

## THE RELATIVISATION OF THE CONCEPT OF JUSTICE AMONG ROMANIANS AND ITS EFFECT: INDIFFERENCE TOWARDS ECONOMIC ACTION

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### **Abstract**

*It is beneficial for a nation to undergo an intensive process of self-knowledge [1]. It is equally desirable that any controversy concerning national identity and the formation of the spiritual character of our people should disappear. Through this process of rediscovery, we may also find explanations for the present condition of our nation. As economists, we are concerned with highlighting one key fact: the collective psychology of our people directly influences its economic action. Romanians display a limited tolerance for social cooperation and tend to favour individual isolation. This occurs to the detriment of the advancement of Romanian society. Something happened in our historical past that disrupted the natural course of an evolution grounded in Western principles.*

*The economic history of Romania ought to be written with greater scholarly attention [12]. The final question concerns the contemporary era. Why does our people today, the Romanians, move more slowly when it comes to the use of money and the development of capitalist-type social relations? Why are Romanians, unlike the populations of other states, relatively indifferent to sound economic action?*

**Keywords:** *property, respect for the law, prosperity, Romania's economic development, Romania's economic history, social classes among Romanians, the Romanian understanding of justice*

**JEL Classification:** *K00, K10, K40, K42, P48, N00, N14, N34, D74*

### **1. The Ancestral Hostility within the Main Social Classes: Peasants and Boyars**

One of the concerns expressed today by sociologists when discussing social behaviour among Romanians is the reproach that Romanians strongly relativise the concept of justice. The Romanian appears unable to perceive anything beyond personal interest — and acts accordingly. Because we remain a profoundly agrarian society, merit becomes almost impossible to assert [19]. Everything unfolds according to the old saying that *what is mine is mine, and what is ours is still mine*. Justice is something deeply foreign, for balance and long-term vision are concepts that scarcely exist among Romanians. Everything is diluted, and each individual holds a personal version of the world around them. Everything depends on the personal disposition of each of us.

We treat our fellow human beings as if they were mortal enemies, and we respect them under no circumstances. If there is anything we relativise to an extreme degree, it is indeed justice. Romanians are fundamentally at odds with the law and its rigours. We have never had — and still do not have today — a strong legal tradition. The predominance of norms is customary rather than codified. We have been governed by habits and arrangements that have consistently emerged from an undefined past. The individual and Romanian society possess something singular — difficult and, at the same time, easy to define [4].

Our stance toward the legal norm is a challenge we have never mastered. Viewed from the outside, the Romanian world appears as a chaos impossible to organise. Collective judgement, and its orientation relative to the norm, lacks even the minimal support of a shared collective common sense. One cannot speak of such a thing, just as one cannot speak meaningfully about cooperation among Romanians.

We live under the sign of an unending struggle for justice, for Romanians too dream that the external world ought to be just. Yet it is always the *others* who must be just; the Romanian individual does not feel obliged to be just himself. It is a kind of deceit that we, Romanians, extend

toward those around us. We urge those near us to be just precisely so that we may deceive them more easily — for we are inclined towards trickery. In relation to the law, we never ask ourselves how we might comply with it; we always ask how we might circumvent it. We live in a form of perpetual moral disengagement, a trap we cultivate ourselves, each of us believing that we can deceive everyone indefinitely. This stems from the ancestral fear rooted in our past, which has made it impossible to cross certain thresholds of favourable perception of the Other — of the person beside us [13].

## **2. The Relativisation of the Concept of Justice among the Romanian Peasantry**

Where does this profound tendency to relativise justice and what is right originate? Rosetti helps us understand certain aspects of our collective mentality by shedding light on how the character traits of our people were formed. It is a matter of the historical environment within which these traits developed over many centuries, especially after the arrival of the Turks in the region and the passage of this territory under Ottoman suzerainty, that is, after the year 1500. Rosetti writes: *“It was only natural that the unjust oppressions, the burdens, the humiliations, the abuses and the indignities suffered by the Romanian peasant for more than two centuries should have changed the resolute, bold, warlike man described by Veranțiu. In place of that wild man, full of vigour and self-confidence, we find in 1828 a mild, peaceful, humble and submissive being”* [18]. It is, therefore, about humiliation and the historical reshaping of character. Above all, it is about exploitation in all its forms.

