

PAUL H. STAHL, *Social Structures in South-East Europe*. Volume edited by Irina Stahl, Stelu Șerban and Andrei Timotin, Istros Publishing House of the “Carol I” Museum of Brăila, 2025.

Paul Henri Stahl (1925–2008), Romanian and European ethnologist, sociologist, and academic, was a prominent specialist in rural sociology, ethno-sociology and the study of traditional societies across Europe. Son of eminent Professor Henri H. Stahl, one of the most remarkable representatives of the Bucharest School of Sociology founded by Dimitrie Gusti, Paul H. Stahl graduated in Philosophy, with a specialization in Sociology, at the end of World War Two, in 1948. Soon after, sociology was banned in Romania by the newly instated communist regime. The members of the interwar School of Sociology were marginalized, destituted, arrested and investigated; few met an untimely death. In order to survive, they accepted insignificant positions in schools, research centers, or museums, where they carried out jobs remotely, or at all related to sociology. Paul H. Stahl started out working within the Ministry of Education, at the Center for Psycho-Medical-Pedagogical Research (1949–1952), where he was part of interdisciplinary teams investigating the conditions of the educational system. After isolating several medical problems, the center was abruptly shut down. Stahl found a new position within the Romanian Academy. He was at first as a researcher at the Institute of Art History (1953–1962) and later, at the Institute for South-East European Studies (1963–1968). In the 50s and the 60s, several of his works were stopped from being published and suppressed by the political censorship. Under these conditions, after earning his Ph.D. in Philosophy at the University of Bucharest (1968), Paul H. Stahl defected the country and went to Paris. From 1969 onwards, he taught Southeast European Ethnology at the University René Descartes (Sorbonne). He became Director of Studies (*Directeur d'études*) at the prestigious École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS Paris), and, from 1970, he joined the Social Anthropology Laboratory, within the National Centre of Scientific Research. During his career, Paul H. Stahl worked with leading European historians, anthropologists and sociologists, among which Fernand Braudel and Claude Lévi-Strauss. In recognition of his contribution, the French Republic awarded him with the prestigious *Palmes académiques*, in 1986. Following the 1989 political change in Romania, Paul H. Stahl was elected Honorary Member of the Romanian Academy (1993), and was later appointed Director of the Institute for South-East European Studies (1999–2008).

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Paul H. Stahl academic legacy covers a large area of themes regarding Romanian, South-European and European social and spiritual life. His studies explore folk art and folk architecture, village structure and household organization, situating the Romanian ethnology within a broader, European framework. Among his most significant publications ought to be mentioned: *Arhitectura Populară Românească* (Romanian Folk Architecture, five co-authored volumes dedicated to different geographical regions, 1956–1959), *Planurile caselor românești țărănești. Die Grundrisse der Rumänischen Bauernhäuser (Blueprints of Romanian Peasant Households, 1958)*, *Arta populară în R.P.R. Ceramica* (Folk Art in the Popular Republic of Romania. The ceramics, co-authored with Barbu Slătineanu and Paul Petrescu, 1958), *Folk Art* (three co-authored volumes dedicated to various geographical regions of Romania, 1963–1969), *Folclorul și arta populară românească* (Folklore and Romanian Folk Art, 1968), *Civilizația vechilor sate românești* (Civilization of Ancient Romanian Villages, with Henri H. Stahl, 1968), *Ethnologie de l'Europe du Sud-Est* (1975), *Il sangue e la terra. Comunità di villaggio e comunità familiari nell'Europa del '800* (with Massimo Guidetti, Milan, 1977), *Un'Italia sconosciuta. Comunità di villaggio e comunità familiari dell'Europa del '800* (with Massimo Guidetti, 1978) *Le radici dell'Europa. Il dibattito ottocentesco su comunità di villaggio e familiari* (with Massimo Guidetti, 1979), *Sociétés traditionnelles balkaniques. Contribution à l'étude des structures sociales* (Paris, 1979), *La Méditerranée. Propriété et structures sociales. XIX^e et XX^e siècles* (Paris, 1979), *Histoire de la décapitation* (Paris, 1986), *Household, Village and Village Confederation in Southeastern Europe* (New York, 1986; Italian version – Messina, 1993; Romanian version – Bucharest, 2000), *Le radici di una valle alpina. Antropologia storica e sociale della Val Tartano* (Sondrio, 1995), *La Méditerranée. Propriété et structures sociales, XIX^e et XX^e siècles* (Paris, 1979), *Name and Social Structure. Examples from Southeast Europe* (editor, Boulder – New York, 1998), *Familia și școala. București 1949–1952. Contribuții la sociologia educației* (The Family and The School. Bucharest 1949–1952. Contributions to the sociology of education, 2001), *Oameni și case de pe Valea Moldovei* (People and Houses of Moldova Valley, 2004), *Case și acareturi din Mărginimea Sibiului, 1953–1958* (Houses and Outbuildings of Mărginimea neighborhood in Sibiu 1953–1958, 2005). Beside his own work, he also published several manuscripts belonging to his father and uncle.

