Chapter 12

Patchwork Economies in Europe: Economic Strategies Among Homeless Romanian Roma in Copenhagen

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This chapter investigates the economic strategies of a group of Romanian Roma, who live in homelessness in Copenhagen. It draws on 13 months of anthropological fieldwork with Roma women and men who migrate continuously between Denmark and Romania and who mainly make a living by collecting refundable bottles and cans in Copenhagen. They refer to themselves as *badocari*, which translates to “bottle people” in Romanian. The chapter proposes the concept of “patchwork economy” to frame the micro economic strategies that the *badocari* engage in. The analogy of patchwork crafting serves to illustrate how the households’ economies rest upon a constant “stitching together” of various unreliable income sources that are scrap based and have no interconnection but due to their unreliability and minor revenue cannot stand alone to support the family. Furthermore, it illustrates how debt constitutes the background quilt against which the patchwork economy is continuously reconfigured. Finally, the chapter presents analytical insight into the interconnectedness between the micro economy of the Roma household and the broader social and political context of Romania and argues that the former should be regarded as a direct response to the latter.

12.1 Introduction

It is early morning and I meet Vasile at the street corner in the city where he usually sleeps. Vasile is a 45-year-old man. He is Roma from Romania and currently lives in homelessness in the streets of Copenhagen (Denmark). He earns a living primarily from the deposit on refundable bottles. On this early November morning, Vasile has just awoken from his sleep. I sit next to him on a sleeping bag, which is placed

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on top of cardboard paper in an attempt to insulate it from the cold ground. We hide from the rain under a shed roof of an office building and Vasile coughs loudly while pulling his cap tighter around the ears. Vasile points to show that his shoes are soaked from walking in the rain the night before, while searching for refundable bottles in the garbage bins around Copenhagen. He smiles wryly and says that the wet shoes are worth 10DKKR (1.3€) since he only found seven refundable bottles yesterday. He shakes his head, points to the rainy clouds in the sky and then concludes that it is time to return to Romania for the winter period since there are very few refundable bottles to find in Copenhagen at this time of year and hence little money to be made. We have agreed to meet this morning because Vasile wants me to photograph how he lives in Copenhagen including where he sleeps and how he works with scrap items from the garbage bins. In his own words, he wants me to document the lives of the *badocari*, which is a term that Romanian Roma who collect refundable bottles in Copenhagen use to define themselves. *Badocari* translates to “bottle people” in Romanian and is further elaborated on in the coming sections.

This chapter responds to Vasile’s request for documenting the lives of the *badocari* by way of zooming in on the economic strategies that motivate them to travel to Denmark.¹ It introduces the concept of “patchwork economy” to frame the micro economic strategies that the *badocari* engage in. The analogy of patchwork crafting serves to illustrate how the household economies of the *badocari* rest upon a constant “stitching together” of various unreliable income sources in which credit and debt figure as continuous components. The chapter further aims to present new analytical insight into the interconnectedness between the micro economy of the Roma household and the broader social and political context of Romania.

The chapter is structured around five empirical and analytical sections. The first section analyses the limitations that the *badocari* experience in regards to the formal labour market in Denmark and how they are consequently pulled into an informal street economy. The second section analyses the economic niche of the *badocari* in Copenhagen. The third section follows my interlocutors back to their households in Romania where the younger children are left behind under the care of other relatives. It sheds light on the interconnectedness between the livelihood in homelessness in Copenhagen and the opportunities and conditions available in Romania. The fourth section introduces the patchwork economies of the Roma households and discusses the components that comprise such a micro economy including continuous financial debt. The final fifth section discusses how the *badocari* regard their household economy as being embedded in a broader Romanian context and how it in fact can be regarded as a challenge to the latter. This is exemplified in my interlocutor Vasile’s paraphrasing of a Romanian proverb *pește se împute de la cap*, which signifies that the fish rots from the head. The analysis unfolds Vasile’s linkage between his economic situation and a Romanian proverb about decayed fish through a discussion on how Vasile – as well as the majority of my other interlocutors –

¹ The chapter builds on ethnographic material for my PhD dissertation and the topics discussed are more extensively elaborated on in the dissertation (published Dec. 2018).

regard the Romanian political system as corrupted (rotten) and how they are affected by this decay as citizens of the state of Romania. On this basis, I argue that in order to gain a comprehensive insight into the experiences and motivations of the Romanian Roma *badocari* who travel to Copenhagen and live and work in the street, it is pertinent to include how the *badocari* respond to broader political and economic contexts in Romania and in the European Union at large.