The Romanian rural world was exploited with extraordinary brutality for centuries. Here, the relationship between peasant and boyar was one of hostility—an ancestral hostility sustained by the peasant’s lingering memory of an age in which he was free and master of his land and his life. For such a period indeed existed in the history of these lands. And how, then, could one expect such a man to relate to justice? Justice, in relation to the boyar or the governing authority, was not the concern of the Romanian peasant; survival was. It was within these terms that social relations functioned in our society.

The relationship between the Romanian peasant and his master unfolded within the following frameworks [18]: the peasant no longer possessed even the strength to hate his master; he feared and avoided him; the entire village was in a state of hostility towards the master and remained closely united in order to defend itself; the master was the common, public enemy, and all quarrels among villagers vanished whenever defence against him was required; the first duty of the villager was to side with the community against the boyar; siding with the boyar against one’s fellow villagers was considered the most ignoble act; whether or not the boyar was right did not matter—the village had to remain united against him; in his presence the boyar could be praised and granted reason, yet behind his back the villagers had to remain united against him; deceiving the boyar was not regarded as a transgression, but rather as an element of pride.

The long chain of injustices continued in the manner in which the Romanian peasant was treated by the governing authority [15]. By this we mean the Romanian state, from its earliest rudimentary organisational forms to its definitive consolidation during the reign of King Carol I. The governing authority represented a new threshold of exploitation and despair [18]. Each stage of state formation constituted merely another circle of exploitation and humiliation for the Romanian peasant. The humble and grievous condition of this being over centuries produced what sociologists would later call the humble condition and slippery abilities of our people [18].

How could a collective individual shaped within an ocean of injustice be endowed with a sense of justice? Romanians do not even know what justice is, let alone how to employ the law for their own development [10]. They do not know it in any form; they have nothing to which they could relate it [6]. It appears that all is lost regarding the Romanian’s stance before the law. Never having seen the law, he does not know what the law is, nor does he want the law. He lives outside the law and feels no need for it. No one accepts restrictions concerning his own life, for he believes

he knows best how it must be lived. Above all, the Romanian yields nothing in favour of the other, the person beside him. Life becomes a kind of battle in which one must produce as many victims as possible. And that is all.

Respect for one's fellow man and for a common norm could easily be perceived as a sign of weakness, of concession. And here Iorgulescu is right. This shapeless mass that is Romanian society is not the sign of a primitive condition that might one day evolve for the better; it is rather the sign of an irremediable decline, preceded by a social catastrophe. For the misery and brutalisation of the ordinary Romanian was indeed a social catastrophe.

Double-speak and the conspiratorial wink are our modes of behaviour before the law. Only in Romania have I seen villagers of a wrongdoer claim that he was a “good man”. Regardless of the crime committed, among Romanians he remains a “good lad”. Therefore he is forgiven, for others have done the same before. And then there is the question: “*But what did he do, after all? It is not as if he killed someone!*” This is a form of mild and complicit judgement in favour of the offender. The Romanian does not condemn because he knows himself to be guilty as well. Everything becomes complicity and silence, accompanied by a profound distrust of the law. For Romanians, it would be better, they say, if one answered directly before God. For only then is punishment postponed—and with it the hope that even God might be deceived and persuaded to stand by our side.

### **3. The Relativisation of the Concept of Justice in Contemporary Romania**

There is much to be said about the modern Romanian's stance before the law. Nothing is more relative in our social life. Precisely where careful attention would be required, we Romanians remain conspicuously relaxed. This concerns the Romanian's attitude towards the law—an attitude shaped by a long history marked by a perfidious relativism which has diluted every norm and the enforcement of every norm. We cannot have laws because we do not take them seriously, and we cannot have institutions because they serve no real purpose for us. Romanians follow customary habits and reject authority. The only authority acknowledged by Romanians is public opinion—the *voice of the community*—the village rumour and the fear of becoming the object of ridicule. To be the laughingstock of the community is the gravest possible condition. Such ridicule may be expressed openly through laughter, or through gossip ending in a faint smirk.