The volume we are reviewing, *Social Structures in South-East Europe*, reunites more than twenty articles written by Paul Henri Stahl, in a volume edited by Irina Stahl (scientific researcher at the Institute of Sociology, Romanian Academy), Stelu Șerban, and Andrei Timotin (scientific researchers at the Institute of South-East European Studies). The consistent volume is a long due *restitutio* to the academic community, highlighting Paul H. Stahl's perspective on the complex domain of *cultural areas*. The articles, published between the 1970s and the 2000s in prestigious international publications, as well as in leading Romanian and French academic journals, witness and reflect upon Stahl's sustained engagement with the comparative study of village structures, kinship systems, customary law,

religious practices, and territorial organization in Southeastern Europe and the Mediterranean. His work constantly returns to the idea of “cultural areas” (*aires culturelles*), understood as historically shaped configurations of social structures, practices, and symbolic systems. In an interdisciplinary approach, combining ethnological field research, historical anthropology, and sociological analysis, Stahl contributes with a distinctive method that connects Romanian ethnology with the larger, European debate in anthropology and history. These writings represent both a theoretical legacy for the study of traditional societies and a bridge between Gusti’s interwar School of Sociology and contemporary European social sciences perspectives.

Reunited under the overarching concept of “social structures”, the volume organizes Paul H. Stahl’s selected articles into five sections, grouped around interrelated themes and sub-themes: archaic and pre-modern state formations, old village communities, the relationship between the rural architectures – houses, church – and the social group, biological and symbolic kinship, identity and naming: *Pays de montagne, pays de vallées; Communautés villageoises; Maisons et églises; Parenté biologique, parenté symbolique; Noms personnels, noms fictifs.*

Introduced in cultural anthropology since the early 1900s, and initially referring to extra-European societies (Northern and Latin America, Asia, Northern Africa), the research field of “cultural areas” opened the way to comparative studies. Cultural areas are defined as a “*group of regions or countries without a common political-administrative framework, but where similar social problems arising from a common history deserve a unique treatment or at least comparative studies, the tools of which are a documentation center capable of ‘cobbling together’ very disparate information*” (Bataillon, 1999). Although working within this comparative framework, Paul H. Stahl’s approach is rooted in the Bucharest School of Sociology founded by Dimitrie Gusti and continued by Henri H. Stahl. In this tradition, villages are seen as belonging to larger cultural and historical areas, which are expressed not only in spiritual attitudes and folklore (songs, costumes, rituals), but also in everyday structures of life: settlement patterns, architecture, kinship and inheritance systems, economic practices, legal customs, and symbolic-ritual frameworks. For Paul H. Stahl, cultural areas are historical-structural zones, where land, kinship, architecture, law, and ritual interact to create relatively stable cultural systems. In the broader landscape of the social sciences, the concept of “cultural areas” emerges at the intersection of several intellectual traditions: beyond the old opposition civilized / non-civilized societies, or the identity / alterity constructions shaped by the rise of 19th century national consciousness (Pathier, 2017, pp. 183–196), it represents above all an epistemological construction, a framework for developing interconnected and interdisciplinary approaches in the social and human sciences. In defining cultural areas, Paul H. Stahl emphasizes that geography alone is never sufficient to explain social configurations. Instead, he stresses on the interplay between history, neighborhood, and shared social life as the structuring forces of a region. In « *L’Europe du Sud-Est. Aires culturelles et*

facteurs structurants (XIX^e et XX^e siècles) », the opening article of the reviewed volume, the author explains:

“My approach attempts to identify the European regions that have most often attracted the attention of scientists in order to identify the defining elements of each. (...) All social phenomena occur somewhere in nature and can therefore be referred to by naming the place where they occur. (...) At first glance, the geographical element alone seems to be decisive; in fact, it is a natural element that provides the framework for a certain form of social life. (...)