12.2 Methodology

The chapter builds on ethnographic data material collected during 13 months of anthropological fieldwork with 40 Romanian Roma in the streets of Copenhagen as well as several visits to their homes in Romania during the period April 2014 to January 2015 and September to November 2016.² However, since my interlocutors and I live and work in the same city (Copenhagen), I continue in close contact with many of them. The Roma women and men who became my interlocutors primarily come from the same all-Roma ethnic neighbourhood in Romania albeit a few come from an adjacent neighbourhood. They mostly make a living by collecting refundable bottles and cans in Copenhagen and call themselves *badocari*. *Badocari* relates to an old term for “bottles” (*badoaca*) used in some regions of Romania and hence the closest translation of *badocari* is “bottle people” or “people who work with bottles”.³ *Badocari* is therefore not an ethnonym for a particular Roma group in Romania. Rather it is a self-defined and self-ascribed plural term used by my interlocutors with reference to their current occupation in Denmark. In regard to ethnonyms, my interlocutors do not identify in the same Roma sub-groups despite largely coming from the same neighbourhood. For example, some identify according to their families’ historical engagement in traditional occupations and crafts e.g. as *Cărămizari* (brick-makers).⁴ Others refer to themselves as “Romanianised Roma” with reference to their families’ engagement in majority society work places rather than in traditional crafts (e.g. in large scale industries

²I spoke with 150 persons during the 13 months fieldwork and followed 40 persons closely. The majority of them comes from one Roma neighbourhood but approximately eight persons come from an adjacent neighbourhood. The two neighbourhoods share many similarities in terms of their size, demography and income levels. They are all-Roma ethnic neighbourhoods located on the margins of the larger city. They have mixed Roma sub-group belonging and refer to themselves primarily as *badocari* and overall as *țigani*, the Romanian term for Gypsies, that originates from the ancient Greek *athiganoi* (untouchables) and has highly pejorative connotations. I included close to a 50/50 division of men and women in between the ages 17 and 70 years. Romanian was the primary language of interaction and in this regard, I had support of my research assistant, Simona Barbu.

³I have investigated the origins of this term by consulting various Romanian dictionaries and through interviews and correspondence with Romanian historians who study Roma history including Petre Petcut and Mariana Sandu.

⁴For more comprehensive overview of Roma sub-group identification see: “Studio despre meste-sugurile Rome” by Romano Butiq.

and factories during the communist period in Romania). However, my interlocutors rarely talk about their sub-group belongings and mostly refer to themselves as *badocari* and as residents of the larger city in Romania that the neighbourhood is located within.

Data is triangulated by comparing field observations with interviews with my primary interlocutors as well as with interviews with employees in relevant public institutions, NGOs, and legal organisations and finally with a document analysis of existing research and legal documents. The name of the Roma neighbourhood and the city in which it is located as well as the names of my interlocutors have all been anonymised and replaced with pseudonyms.

The chapter highlights the ethnographic account of Vasile and complements it with quotes from my other interlocutors. This structure is chosen since it is an anthropological chapter, which takes the point of departure in selected empirical cases that reflect general concerns expressed by the group of interlocutors involved in the study (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 3).

12.3 Analytical Perspectives

The chapter places itself within the field of economic anthropology and is inspired by a range of anthropological perspectives on how urban poor understand and respond to notions of money, debt and credit (e.g. Hann and Hart 2011; Gregory 2012; Peebles 2010; Pedersen 2017). It also brings into discussion studies concerning economic strategies of Roma communities (e.g. Hrustic 2015; Pulay 2015; Solimene 2015; Stewart 1999; Okely 1996).

“Patchwork economy” is introduced as a concept in this chapter, to grasp the various sources of income with together form the basis of the household economy of my interlocutors (Sect. 12.7). A patchwork pattern is made up of separate squares of fabric, each in their own design, that are sewed together and finally attached to a larger material (such as a quilt or a pillowcase). Whereas the larger material onto which the patchwork is attached is clearly defined (e.g. a squared quilt) the patchwork pattern itself can take different shapes. A patchwork household economy is argued to refer to a process of “stitching together” various sources of income that per se have no interconnection (each have their own design) but due to their unreliability and minor revenue cannot stand alone to support the family. It is not a stable economy but rather an economy, which depends on a constant development of new economic income opportunities (replacing the squares of fabric). This includes bottle collection in Denmark, child allowances in Romania, begging in France as well as other activities. The chapter illustrates how the families “stitch” their household incomes together and also how credit and debt figure as constant components in the patchwork household economy. The analogy of the patchwork pattern is explored over the course of this chapter.

12.4 When Employment (*muncă*) Is Not an Option, Then You Turn to Business (*afacere*)

The majority of my interlocutors worked in Italy, Spain and Portugal prior to their arrival in Denmark. They mostly occupied jobs in construction, agriculture, the restaurant business, and in the care sector (Ravnbøl 2015; see also studies by Maroukis et al. 2011; Solimene 2015; Djuve et al. 2015; Preoteasa et al. 2012). They worked without a formal working contract and with a lower salary compared to their formally employed colleagues. In other words, they were part of the informal economy in these countries, defined as the uncontracted employment of persons who work without access to social protection schemes as well as workplace and union protection standards. Following the economic crisis of 2008 and the euro crisis of 2010, many became unemployed in these countries and those most significantly affected were irregular workers and low skilled workers (Maroukis et al. 2011: 133). Upon losing their informal work opportunities, many Roma families directed their attention to countries in Scandinavia (see also Djuve et al. 2015).