We, Romanians, have never succeeded in establishing within our communities a council of elders capable of deliberating on the actions and events within the community. We appeared on this land, we were formed on this land, and we accept nothing beyond it. The land is our origin, our home, and our future. We remain to this day an agrarian society in the most classical sense of the word [9]. Instead, what we have succeeded in elevating is the sarcastic smile of the old village woman sitting on the bridge gossiping, raising it to the status of a supreme and final judgement. This has always been the case. The old women judged, they introduced topics for debate, they drew conclusions, and they were the ones who smiled in the end. These women constitute —*the voice of the community* —the council of headscarf-clad, illiterate, often malicious elderly women. The entire village stands at their mercy, and an equation has been established between their word and the word of the community. They, not the Church, dictated what must be done at the key moments of life—at weddings, baptisms, and funerals. They made the norms of the village and they supervised their enforcement. They were, and remain, the supreme authority in a world that detests rules and cannot establish or respect them.

The Romanian has always been prone to error. He had to steal and deceive in order to survive, for he possessed neither land nor the means of production [8]. Everything belonged to the boyar. And then, what laws could one respect, when such laws were imposed by those who constantly violated them? Over time, the Romanian ruling class developed a deep aversion towards the demand for legality coming from those they ruled. Petru Creția, attentive to the civilisational

level of his own people, addresses this sensitive subject concerning the Romanian’s stance before the law [3].

And yet, regardless of the context of our historical development, the failure to comply with the law—especially today, in modernity—is a profound social ill confronting Romanian society. We have developed a kind of arrogant, destructive complicity in our relation to norms. This “*lasă-mă să te las*” attitude is something dreadful. Indulgence and hesitation in punishing the guilty form the beginning of all social decay. But we do not refrain from punishment because we desire the offender’s moral improvement; we refrain because we know we are like him, and that one day we ourselves will require the same general indulgence. Romanians have invented sayings such as *one hand washes the other, and both wash the face*. And what response can one offer to such reasoning? Creția’s essay on the Wallachian man, to which we refer here, ends with memorable words [3].

Complicity with wrongdoing in Romania is infinite. Every Romanian thinks that one day he too may err. And so, what use is there in punishing the one who errs today? We do not see how we might escape this vicious circle of unimaginable, toxic, and corrosive tolerance. This toxicity lies in our very collective fibre, and it is well masked beneath our professed love for others [3]. This is the truth. To what extent we are prepared to accept it is of little consequence. Petru Creția is right. This obtuse individualism, in which everyone fears the law and therefore refuses to apply it, must be stopped. Respect for our fellow human beings is essential, and our conduct in society must be governed by law, not custom. Unfortunately, for the time being, we remain at the stage of *lasă-mă să te las* — a mutually evasive attitude marked by reluctance to take initiative. This is all we have managed to achieve so far. We must strive for more. Otherwise, history may once again fall upon us.

#### **4. The Economic Effects of Living Beyond the Law**

The first economic consequence of this mode of existence has been both individual and national isolation. Romanians do not engage in economic exchange among themselves, nor does the nation as a whole engage in exchanges with the outside world [20]. Romanian society proved incapable of developing an industrial social stratum [14]. The Romanian bourgeoisie emerged late and, precisely when it was poised to take historical momentum, it was eliminated by communism. We failed to develop the city as a spiritual and economic centre [17].

The debate concerning the manner in which Romanians position themselves in relation to the material world and its constraints is of great relevance today for economists concerned with the condition of their country. It is therefore beneficial to investigate and understand how our mentality regarding the material world has been shaped over time—how we relate to money and property, and what the underlying causes of these attitudes might be. For we, Romanians, are fundamentally different from Westerners. In the West, individuals possess a particular culture and behavioural code regarding money and wealth, whereas we possess an altogether different one. Asceticism and restraint in the fulfilment of immediate pleasures represent the values underpinning Western capitalism. Their culture is one oriented towards saving. We call them stingy. Perhaps they may indeed be described in such terms. What is important, however, is not to assume that, by being spendthrifts, we are somehow superior to them. In the West, careful handling of money within the boundaries of family and personal balance constitutes a way of life. We do not behave in such a way.