The study of South-East Europe has led not only to comparative presentations but also to the establishment of numerous research institutes dedicated to the study of the region (...). Geographical and ethnic factors, which are particularly varied, cannot provide arguments to explain the common aspects of the entire region.

The decisive factor, which is mentioned in the explanation of the situations analyzed for this cultural area, is shared history, proximity, and shared social life” (Stahl, 2024, pp. 15–18, translated by the author A. H. M.).

The studies collected in the reviewed volume cover a wide thematic range, reflecting Paul H. Stahl’s comparative approach to village structures, kinship, religion, and symbolic systems in Southeastern Europe and beyond. Among the most significant are: « L’évolution historique de la communauté villageoise. Quelques repères européens » (originally published in *Sociétés européennes. Études roumaines et aroumaines*, 1990 (1)), « “Pays” et communautés des vallées. Exemples roumains et européens (originally published in *Revue roumaine d’histoire*, 37(3–4), 1998), « Deux communautés villageoises en Europe du Sud-Est (originally published in R. Cresswell (Ed.), *Éléments d’ethnologie*, vol. I, 1975), « L’organisation magique du territoire villageois Roumain » (originally published in *L’Homme. Revue française d’anthropologie*, 13(3), 1973), « Soi-même et les autres. Quelques exemples balkaniques » (originally published in *L’identité. Séminaire interdisciplinaire dirigé par Claude-Levi-Strauss, professeur au Collège de France, 1974–1975*, Paris, 1977), « Le nom des princes roumains (originally published in *Revue d’études roumaines*, no 17–18, 1993). Some articles are selected from the prestigious journal edited and published by Stahl himself, *Études et Documents Balkaniques et Méditerranéens*: « *Muntenia, le pays de la montagne* » (no. 18, 1995), « Les règles de vie des anciennes communautés villageoises européennes » (no. 16, 1992), « L’église et la maison. Les rituels de construction parallèles » (no. 30, 2006), « Les églises en bois de la Valachie. La table des ancêtres » (no. 7, 1984), « Les Albanais, la région tribale » (no. 20, 1998), « Les anciens codes de Monténégro. Coutume orale et coutume écrite » (no. 31, 2007), « Les sept lignages. Structures sociales archaïques et modèles numériques » (no. 22, 2000). From the articles published in *Revue des Études Sud-Est Européennes*, the coordinators of this volume, Irina Stahl, Stelu Șerban and Andrei Timotin, collected some important syntheses: « L’Europe du Sud-Est. Aires culturelles et facteurs structurants (XIX^e et XX^e siècles) » (no. 43,

2005), « L'installation des fidèles dans l'église. Exemples sud-est européens » (no. 31 (1–2), 1993), « Les errements de la parenté » (no. 41, 2003).

Paul H. Stahl is concerned with the continuity of the social structures inherited from the past, the domestic group, the neighborhood, the property, the authority of the elders; the interplay between oral and written religious traditions; as well as the political-territorial formations, such as the Romanian « *Muntenia*, le pays de la montagne » (*id.*, 44). The studies explore tribal communities, brotherhood (*phratricie*) and the household (*maisnie*) as social units (*id.*, pp. 80–81). The tribal confederation, as opposed to the modern State is described:

“Tribal life is better preserved in the absence of a powerful state, as a tribe is itself a state, even if it is smaller in size compared to modern states, and even if it is organized according to customs passed down orally. Between the independence of a tribe and the desire of a state to regulate the lives of its subjects, there are conflicts of interest that often lead to armed oppositions and are difficult to resolve through compromise. These conflicts have developed even within the framework of modern Balkan states” (Stahl, 2024, 101, translated by the author, A. H. M.).