The vast majority of the Roma communities in Romania have been sedentary since the communist period (Achim 2004: 191; Preoteasa et al. 2012). For some, the sedentary livelihood dates back as far as to the period of Roma slavery in Romania, during which Roma families were bound to the land of the king, the lords and the monasteries (Achim 2004; Petcut 2005; Asséo et al. 2017; Yildiz and De Genoa 2017). The large migration flow for my interlocutors as well as many other Roma communities in Romania initiated after 1989, in the aftermath of political and economic changes which opened the borders but also increased the gap between social classes; and more bluntly revealed problems of structural discrimination against the Roma in Romania (Achim 2004; Preoteasa et al. 2012). Many Romanians and particularly Roma minorities who often occupied the lowest paid jobs and worked in informal arrangements lost their jobs in the transition to a capitalist market economy (Bacon 2004; Asséo et al. 2017).

Employment is the dream of the majority of my interlocutors. Vasile, used to work in a factory during the socialist period in Romania. He lost his job at the factory when it closed down shortly after the political changes of 1989. When Vasile arrived for the first time in Denmark in 2009, he initially hoped to find employment in a factory or in the construction sector. However, he rapidly learned the complexity of such an endeavour since he does not speak Danish or English and does not have formal education. Vasile also realised that the highly regulated Danish labour market has an inherent complication to it, since the access to a Danish social security number (CPR number) is usually dependent on having an employment contract and a residence address.⁵ However, the majority of employers and landlords frequently request CPR registration when foreign nationals contact them regarding employment or housing, although this is not obliged by law. Vasile, as well as the vast majority of the *bado-cari*, thereby find themselves caught up in a circle of social exclusion in which con-

⁵ See information available on the Danish State Administration homepage

ditions relating to employment, housing and social security mutually exclude the other (Ravnbøl 2015).

As many of my other interlocutors, Vasile makes a distinction between formal employment that he calls “work” (*muncă* in Romanian) and the economic activity of collecting bottles, which he terms “business” or “work tasks” (*afacere*) (Ravnbøl 2015). *Afacere* as a concept serves to frame the multiplicity of businesses performed in a diverse and highly complex street economy in Copenhagen. The street economy in Copenhagen is as any other urban street economy comprised of a large variety of economic niches (Wacquant 2008; Pulay 2015; Di Nunzio 2012). Some economic niches are legal (such as collecting refundable bottles and scavenging trash) but many are also illegal (such as theft, pimping and drug sale). The niches are highly diverse but have in common that they all unfold within the informal economy in the street and comprise a broad variety of nationalities and age groups. The following section zooms in on the *badocari* economic niche.

12.5 The *badocari* Economic Niche in Copenhagen

Vasile explains how the income for the *badocari* is entirely contingent on the season and the weather. They earn very little during the winter and when it rains, since this entails that fewer people consume beverages outdoors. Vasile’s income of about 1€ from the rainy day in November, described in the introduction, illustrates this point. During the summer, the weather is warmer and a range of open-air festivals are held throughout the city. As Vasile himself explains:

In the summer the sunlight lasts longer. People drink outside, and you can earn around 300–400 DKKR a day [40–54€]. During festivals, it is better, and we can raise many bags of bottles, you can earn up to 700 DKKR a day [94€].

The weekends are more lucrative compared to the week days since the *badocari* can collect bottles around the discotheque area in the city centre. Vasile explains that a normal working day during the summer starts at 10 am and ends at 5am the following morning when the discotheques close. He continues:

You have to run a lot to collect these bottles, they are not all in one place, you have to run all over the city and look into all the garbage bins. And you have to get there before everyone else.

The *badocari* share a common concern of having their personal belongings stolen when they live and work in the street including that their bags of bottles are stolen by other bottle collectors. Vasile explains this risk:

Yes, the bags get stolen if you leave them or look away. This is why it is better to cooperate with other *badocari* during the festivals, so that one person can guard the bags while the others collect. Then you take turns so that everyone gets a chance to collect something. But you have to be careful, you cannot cooperate with everyone. It is best to cooperate with people you know from back home in the neighbourhood.

Vasile explains how he ties the bags to his bicycle during the night to prevent them from being stolen while he sleeps. He, as well as the majority of my interlocutors, tries to avoid this situation by delivering the bottles at the return machines before nightfall.