To spend is the verb seemingly invented for Romanians. And to go into debt in order to spend constitutes a way of life. Genuine capitalism is not built on such values. Restraint and moderation are its specific virtues—virtues to which Romanians have never truly aspired. Romanians display a certain detachment toward money and its management [16]. One might say this resembles an aristocratic attitude, if it were not in fact born of poverty and hunger. It is evident that money is not viewed as something precious, but rather as a necessary evil—something that

burdens and obliges us. And it is never desirable, from our perspective, to be obliged to anything. We would be better off, in our own view, if the material world did not exist at all. Only then, perhaps, would the Romanian feel relieved.

This may partly explain why the legend of a bright and beautiful past—always bright—is so deeply embedded in our present consciousness. We sigh often for the past, we Romanians. And we imagine how wonderful it would be if we were not required to work, to handle money, or to eat several times a day. We are particularly irritated by the thought that we must go to work and allow ourselves to be exploited for money. This represents the great torment and degradation endured by the contemporary Romanian. We are ancestrally inclined towards indolence, and we dislike the constraints imposed by modernity. We understand nothing of communal living and dislike our neighbours. Cooperation is not a word invented for us. Rather, envy is our natural state. Envy drives Romanian society, as does the resentment toward the possible success of those around us. When someone rises above us, we will do anything to bring them down to our level.

Romanian society is an enormous Procrustean bed. Here, heads and limbs are cut; destinies and lives are adjusted. Nothing escapes our vigilance regarding the neighbour or friend, and we remain perpetually concerned that they might surpass us. When we accumulate wealth, we do so not in order to live better, but in order to boast. We are vain and envious. We understand nothing and desire nothing more. And yet, for this mode of being, shaped over a very long historical period, explanations do exist. We do not emerge out of nothing; we are the product of a history of intertwined facts and circumstances.

Why are we this way? Numerous explanations have been offered. Today we shall focus on the one proposed by Radu Rosetti in his work *Pentru ce s-au răsculat țăranii*. The author undertakes an analysis of the causes that have shaped, over time, the character traits of our people. In the section discussing *Cauzele care au împiedicat ca țăranul român să devină silitor și străngător*, Rosetti provides several arguments [18]. At the centre lies the curse of resources: the land was abundant and provided necessities without significant effort.

A second explanation for the Romanian's lack of industriousness and inability to save lies in the conflictual nature of neighbouring peoples: “*But, on the other hand, the Romanian from Moldavia and Wallachia was, from the very beginning, in direct contact with pagan and barbarian peoples: the Pechenegs and the Cumans, whose preferred means of acquisition was plunder*”. These peoples were warlike and organised. The Romanians, who lived in scattered groups, could not withstand them. The consequence was that, periodically, Romanians were robbed of whatever they had managed to accumulate [18].

In such historical conditions, accumulation was impossible. Moreover, despair gripped the inhabitants of this geographical space. Being at the mercy of raiders, they became indifferent to the pursuit and accumulation of wealth. Life unfolded from one day to the next, without the possibility of future planning. Everything took place, materially speaking, under the sign of transience and improvisation. Industriousness and thrift thus became impossible, and even if they had once existed, they were lost.

Another cause identified by Rosetti concerns internal hostilities and the intensity of power struggles following the establishment of principalities and administrative structures [18]. Because official positions were temporary, dignitaries rushed to recover the money they had paid to obtain them. Rosetti describes this as a peaceful form of plunder, yet one just as ruinous as that of war. Under such circumstances, the love of work and the spirit of saving could not possibly develop.

## 5. Extreme Poverty as an Effect of Weak Social Cooperation and Organisation

There are numerous perspectives concerning the state of the Romanian economy in its pre-communist period [5]. Under such conditions, the condition of the Romanian peasant is described by Mihai Sturdza, as cited by our author [18]. The ordinary condition of the Romanian peasant was characterised as follows: he possessed literally nothing; the very notion of owning goods was foreign to him; he was permanently prepared to be plundered from all sides—both by internal officials and externally through warfare; he was subject to alcohol consumption and various vices, which constituted his only refuge.