In his study « “Pays” et communautés de vallée. Exemples roumains et européens », Paul H. Stahl recalls the methods developed by Henri H. Stahl, under the formula of “social archeology” (*archéologie sociale*). This approach makes it possible to trace the remnants of ancient social formations beyond written sources, by reconstructing them through the study of customary practices, material culture, etc. For example:

“Vrancea, located between mountains at the curve of the Carpathians, preserves the memory of an ancient tribal structure, especially an eponymous legend; the entire country is said to descend from an “old Vrâncioaia” who had seven sons. There are many Romanian eponymous legends, each linked to the origin of a single village, but Vrancea is unique in this respect, because its legend concerns a confederation of villages” (Stahl, 2024, p. 114, translated by the author, A. H. M.).

The section « *Maisons et églises* » provides examples from communities such as the Albanians, Southern Slaves, Slovaks, Caucasians, Romanians, and French, highlighting how domestic and religious architecture reflects social organization, kinship structures, and symbolic practices across diverse cultural contexts:

“We are thus faced with an impressive series of common elements in the organization of the houses of the extended European domestic groups. Within this group, we can distinguish the cases of societies based on a tribal structure which, as warrior societies, build and inhabit towers. The materials I present here are only a first attempt at a synthesis on a European level, but the data concerning other countries are also interesting and rich” (Stahl, 2024, p. 263, translated by the author, A. H. M.).

The article « *Églises en bois de Valachie. La table des ancêtres* » opens with the statement: “the dead must be cared for because they have needs similar to those of the living”, emphasizing the continuity between the living and the ancestral world. Stahl interprets the material and ritual arrangements within wooden churches – notably the placement of the “ancestors’ table” as tangible expressions of social memory, kinship obligations, and the symbolic structuring of community life. Through this lens, architecture and ritual become mediators between the sacred and the social, revealing enduring patterns of cultural and spiritual organization in rural Valachian society (also see Stahl, 1983, pp. 87–106). Thus:

“(…) the custom of eating with the dead, which is practiced by almost all populations of South-East Europe, is also evident elsewhere in the construction of tables and even shelters for these tables. They sometimes take forms related to the local social structure. The wooden churches of Serbia are most reminiscent of those of Wallachia and Little Wallachia; but the social structure there is different. While in Wallachia the social unit that stands out is the village, giving rise to a single table, in Serbia the lineages were more important. This probably explains why, in some places, each lineage has its own small hut built near the church” (Stahl, 2024, 319, translated by the author, A. H. M.).

Through his thorough researches, grounded in extensive archival documentation, field observation, and comparative analysis, Paul H. Stahl has built a bridge between the Romanian sociology and ethnography and the Balkan and Mediterranean studies, situating Romania and Romanian studies within the broader European scholarly context. His work not only preserved and extended the traditions of the Bucharest School of Sociology (1925–1948), but also introduced comparative, interdisciplinary approaches that connected local ethnography with regional and European historical patterns. By emphasizing the continuity of social structures, the interplay of kinship, ritual, architecture, and territorial organization, Stahl provided a methodological and conceptual framework that continues to influence contemporary research in sociology, ethnology, and historical sociology and anthropology.

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Angelica Helena Marinescu

ANAMARIA IUGA, *Țesând povești. Istorii de viață în camera bună maramureșeană* [Weaving Stories. Life Stories in the Good Room of Maramureș], Iași, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University Press, 2025.

The Bucharest-based researcher offers a fascinating study on the life of traditional fabrics in Maramureș region (Romania), especially those that, by tradition, are kept in the “good room” (*camera bună*). Conceiving her work in line with the anthropology of objects (Arjun Appadurai, Janet Hoskins, Alfred Gell, Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall etc.), the author prefers to see the material she studies not as inert things, but rather as “subjects”, artifacts that – in relation to their owners – develop a life of their own, accumulate memory, compel their owners to actualise certain behaviors, modify the space in which they are displayed; in short, they behave in relation to humans as if they were beings. Taking this theoretical standpoint, the author’s attention constantly shifts from issues of morphology and symbolism, popular aesthetics or production techniques to the “biography” and function of these objects and, in general, to the way in which the destinies of traditional fabrics and people intertwine. It should also be noted that the work represents a profound and well-documented foray into the universe of female sensibility of Maramureș, as the universe of fabrics is essentially feminine.