The return machines, also known as reverse vending machines, are allocated within or next to larger grocery stores. Refundable bottles and cans are counted automatically when the items are inserted into the machine and the value of each item depends on the volume, weight and material and range from 1 DKKR up to 3 DKKR (0.13 € – 0.40 €) per item. The *badocari* know the value of the returnable items by heart. Refundable bottles and cans in Copenhagen is an economic niche not only of interest to the *badocari* but also to a range of other persons who live or work in the street (e.g. homeless persons) or persons who want to augment their income. Hence, competition for the bottles rises in various periods of the year. For example, a woman called Ioana explains that she normally takes all the bottles and cans that she finds on the ground or in the garbage bins. However, during summer days and especially during festivals, where larger quantities of beverages are consumed outdoors in Denmark, there are more bottles and cans available but also many more bottle collectors. Hence, competition rises and the *badocari* become more strategic. Ioana and the other *badocari* carefully evaluate the value of each bottle compared to its weight and volume, since a full or heavy bag means that they have to leave the “bottle location” and locate a reverse vending machine where they can dispose their bottles, unless they can find a person of confidence who is willing to guard the bag. As a result of careful calculations, Ioana, as well as the rest of my interlocutors, favour the small 33 cl plastic bottle since it has a higher value compared to cans of a similar size, weighs less than a glass bottles, but is also less bulky and easier to stack compared to the large plastic bottles.

Another income opportunity in Copenhagen that most of the *badocari* engage in while also collecting bottles, is to scavenge through garbage bins for discarded items that can be brought home and sold at flea markets in Romania. Some also enter waste disposal sites at nightfall. Everything has a potential value; from old shoes and clothes to toys, broken electronics, old chargers etc. The old items serve as a minor but also highly unreliable source of income, since the *badocari* never know which waste sites or which garbage bins contain items of value.

Vasile explains how the *badocari* constantly evaluate the expenses that they have in relation to their income. If they earn 300 DKKR a day (40€) during the summer, they can afford to buy food, cigarettes and still have money left to send home. However, during the winter they hardly make enough money to send home and many eat discarded food items that they find in the garbage bins or visit social cafes and shelters that offer free food. Similar reflections are made with regard to sleeping in the streets. The *badocari* sleep rough due to an expensive and inaccessible housing market in which – as was illustrated in the above sections – landlords often request a social security number and a work contract upon lease as well as a limited availability of shelters that allows entry to un-registered EU citizens and undocumented migrants. The police immediately demolish the informal settlements such as shanty towns and camps. Renting a room in a hotel usually costs more than the *badocari* make on a days’ work. The *badocari* present numerous accounts of private

landlords (illegally) renting out “sleeping spaces” on bunk beds and on the floor in their apartments for prices ranging between 50 and 150 DKKR (7–20€). However, even this amount is too high for many of the *badocari*.

The ethnography has so far shed light on how the *badocari* live a precarious livelihood on the margins of society that is marked by temporalities of the day and the year. They enter into the informal economy in the street and engage in a constant hunt for bottles and old items to ensure minimum income. Bottle deposit and return comprise an economic niche, which is legit in terms of the law. However, it unfolds within a broader street economy in Copenhagen, which as any other urban street economy has a significant share of illicit and semi-legal street activities (Wacquant 2008; Di Nunzio 2012; Pulay 2015). Consequently, the *badocari* are continuously tempted with possibilities for earning fast cash (through crime) as they are also tempted by other possibilities in the street milieu including gambling, alcohol and drug consumption. Some of my interlocutors with time gave into such temptations for various personal reasons.

At this point in the analysis it is relevant to turn the attention to the motivations for engaging in the *badocari* niche in Copenhagen since revenue is sent home to the family in Romania, which usually consists of the children as well as grandparents or other close kin who take care of the children while the parents are away.

12.6 Income Opportunities at Home in Romania

Most of my interlocutors come from the same Roma neighbourhood in Romania. The majority of them are poor and some are extremely poor. For example, Vasile and his family manage to cover basic needs (food, clothes, utilities) but have no possibilities for covering unforeseen expenses, saving money and paying off debt. In comparison, Vasile's stepson Matei lives in extreme poverty. Matei and his wife Andreea live in a small one-room shack together with their two children ages 2 and 4 years. The roof is broken, there are no kitchen or toilet facilities, no running water and the shack does not have flooring. Matei and Andreea explain that they cannot afford daily meals for the two children and the family often goes to bed hungry. Larger and better equipped houses are also present within the neighbourhood, which are owned by the wealthier residents.

On the early November morning, while hiding from the rain, Vasile sums up a range of important aspects related to the income opportunities that he and other residents in the Roma neighbourhood experience in Romania:

It is not possible for me to find a job in Romania. I am also too old now since they prefer to hire younger people. Then the question appears if I should stay home and receive social benefits, which is 100LEI a month⁶ [22€] and only lasts for buying a gas container for cooking, or if I should go to Denmark. In Denmark I can earn 100 DKKR [13€] a day. I will spend 50 DKKR on food and still be able to send 50 DKKR [6.5€] home a day.

