hypothesis of the book is that it is possible to reconstitute the cosmology, the sociology and the history of ideas of various conceptions of the habitat or of the living, according to the representations or the imaginary that the “peasant house” inspires, or yet

through the roles that we attribute to it. In other words, the ambition of the book is to discover all that the theme of the “peasant house” conceals, rather than the objects, the house and more generally the rural and indigenous habitat. What does the peasant house really consist of? Is it an object to be classified based on typologies created by architects and ethnographers, or is it a product of the imaginary and of a certain idea of rural life, born in the 19th century? These are two questions addressed by the book.

The first chapter, “The Birth of the Peasant House” establishes the circumstances in which the peasant house (*Bauerhaus*) was born, by privileging the German tradition, exemplary in various aspects, through its stress on the notion of people (*Volk*), bearer of culture (*Volksgeist*). The chapter shows how the peasant house emerged in the 19th century as an emblem of the nations. Then, it reveals how the rural habitat is studied by

representatives of various disciplines – agronomists, engineers, architects, geographers and ethnographers. These diverse disciplines which describe the peasant house converge when considering two stages in the history of rural and / or popular architecture: a primitive and quasi-immemorial stage, speaking of secondary or temporary buildings and an evolved stage which allow *ethnic groups* rather than *nations* to produce differentiated and thus, *typically national* peasant houses.¹ The sub-chapter “*Folk Architecture at the Service of the Nation*”² shows that the study of the peasant house follows the study of “national heritage”, first romantic, philosophical and esthetic. Once this heritage is institutionalized at regional and national level, the peasant house becomes the study object of folkloric ethnographers who make its inventory and celebrate it.

The chapter is “interrupted” by the author’s fieldnotes, which show how he aimed to study wooden architecture in Romania, due to its apparently well-kept traditional characteristics, without doubting the instrumentalizations that the national and socialist government of comrade *Ceaușescu* could make.³ He reveals how he proceeded for this purpose: “I had no choice but to follow my weapons and use the classical way: observe, reveal, classify, then study the evolution, reveal the common characteristics at a national, regional and local level as well as identify primitive forms that were generally re-grouped at the beginning of works as a chapter of national ‘pre-history’ and consequently more universal.”⁴ The author also reveals how his fieldwork in Romania is followed by the one in Yugoslavia, aiming to compare the folk architecture within the two countries, and provides interesting insights on ethnographic knowledge production in the two places.

A notebook of field illustrations made by the author stands between the first and second chapter, grouped in the following categories: “techniques and materials,” “colonial type street-villages,” “from the Adriatic to the Black Sea,” “between East and West.” The photographs in the section “techniques and materials” are divided in those related to plain (e.g. – half-buried building, Banat, Romania) and mountain (e.g. mixed technique of wood and earth, Apuseni Mountains, Romania) living structures. A stone house from Istria, a hay barn in Slovenia or an earth house aligned in colonial fashion from Dobruja stand in pictures from the section “from the Adriatic to the Black Sea”.

The second chapter “From the Origin of the House to the House of Origins: Paleontology and Mythology” shows that the question of the origin of the house answers the question on the *evolution of shapes*, which goes back to an initial, simple or elementary form, according to an organicist pattern. It outlines the perspectives of archaeology, paleontology, imaginary, and the naturalist school. The latter privileges a discussion on the work of Le Corbusier, who claims that that the plan of the natural

home is universal, and that it is just the technical means that evolve. Based on this idea, Le Corbusier will use in his own architectural creation a typical approach of return to the origins or pretended return to pretended origins, where all is natural and simple. This approach involves a denial of the past, of its traditions and gains, in order to come back to the purity of origins – to a paradisiac, nature state. The author differentiates this return to origins, somehow to the raw initial nature (as an austerity reform), from the romantic return to nature, of culturalist type. It is this very romantic return to the primitive and to the scenery that makes the author take an interest in architecture and peasant art at the beginning of the 20th century in order to reproduce the idealized moments in a national or nationalist state that gave among other what we call *Heimatstil* or the national-patriotic style. On the contrary, at Le Corbusier we find a quasi-religious reform movement that connects the origins (simplicity) to the most daring creations.⁵

The third chapter, “The Study of the Peasant House in its Diversity” shows how the rural habitat is the result of events which mark its (physical) environment, through factors such as roads construction, import of colonizers, liberation of serfs, militarization of frontiers, circulation of artisans. The chapter then approaches the technology of the house (description and classification) and presents typologies of houses made of key elements such as – fix or mobile living feature, technology materials used for walls (wood, stone, earth, mix etc.), materials and technologies for the roof etc. This functionalist approach is followed by more recent examples, which show how typologies are built based on geographical or environmental criteria. The author points out that, for a social and cultural anthropologist, the technological perspective is too narrow, even if, in a certain manner, it is more “scientific” and essential as a departure point. Thus, in order to understand the house, one needs to draw on social representations, and review the contribution of social sciences to the question of rural habitat. Overall, neither climate, nor comfort or available techniques explain by themselves the shape and organization of the house.