To all these hardships were added the Phanariot reigns—a special chapter in the history of the plunder to which the Romanian Principalities were subjected. They were viewed by the Ottoman Porte as a solution to the frequent uprisings of native rulers. And they indeed achieved their purpose. The foreign rulers intensified exploitation. The fact is described in these terms by the son of one such ruler [18]. Romania embarked late upon the path of modernisation [7].

## 6. Conclusions

In some way, at some point, someone must devise a project for the modernisation of Romania [11]. This modernisation project must overcome the threshold of Romanian indifference and fatalism [2]. Furthermore, such a project can only begin by asserting the norm as mandatory and ensuring its enforcement through specialised individuals and institutions. This pact with wrongdoing must be broken. Otherwise, it cannot be claimed that the foundations of a civilisation are being laid.

Of course, history and the past are significant. That is undeniable. However, we must move beyond the past and look forward. We are obliged to do so. In the absence of respect for the law, there will be no social organisation, no functioning institutions. The consequence is that Romania will not advance into modernity until its communities evolve in a favourable manner [21]. Indeed, Romania has not yet fully entered modernity. Even today, Romania has not closed the developmental gap with other European states, due both to its historical legacy and the period of communist domination [22]. None of the above should be interpreted as an excuse for the present state of the country. Yet one thing is certain: Romania and the Romanian social psyche did not emerge from nothing. They are the product of centuries of survival under extreme hardship. The ordinary Romanian lived for hundreds of years at the brink of animality. Therefore, what can we reasonably demand of him today? Can we justifiably criticise him for failing to save or for lacking a favourable attitude toward work? No, and indeed, we do not. We analyse these conditions solely to understand better, to know ourselves more profoundly, and to reconcile more fully with our own destiny.

## 7. References

Creția, Petru, (2023). Here is what Creția states regarding the Romanian attitude towards the law: “The people of these regions have a particular relationship with the norm (law, rule, prescription), a confused relationship stemming from two correlative directions: 1. the perception of the state not as an institution of regulation and mediation, but as a repressive and expropriatory entity (a view not without historical foundation), and 2. an excessive sense of immediate personal interest from which our people are unwilling to sacrifice anything for the purpose of a public and equitable regulation of individual interests. Any circuit that is too long from immediate profit to one mediated by law exceeds our imagination, patience, and capacity for trust” (pp. 122–123).

Creția, Petru, (2023, a.): “But one is not allowed to complain, because within his own yard, he considers himself not only the master but also the sole being in the world. And towards himself, willingly and with his own faults, homo valachicus is extremely tolerant. Less so towards others, and then only by virtue of an unwritten pact of generalised complicity. ‘Let me leave you be’ is an

expression in which the reciprocity of tolerance in wrongdoing is intertwined with indifference and, forgive me, with insolence. In many respects, Romanian civilisation harmonises well with a degenerate suburb. I do not deny that our own is dear to us even so. However, genuine love also implies a will to rectification, and this will should somehow be found within us and made to operate. I cannot say how, nor when” (p. 125).

Creția, Petru, (2023, b.): “He too is human and liable to error!!!”, we often hear around us. Beneath ancestral compassion lies, in fact, a refusal to apply the norm and a doubt that, once applied, the norm will correct anything. In reality, this is the only path: the simple application of the norm. We repeat the words of Petru Creția concerning Romanian civilisation as a degenerate suburb: “‘Let me leave you be’ is an expression in which the reciprocity of tolerance in wrongdoing is combined with indifference and, forgive me, with insolence. In many respects, Romanian civilisation harmonises well with a degenerate suburb” (p. 125).