⁶The exact sum of the social benefits at this period of time (2014) was 141 RON a month.

A survey by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA 2016: 9) indicate that 80% of Roma in Europe live below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold defined by the survey. Furthermore, it shows that the paid work rate for Roma (20–64 years) is only 30% compared to the EU average of 70%. The survey finds that 63% of Roma youth (16–24 years) are unemployed and not enrolled in education or training compared with the 12% EU average on the NEET rate for the same age group (ibid.: 10). Statistics from Romania from 2012 indicate that unemployment rates in Romania for persons age 15–64 are 33% for Roma and 18% for non-Roma. For young persons (age 15–24) the unemployment rates are higher, respectively 43% for Roma and 28% for non-Roma. 77% of Roma work in the informal sector compared to 8% of non-Roma (UNDP 2012: 20). This situation is caused by multiple interrelated factors with primary roots in poverty and ethnic discrimination against Roma in all aspects of public life including the labour market, education and housing (FRA 2016; UNDP 2012). These listed statistics are well reflected in the situations of my interlocutors who all confirm that they cannot find contracted employment in Romania. The middle aged and older generations, such as Vasile, experienced to hold jobs (formal and informal) prior to the political changes in 1989. A few also worked in the informal labour market (without a contract and with lower salaries) in more recent periods but the vast majority cannot even access uncontracted labour. Especially young persons, such as Vasile's step son Matei, experience limitations in accessing both the formal and informal labour market and none of the young persons that I spoke with had ever had a work contract in Romania. For example, Matei explains that he is very well aware of the fact that he will never be able to access a job with a contract. He only completed 4 years of school and explains that he struggles with reading and writing. He then adds that he does not have a driver's license, which could increase his chances of finding daily work tasks around the city. "And I am Roma so who will hire me?", Matei then concludes and thereby underlines a consciousness about the discrimination that Roma experience in Romania. Matei instead engages in daily labour for wealthier residents in the neighbourhood, when such is available, such as cutting wood during the winter period for which he is paid 20 RON (4.50€) for a full working day. Matei explains that he began travelling to Denmark as a *badocar*, to gain revenue to pay expenditures for his family at home incl. food, clothing, electricity and wood for heating.

Very few of my interlocutors receive unemployment benefits in Romania. Most receive monthly child allowances, which range from 200 RON (45€) per child below 2 years of age and 40 RON (9€) per child age 2–18 years (from 6 to 18 years it is termed a school allowance and is contingent upon school attendance) (Radu 2009).⁷ The majority do not receive social benefits since they lack the necessary documents. They do not own formal rental contracts to their housing let alone ownership documents, since they mostly live in informal settlements. Furthermore, since many have started travelling abroad to work they cannot attend regular meetings with social services to prove their eligibility for the social benefits, nor can they

⁷These sums stem from the period of 2013 to 2014 when my fieldwork was carried out. Minor adjustments to the social benefits rates may have occurred since this period.

engage in the monthly 72 h communal work activities which is a requirement for obtaining social benefits in Romania (Radu 2009). As Vasile describes it in the above, the *badocari* earn more on bottle work in Copenhagen compared to social benefits in Romania, so many resign from the bureaucratic processes of claiming social benefits.

12.7 Patchwork Household Economies Configured Around Debt

An important aspect that should be included in the analysis is that of managing debt as part of the household economy.⁸ Since the majority of my interlocutors are poor, they take out credit (in the purchase of food in the grocery stores) as well as cash-loans to cover larger expenses such as health care expenditures, school expenses etc. Matei's case is illustrative of the complexities associated with taking up such debts. Matei explains that it is impossible for unemployed persons to be approved for a bank loan and that only wealthier residents have bank accounts. Instead, poor families take credit with local shops who often charge higher prices compared to the super markets. Furthermore, they take out cash-loans from private money lending companies and from the wealthier families in the neighbourhood. They refer to these moneylenders as *cămătari*. When I visit Matei's house he shows a loan agreement that he signed with a private moneylending company in which he commits to a 70% interest rate. He says that he could not borrow more from the *cămătari* since he already owes them too much. Matei says that it was foolish to take out another loan, but that he was desperate since his children were hungry. Matei explains that the *cămătari* also set high interest rates (between 30% and 70%). Most of my interlocutors have debts to the *cămătari* and most take out new loans in order to repay older loans. Furthermore, some of the *cămătari* are also the shop owners in the small neighbourhood and therefore people such as Matei have several forms of debt to the same person (both in form of credit in the store and cash-loans).