The culture of the habitat involves what the inhabitants think of their habitat as well. Therefore, as part of this endeavor, it is good to analyze the local terminology for the house, in addition to observation and description.

“The Contribution of Rural Sociology”, or the fourth chapter, shows what social sciences can bring to the study of rural habitat, by looking at three non-geographical modifying factors: the social status of the peasant and of his / her village; the family structure of the kinship system; the belonging to a political unit determining the layout of the territory. When looking at the social status of the peasant and of his / her village, the author presents some helpful and inspiring typologies for further studies. For example, the general typology of villages as established

by national ethnographers, in the Germanic tradition. The usually retained types of (traditional) villages, according to the more or less intense concentration and activity of inhabitants are : disseminated villages (in mountain villages); concentrated villages, in the plain regions, with an informal center to which a more recent part of a certain geographical form is added; villages with spaced, agricultural or pastoral houses; stretched out villages (along the rivers and the route); villages of a geometrical form (stretched out, circular, terraced, polygonal) or still villages distinguished according to their geographical position: summit, exit from a valley etc. Then, some ethnographers in Romania made a typology of villages according to ethnicity: Romanians practice the dispersed village of shepherds, Hungarians live in concentrated villages, and Saxons and Swabians in geometric ones.⁶ The author also points at the writings of national architects (in Yugoslavia) who present rural architecture as resulting from two combined factors: the geographical factor, which partially dictates the used materials; the cultural factor, which dictates forms and techniques.

The fifth chapter – “The Contribution of Social and Historical Anthropology” – insightfully takes over the example of Marcel Mauss on a “dynamic” interpretation of the habitat. The essay on the seasonal variations of Eskimo societies – a study of social morphology (1904-1905) offers an outlook on the Eskimo habitat. The latter is an ideal subject for illustrating what social anthropology can say about the built environment. Mauss’ original study stresses the alternation of seasons in order to describe the social life of the Eskimos. The author reveals how Mauss criticized approaches that we could call utilitarian through a “culturalist” or sociological approach: social life dictates the form of the habitat more than climatic conditions, despite their harshness and qualifies this critique as a socio-anthropological approach. The first section of the chapter is followed by a perspective revealing the role that the State always had in the so-called popular architecture in the privileged study region. By stressing a historical dimension (the influence of colonization in Eastern and Central Europe and the Turkish-oriental influence in the Eastern and southern part of this area on the habitat and the environment), the book takes a new perspective, the socio-political perspective of the human environment or the habitat which also includes the territorial dimension.

The chapter also includes examples of state interventions on the configuration of territory. The examples draw on the big colonization-related maneuvers taking place in Banat (englobing the current Serbian Vojvodina), the Polish Galicia and meridional Hungary, including the already-established Croatia through military borders. Here, territorial layout is essentially resumed to census undertakings, planning, control and valuing, actions which correspond to the new *Aufklärung* entrepreneurial ideology. This

corresponds to the cartographic survey, the division of land based on its utility (fields for building, prairies, fields, forests), the reglementation of water and forests as well as urbanization. The subsequently born concept of *Idealdorf* is illustrated by the testimony of a traveler at the end of the century.

The sixth chapter – “A Symbolic Interpretation of the House” – refers to the work of Bachelard and his interpretative approach. From this work, the author retains the poetics of the house, which was used by psychologists as an instrument for analyzing the human soul: an evocation of intimacy, of the cave, of the cell and the metaphoric interpretations of the word *dwelling* (*demeurer*) or *living* (*habiter*). The author points out at Bachelard’s distinction of two fundamental imaginary characteristics of the house – verticality (polarity between the cave and the attic, corresponding to the couples rationality / irrationality or clarity / obscurity) and centrality (articulated around the idea of shelter, protection and well-being involved in the concept of hut).