The book begins with a series of theoretical considerations that question the notions of heritage, tradition, cultural memory, personal and community identity, with interesting contributions of its own in the direction of object theory (“autobiographical”, “biographical” and “a-biographical”), in an exciting dialogue with a wealth of recent and contemporary theoretical literature, both Western and local. Anamaria Iuga then circumscribes the space that constituted the centre of her fieldwork (the room with *rudă*), so that the reader can subsequently be immersed in the world of research that the author undertook in Maramureș between 2001 and 2011 in four villages: Botiza, Dragomirești, Ieud and Săliște de Sus.

Iuga’s approach is conveyed through narratives articulated around Maramureș textiles. In the author’s reading, life stories constitute a dimension of the object to the same extent that the object itself, thanks to the privileged relationship it has with its owner, stands out as a structural constituent of the latter. The existential matter of the narratives varies, ranging from bright and peaceful parts to tragic or dramatic scenes. Through them, we take note not only of the tensions between generations, between men and women, mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, parents and children, but also of an entire universe of thought and sensitivity that becomes analysable. In this sense, the author’s Maussian paraphrase, according to which the room with *rudă* is a “total social fact”, is fully justified. However, these narratives also reveal a lucid optimism professed by the people of Maramureș who, while living in the midst of postmodernity and experiencing globalization, understand how to continue to cultivate such elements of traditional, local culture.

For although it is almost invariably a question of patrimonialized traditions or reinvented traditions, the relationship of the people of Maramureș with traditional textiles is imbued with exceptional emotional and identity values, which explains the great sacrifices they are willing to make in order to create, preserve or take the items with them whenever they leave their home region. For, as clichéd as it may sound, the proximity of these objects provides them with an existential anchor, that helps them navigate through the difficulties of life.

The last chapter of the book (before the conclusions and a very useful glossary), “The Carpet Library”, is an informative insight into the universe of communities built around Maramureș churches. The author shows how the local tradition requires that at a certain ritual-ceremonial moment (the funeral), people ought to bring a carpet to the church. Over time, the churches have become the keepers of impressive collections of traditional carpets. The multitude of pieces, their age and variety of patterns make these spaces a veritable *Eldorado* of Maramureș textiles. At the same time, these small communities, where the function and beauty of traditional fabrics are celebrated with pomp, are also an important source of energy and enthusiasm that nourishes and amplifies the reflex of sincere heritage preservation.

On another note, the work contains many splendid photographs taken by the author herself, during her 10 years of fieldwork research in Maramureș. The visual / photographic dimension that accompanies the text is essential: it truly expresses what cannot be conveyed in words (for instance, the beauty of the traditional fabrics of Maramureș), but it is also of cardinal importance for the coherence of the argumentation: the photographs complement the reasoning, support or develop the hypothesis expressed within the text, or tacitly add new facets to the author’s point of view. Therefore, without necessarily being an essay on visual anthropology or an “album”, the work of Iuga contains a little bit of both registers.

I want to emphasise the fact that *Weaving Stories. Life Stories in the Good Room of Maramureș* has nothing to do with the dull studies of material culture, nor with the nationalist, triumphalist or orthodoxist outbursts that have been expressed, especially recently, in connection with the field of traditional textiles in Romania. The work also prudently and lucidly distances itself from the conceptual fictions of “purity” or “authenticity”, embracing and honestly exploring cultural facts in their dynamic evolution.

The book is written in a clear and rigorous style, sometimes with an interesting lyrical added tone. This tone, which is sometimes enabled in the work, is welcomed: it adds expressivity to the approach and, above all, it facilitates the access of the reader to the sensitive dimension of the topic. However, this tone also emphasises something else: although the researcher cultivates the participatory observation in the field, fully immersion in the atmosphere, life, fears and hopes

of people of the Maramureș region, there is a discreetly militant side hidden within the text, which allows us to visualise another methodological positioning. The author cultivates not only classic participant observation, but also “objectified participation” (Natalie Wigg-Stevenson), the latter referring to the lucid and assumed intervention of the researcher in the field, convinced of the moral and positive value of their own intervention in the ecosystem under study.

Mircea Păduraru