Matei is far from alone in feeling desperate and as if he is drowning in debt (see also Hrustic 2015 on usury among Slovak Roma). To the contrary, the majority of my interlocutors describe the debt repayments as being one of the primary motivating factors for migrating. For example, the woman introduced in the above called Ioana and her husband Dragos started migrating abroad to repay their debt. However, they also had to borrow more money to pay for the travel to Denmark, and thereby had to increase their debt in order to repay it. When Ioana and Dragos finally manage to repay their debt following a long working year in the streets of Copenhagen, they arrive home without money and have to take up a new loan with another *cămătar* to cover for expenses at home during the winter period. In this sense, the debt is not caused by the migration process as has been illustrated in research on

⁸ See also studies on debt by Graeber (2011), Pedersen (2017), Gregory (2012), and Peebles (2010).

some migrants from Nigeria (Plambech 2017). Rather, debt appears as an integral component of the *badocari* household economy prior to the migration process, and in fact encourages mobility (to earn money for repayment) as well as it is perpetuated by the migration process (when taking up new loans to pay for travel costs).

With inspiration in the work of Gustav Peebles (2010), the anthropologist Chris Gregory (2012) describes how credit is essentially an aspect of potential future consumption (of granting the ability to spend money). However, as soon as the credit is invoked in turns into a debt, in a lived presence and future (Gregory 2012:384; Peebles 2010). For my interlocutors it is the potentiality of spending money in the future (credit and loans) that carries the economy in certain periods of the year such as when purchasing food in the store. Debt has a paradoxical attribute to it, since it serves as the most reliable income opportunity that the poor families have (compared to the unknown availability of bottles, it is more predictable that money lenders will want to lend money at high interest rates). At the same time, debt ties them down through rapidly growing interest rates in need of repayment. In other words, debt and credit serve as stable income (credit and loans) as well as an expenditure (debt repayments) in a household budget that is constantly adapted to fit new economic realities. Yet, it is a highly problematic “stable” element due to the high interest rates. I argue that in order to understand the relationship that the *badocari* have with money (Peebles 2010) it is vital to understand debt as a continuous component of the household economy.

Very few of my interlocutors envision a future where they will be debt free. Rather they envision a future where they can control their debts better. It is more about preventing the house from being appropriated by a moneylender as a sanction for not repaying loans, than never taking up any new debt. There is no escape from the debt, such as it has been portrayed by the anthropologist Morten Axel Pedersen (2007) in a study of young men in Ulaanbaatar in Mongolia who hide from their money lenders when they relocate to other parts of the city. The *badocari* cannot leave the neighbourhood since their young children are usually left at home under the care of other relatives or neighbours. Furthermore, access to new loans with the *cămătari* usually depends on a history of previous loan repayments since few money lenders will lend money to strangers. Hence, the *badocari* are dependent on social relations in the neighbourhood including to close kin who take care of their children and to the local *cămătari*. The *badocari* seem very conscious of the fact that their lives are shaped by poverty and that debt is an unavoidable element. They aspire to influence what this life in debt might look like by creating a livelihood situation with periods of tolerable living and with periods of life on the edge reflected in the constant movement around Europe. In this continuum, the majority of the *badocari* do not seem to envision themselves as living in an equal relationship with the remaining social world, nor that there is much solidarity to find outside the core family – neither in majority society, which largely discriminates against the poor and uneducated Roma, nor with the wealthier money lenders who charge immense interest rates from their poor neighbours.

The situation of unemployment, constant debt, lack of access to often inadequate social benefits and clear awareness about limited opportunities in Romania illus-

trates how the household economy of the *badocari* is entirely dependent upon one or both of the heads of the household (mother and father) travelling abroad and living a life as a homeless *badocar* in Copenhagen. This movement allows the household to “stitch together” what I argue can be termed a patchwork household economy. The economy is composed of several sources of income such as child allowances from Romania, minor salaries from daily work in Romania, income from selling scavenged trash items from Denmark at flea markets in Romania, and income generated in Copenhagen from bottle deposit. Some *badocari* also travel to other EU member states where they beg, work in construction sites, agriculture or factories. The sources of income are not interrelated but are combined in order to create a total economic sum that allows for basic survival. They are unreliable and minimal and each of them cannot stand alone to support the family. The income opportunities are also generated by different members within the household. The children constitute the basis of the child allowance. The relative who remains at home to care for the children is in charge of selling old items (from Copenhagen and other places) at flea markets in the city. The parents who migrate are in charge of begging, bottle collection, daily labour etc.

I regard the patchwork household economy as a continuous crafting process. When one economic source fails, that specific element of the larger patchwork is replaced by another economic source – similar to when small squares of fabric are sewed together in a patchwork pattern. One square can be replaced without destroying the rest of the pattern. The financial crisis appears when too many of the minor economic strategies fail, just as a pattern dissolves when missing too many squares of fabric. Furthermore, whereas a patchwork pattern can have different shapes, the larger material onto which the pattern is attached is clearly defined and often squared (such as a quilt or a pillowcase). This analogy of dual layers is important (the background and the pattern) since it reflects the composition of the *badocari* household economy. I argue that if the economy can be approached as a patchwork pattern, then the background material against which the economy is configured can be regarded as debt. Debt is the “quilt”, so to say.