The chapter is “interrupted” by field notes on the symbolic interpretation of the habitat of Val d’Anniviers, Wallis (Switzerland) in a field research done by the author in 1973, based on archives, folklore and oral history. The notes draw on the results of the research on the symbolic interpretation of the peasant and bourgeois (common to the descendants of a village) home, while leaving aside the historical and descriptive context of the habitat: “Thus, in each village one can identify two centers, a familial center representing and symbolically reuniting all dispersed property (pastures and barns) and a common – bourgeoisie center, representing the whole group of families and their property.”⁷ The symbolic interpretation of the house is then discussed through the examples of the Kabyle house, the Indian house in America, the short symbolic analysis of the Bororo village by Lévi-Strauss or an analysis of construction rites.

The conclusion – “The Peasant House: A Cumbersome Object” – sums up the idea that the study and interpretation of the peasant house belongs to a discipline or theory: architecture, urbanism, archaeology, evolutionism, diffusionism or structuralism. At the same time, aiming to read in the habitat, or, more generally, in the organization of space *the history of ideas and societies* seems one of the most pertinent enterprises. The book offers a refined lens through which to explore the uses and limits of concepts that guide anthropological work in general, such as ideas about socially constructed difference, place, tradition and modernity, community, or identity. Moreover, it paves the way for looking at the interrelationship of the house / living place with heritage making, migration and development. With this interrelationship in mind, in the following, I refer to two works.

Brumann looks at two popular pieces of local heritage in Kyoto – the Gion matsuri, arguably the most famous festival of Japan and the *kyo* – *machiya*, the traditional



town house⁸ – and explores the motives and meanings with which people engage the past and its remnants. The houses are a symbol of “defrosted” heritage – and a visible instance of this defrosting is the exclusive use of a house as a restaurant or shop which often requires substantial physical modifications, such as use of show windows instead of the original wooden front lattices (*kōshi*) or the replacement of raised tatami floors with street-level tiled floors. Instead of “freezing” these houses, something original has to be done with them to make their continued existence viable and meaningful, and this may involve their physical structure, uses, or both. Then, the affection for the *kyo* – *machia* drives both natives and newcomers, not due to collective identities, but to personal motives. At the same time, this study reveals that the key to a more comprehensive understanding of the social life of cultural heritage lies in the sufficient inclusion of emic perspectives.

Vintilă Mihăilescu follows the symbolic life of houses in Romanian post-socialist and post-peasant society⁹ departing from the claim that a house is “the most convenient and obvious way of advancing a material

claim to social distinction.” (Alfred Marshall, 1891) The paper is tracking the means and meanings of such “claims” in the case of the new households built all over the Romanian post-peasant countryside. In communism, the household is subjected to a whole range of adaptive strategies rooted in emerging rural-urban kinship and neighborhood networks. Later, “pride houses” (Mihăilescu, 2011) – houses that migrants started to rise all over the country – mirror new possibilities of consumption that have been used to embody elements of modernity” (Miller, 1995: 282).¹⁰ In the Romanian case and at first sight, “pride houses” can be best described by excess: excess of shape, excess of rooms, paintings, ornaments, a mix of influences and ongoing improvisations. Pride houses are not just show off and distinction seeking; they are material means to break through the material space of a former way of life: modernization *had* to start with households. Past items are recycled as means of genuinely *feeling* the past, not being embedded in or reproducing it. Thus, patrimony turns to a kind of state of mind.

Notes:

1. The italicized words are the author’s mark.
2. François Rüegg, *La maison paysanne : histoire d’un mythe* (Paris: Infolio, 2011), 70.
3. Rüegg, *La maison paysanne*, 50.
4. Ibid., 53.
5. Ibid., 105–106
6. Ibid., 158.
7. Ibid., 248.
8. *Machiya* translates as “town house” and applies to any traditional urban commoner dwelling, but prefixing *kyo* for Kyoto recognizes a variety of locally specific features. The two traditions are not only the most prominent in urban Kyoto but they are also connected: they were carried by the same stratum of merchants and craftspeople in the past, the festival neighborhoods are those with the most splendid *kyo-machiya*, and, in those neighborhoods, *machiya* architecture is adapted to festival participation, for example, by featuring removable street fronts for festival displays. Christoph Brumann, “Outside the Glass Case: The Social Life of Urban Heritage in Kyoto,” *American Ethnologist* 36 (2009): 295.
9. A “post-peasant society” is a representative collectivity changing in time and space according to contexts and selectively breaking through or re-appropriating some elements of its peasant heritage in order to cope with these contexts. Vintilă Mihăilescu, “‘Something Nice.’ Pride Houses, Post-peasant Society and the Quest for Authenticity,” *Cultura. International Journal of Philosophy of Culture and Axiology* 11, no.2 (2014): 10
10. Mihăilescu, “‘Something Nice,” 83.

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