Iorgulescu, Mircea, (1988). Consequently, the Romanian society at the end of the 19th century, when attempts were made to construct a country called Romania, appeared as described by Mircea Iorgulescu in *Lumea lui Caragiale*: “The world of Caragiale, viewed in its entirety, seems rather to lie beyond history; it is post-historical, as all evolution has concluded here, hence its striking residual appearance as a chaotic conglomerate. There exists a pre-historic barbarism, so to speak natural, which precedes historical becoming, yet continues in germ its possibilities; but there also exists a final barbarism, a barbarism reached as a result of a devastating evolution, a barbarism arising from a process of collapse and degradation. A wild world is not equivalent to a savaged world. The innocence of Caragiale’s world is therefore pseudo-innocence, being simultaneously simulated and real. The awareness of sin – in Paul Zarifopol’s terms – is indeed absent in this world, not because there is no distinction between right and wrong, but because this entire world sins. Candour is no longer synonymous with innocence: it is the consequence of abolishing the notion of innocence through its constant identification with guilt. Just as people in Caragiale’s world speak the truth and lie simultaneously, they are concurrently guilty and innocent, and this duality is best expressed at the level of language: the shrewd rhetoric widely employed in all relations between individuals, from social to intimate, constitutes a particular, highly specific form of double discourse” (pp. 68–69).

Rosetti, Radu, (1987, a.). Regarding Nicolae Șuțu, son of the ruler Alexandru Vodă, the last Phanariot prince of Wallachia, he states: “Some ephemeral rulers, foreign to the country, who enjoyed almost absolute power, came in succession to exercise here a regime steeped in the indifference and greed of any poorly organised governance. The perpetual renewal of judgments, the lack of any procedural formalities, stripped property of all guarantees. Taxes were manifold and vexatious, and the unbounded corvées depended on the will of the last ruler. The feudal system and the immunities of privileged classes aggravated the plight of the taxpayer, who, crushed under the burden of levies (...), perished in misery, devoid of any element of well-being” (p. 23).

Rosetti, Radu, (1987). First, there was the richness of the land owned by Romanians: “From the beginning, the Romanian, particularly in Moldova and Wallachia, possessed very extensive tracts of generally extremely fertile land, on which large herds of all kinds could be freely raised, and from which, through the easiest labour, he could easily extract quantities of bread more than sufficient for his own sustenance and that of his livestock” (pp. 22–23).

Rosetti, Radu, (1987, b.). The consequence was: “There is no doubt that no one could be certain of his possessions or his life. At any moment, a pagan might come and select the finest cattle from the village herd or stud, the choicest bread from the pits, the most valuable item from the house” (p. 23).

Rosetti, Radu, (1987, c.). Our author notes: “But, beginning in the first half of the 16th century, these countries were almost incessantly plagued by countless struggles for rulership, wars between Turks and Poles, and relentless and devastating Tatar incursions. Once installed on the

throne, the rulers hurried to impose heavy levies, while those entrusted with collection plundered the people for their own benefit” (p. 23).

Rosetti, Radu, (1987). “In the village, there are two moral codes: one towards other people with whom one must act honestly, and another towards the boyar, which allows one to defend one’s interest by any means. It is a sin and shame to take another villager’s property, but the master’s property may be consumed, as long as one is not caught; after all, he has taken much from the people” (p. 26).

Rosetti, Radu, (1987). Rosetti describes the situation: “More feared than the master is the administration and its officials: the administration’s agents for centuries have plundered and violated the peasant without mercy; alongside it, the master appears as a benefactor, often providing the village with protection against the depredations of officials sent by the voivode and the spans” (p. 27).

Rosetti, Radu, (1987). Rosetti characterises the Romanian peasant in 1830, whose traits resulted from the aforementioned situation: “The Romanian peasant before 1830 may be characterised as follows: intelligent and lively-minded, kind-hearted, gentle, peaceful, and excessively submissive, yet completely lacking in education, self-confidence, and industriousness; unwilling to change his fate, suspicious, without a sense of national identity, hypocritical, superstitious. Circumstances of history, foreign enemies, and the greed of the rulers and the ruling class had made him so” (p. 28).

Rosetti, Radu, (1987, d.): “Indeed, the condition of the Moldavian and Wallachian peasant is abject; viewed as a being who should exist only for the whims of another, almost reduced to a bestial state; abandoned to the greed of all officials, from the clergy and the highest dignitaries to the lowest functionary, extorted by both landowners and lessees, and after all this, the poor peasant is further blamed for being indifferent and lazy!” (p. 23).

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