The patchwork household economy rests upon a calendar year which is divided into cyclical phases. The months from March/April to August are spent in Copenhagen. September is spent at home in Romania with the family, where they enrol the children in school and participate in family festivities such as weddings and baptisms. October to December are by some of my interlocutors spent in Copenhagen collecting (albeit less) bottles and scavenging trash that can be sold at flea markets back home in Romania. Other *badocari* spend these months in EU member states such as Italy, France or the UK, where they beg or work on agricultural farms, construction sites etc. January and February are mostly spent at home with the family to celebrate the holidays and prepare for spring so that they can return to Denmark. In this way, the year is carefully planned out in phases that are repeated continuously. The *badocari* constantly evaluate the time and money spent and earned in each location. A woman called Ana explains it as such:

Most young people have left the neighbourhood and now only old persons and children are left. People leave for countries like Denmark, Sweden and Norway but also to other parts of Europe. Then they return home after a few months. Some stay home a few months and some only stay a few weeks, this all depends on whether they have gathered enough money to stay home for longer periods. Coming home means starving, since there is no work at home.

Ana does not know when she and her husband can return home to see their children but at this moment they have not earned enough to be able to return. Anna tells me that she dreams of finding a job as a cleaner or caretaker of elderly persons, since the money that she earns from deposit on bottles and from begging is not enough to support her large family at home. Ana's story illuminates how, paradoxically, the way to ensure the subsistence of the household is to leave the family behind for longer periods of time to explore economic avenues in other countries. Returning home entails being close to close kin and loved ones but also entails not earning an income. In order to remain home, one has to make a living abroad to cover the expenditures during the home period or take up a new loan. In this sense, the home serves as a constant push and pull factor in the migration processes of the *badocari*. The migration process of the *badocari* is cyclical with a constant return to Romania where the family lives. For the *badocari* it is not a matter of leaving the country in search of establishment with a better fortune elsewhere. Rather it is about creating a viable living in Romania through developing a patchwork household economy, which involves moving across Europe in a continuous cyclical process (Ravnbøl 2015).

12.8 Micro-economics as a Challenge to Political, Economic and Social Contexts

“Peștele se împute de la cap!” [The fish rots from the head]

The anthropologists Chris Hann and Keith Hart (2011) argue for the importance of adopting an anthropological analytical perspective on what they refer to as a “human economy” (Hann and Hart 2011:167). In opposition to a rationalist choice perspective on individuality, they emphasise a human economic approach that looks at persons whose preferences and choices are shaped by their social relations and broader historical and political contexts (Ibid: 9). Thereby, the concern is with how social beings engage with their economic situations and transactions as part of their relations to the world at large.

The proverb *Peștele se împute de la cap!* can be regarded as central to understanding how my interlocutors relate their individual household economy to the broader structures of society. The proverb is not only Romanian, but can be identified in several other languages, and refers to a decay process, which initiates in the

fish head before it spreads to the trunk and finally to the tail.⁹ Vasile presented this proverb as his answer to my enquiry about whether he could ask for financial or social support in Romania to address his poor livelihood condition. The proverb represents Vasile's rejection of such possibilities and response to his necessity to travel abroad to gain funds due to a situation of poverty but also due to a situation of corruption in Romania, where, in his view, the economic and political elite uses EU and state funds for private interests. Vasile thereby links his household economy to a broader historical and political context of Romania in which the political management of the country is "rotten" and not extending its services to the poor Roma families. Corruption and mismanagement of EU funding have been described in several studies on Romania and is also part of the broader criticism by the European Commission as well as the European Union agencies towards the member state (CoE 2017; Ionescu 2006).

However, there are additional important aspects to Vasile's reference to decayed fish. What he is also stating in this sentence is that Vasile envisions himself as belonging to the body of the fish. The corruption (decay) which initiates in the political system and its elite (the fish head) eventually influences the rest of the nation state (the fish body); it triggers down and influences behaviours of citizens within the state. One consequence is that of lost faith in the state and decision to migrate abroad in search of alternate income opportunities, which Vasile and my other interlocutors have opted for. Another consequence is that of becoming corrupt or involved in financial fraud and bribery. Vasile elaborates on this second part with reference to the *cămătari*, to whom he – as well as all my other interlocutors – is financially indebted. When I ask my interlocutors if Romania's accession to the EU in 2007 has not resulted in increased economic funds for Roma integration and combating poverty, most of them laugh. They do hand gestures in the air and point to their pockets by way of imitating a hand that steals. Their gesticulation explains how in their opinion EU funds have been stolen and channelled into private properties of wealthier businessmen and politicians in Romania. This includes high level politicians as well as local mayors and city counsellors who have access to EU funds and who also act as money lenders. The *badocari* mention the contrast between their poor houses and the large houses in the city as an example. Vasile's response is an example of this:

The counsellor here is not helping us, he is helping himself. His pocket is closer to him than we are. I will show you around the neighbourhood so that you can see the houses of those who work in the municipality. They say that they work with human rights. But you will ask yourself with what money they have built those houses since they do not earn big salaries. And then you can see how people like Matei live in one-room shacks. It is like this all over Romania.

Consequently, Vasile and the many other *badocari* started travelling to EU member states to explore new economic strategies. This became the initiation of the patchwork household economy, a micro economy which can with benefit be regarded as a reaction to a situation where the *badocari* experience that they have to manage on

⁹It is an inaccurate biological assumption but serves as a metaphor that Vasile uses to explain his view on how corruption among politicians eventually trickles down and influences behaviours of local politicians and regular citizens within the state.

their own in a (rotten) political landscape that cannot be trusted and where they receive no assistance from the remaining society or even within their own neighbourhood. The critique presented by Vasile, as well as by the majority of my interlocutors is however also extended beyond the margins of the nation state to include the EU as a whole. This was most evident one early morning where I asked Vasile a question and referred to him and the other *badocari* as migrants. Vasile send me a sharp look and replies in a serious and slightly raised voice:

– We are not migrants! Migrants are those from Africa and the Middle East. We are in the European Union and we are EU citizens [...] We are part of one big family! We have a right to be treated the same way as Danish persons seeking work, but there are so many double standards and they find excuses not to give us our rights.

Vasile's outburst underlines an awareness of the rights that he and the other *badocari* have as citizens of an EU member state as well as his experience of not being granted such rights in practice. The patchwork household economy of the *badocari* should be understood in the light of the critique presented by Vasile: as micro-economic strategies that develop in response to social disparities and corruption on their home country (Romania) as well as in response to experiences of limited assistance and opportunities for the Roma in general within the EU.

Various scholars have analysed the economy of Roma communities within a framework of negotiated power relations between Roma communities and the broader non-Roma society (Pulay 2015; Solimene 2015; Okely 1999; Stewart 1999; Engebrigsten 2007). These studies argue that the opposition to majority society is essential to Roma identity formation and that the opposition to non-Roma (Gadjo) is a key marker of such distinctions (Solimene 2015). In contrast, this chapter offers alternative viewpoints presented by the *badocari*. Even though ethnic distinctions shape their everyday lives and relations, other social distinctions are much more important to them, and at times prevail over that of ethnicity. This includes distinctions according to social class where they are critical towards those who are rich in comparison to them, who are poor if not extremely poor. The *badocari* also turn their critique of wealthier elites inwards towards neighbourhood residents who they find to be corrupt, such as the *cămătari* and local politicians. The *badocari* claim rights as Romanian citizens and as citizens of the European Union who seek employment and housing on a similar footing with nationals but are also very conscious of the fact that they are not given such rights neither in Romania nor in the broader context of the EU. They feel that they belong to "the body of the fish" but as a marginalised part. In other words, their economic strategies should not be understood as a manifestation of an opposition to a Gadjo society with the opposition (dualism Roma/Gadjo) as an end in itself. Rather, their economic strategies reflect those of a marginalised neighbourhood that is critical towards social disparities between rich and poor, as well towards corruption and ethnic discrimination. This difference is highly important since it sets a question mark to the scholarly tendency towards continuous depiction of the Roma as an ontological other.¹⁰ Rather, it calls for the

¹⁰ For a more elaborate critique of the historical representation of Roma as an ontological other see the work of Asséo et al. (2017).

importance of a critical look not only on ethnicity (Roma/Gadjo) but also on relations of social inequality including on the *de facto* opportunities that poor Roma communities have of upwards mobility and not just free movement from one destination of marginalised livelihood within the EU into that of another.

12.9 Concluding Comments

In Ancient Greek, the term *oikonomia* refers to the management of the self-sufficient household, which is usually a manorial estate (Hann and Hart 2011). The household of the *badocari* is far from being a self-sufficient manorial estate. Rather it is entirely contingent on the availability of economic sources across the EU such as refundable bottles, trash that can be sold at flea markets, child allowances, begging incomes, low paid daily jobs etc. This patchwork household economy is haunted by constant debt. However, it is not a resigned and passive submission to poverty but a critical claim towards the state for basic rights, in a context where their economic strategies for creating a life on the margins are continuously developed and adjusted, as a continuous patchwork pattern crafting process.

The patchwork household economy of the *badocari* is less about searching for better futures in new locations (Philpott 1968) and more about viewing Europe as one social field of economic potentialities. The *badocari* emphasise their EU co-citizenship and the obligations that they place on nations within the EU, including Denmark and Romania. Until these obligations are manifested in concrete actions on behalf of the member states, the *badocari* manage with the opportunities that they themselves create and that are made available to them. The patchwork household economy, I argue, is a reflection of such micro strategies for economic survival as well as they are a challenge to current political, economic and social orders within Romania, Denmark and the EU at large.

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